

# MICHAEL HOWARD: AN INTERVIEW

*A pre-eminent military historian tackles peace movements  
and the meaning of peace.*

■ This interview is excerpted from the TV Ontario programme *Realities* first broadcast in December 1986. Sir Michael Howard is Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford University. His best known book is *The Causes of War* published by Harvard University Press in 1983. The interview was conducted by Richard Gwyn – European correspondent for the *Toronto Star*.

RICHARD GWYN: I'll start with a discussion about war and peace and the nature of those two activities . . . I guess with the most obvious of all questions: will war always be with us? Will our children, our children's children, be involved in wars, be worried by wars, be trying to prevent wars?

MICHAEL HOWARD: War will always be with us so long as there are people who are prepared to use violence to attain political objectives. They may not want to use violence as their first resort; they may feel they have to use it as their last resort if there's no other way of getting what they want. People who are not satisfied with the existing state of the world, who feel they're under-privileged, who feel their frontiers are wrong, who feel that their ideology is insufficiently powerful, are always likely to resort to violence if they can't get their way by negotiation, when negotiation simply means accepting the status quo. So there is always likely to be a tendency towards the use of violence. Whether it is going to be a formal war, whether it is going to be guerrilla conflicts, whether it is going to be terrorist manifestations, it's always likely to be there.

R.G.: And peace, is peace the absence of war?

MICHAEL HOWARD: Well, peace is two things. In the first place it is the absence of war. And that is no bad thing. When people nowadays say why cannot we have peace, they are usually living in a condition of profound peace. And those of us who experienced the Second World War are very grateful for the peace that we have got. But they're quite right when they say that this is not true peace. I mean true peace is where there is such agreement between people – so much empathy, so much mutual understanding, that there's no conflict. And we have not got that. It is very difficult to achieve it. But peace as non-war is, in the minds of most people, a necessary preliminary to moving on to peace, which I call reconciliation of conflict.

R.G.: The way you define true peace – it's almost like the Kingdom of God come to earth.

MICHAEL HOWARD: Yes. And I think that that is what most peace movements mean when they say – we want peace. We want a condition in which there is no longer going to be any conflict, when there is no longer going to be any threat, where the lion is going to lie down with the lamb, and the young child is going to play in the Cockatrice's den. This image of peace, of shalom, is what does inspire most of the great saints and great martyrs of the world today. And part of the problem, I think, about peace movements and the conflict between the establishment diplomats on the one hand and peace movements on the other, is that establishment diplomats –

when they mean peace – mean non-war. They mean making the best that we can of a very imperfect world. And peace movements say we want more than that. We want to move to a perfect world . . .

R.G.: You were going into the reasons why men have fought . . . you say it is not because their purposes were necessarily acquisitive nor aggressive, but rather because they would be acting rationally . . . I found that expression surprising, since surely war is an expression of man's aggressivity – the male chest thumping. It's a sort of macho exercise. It's territorial imperative. Is it not rooted in the animal side of our nature?

MICHAEL HOWARD: I don't think it is nowadays. I think that the macho activities as depicted by football hooligans have very little, if anything, to do with the calculations of war and peace which are carried on by statesmen. Let me give you an example. In 1939, the British declared war on the Germans – not the other way around. The British were profoundly peace-loving, who had had one war which virtually eviscerated us; we didn't want any more. We had to be dragged kicking and screaming into a conflict with Germany. But the decision was taken in 1939, with massive popular support, that if we do not go to war with the Germans now, we will never be in a position to do so; they will simply continue building up their strength – they will conquer Eastern Europe, they will then overrun Western Europe; we will be confronted with an adversary so strong that we will simply have to surrender. And it was this rational

calculation, against our instinctive desire not to go to war, which led us to go to war. And you can find that in most of the decisions to go to war. In 1914 it was also there – although in 1914 there was much more of the macho spirit around.

Now, one can see in the calculations about nuclear strategy on the side of the United States and, no doubt, on the side of the Russians as well, that always there is a 'what if,' . . . What if they were to build up such an overwhelming strength of accurate missiles that they were then able to take out all of our land-based missiles? Well, alright, we still have sea-based missiles. But what if they were to then say, if you use your sea-based missiles we will attack your cities? And what if an American President was so weak that he then surrendered? Or what if, even if the American President was not so weak, the Soviet Union miscalculated that he might be so weak and they started it. Or . . . It's this kind of super-rational calculation which leads to arms races . . .

R.G.: Is there a particular problem with the arms race today . . . that while to keep a rough parity between East and West isn't that difficult . . . the two sides which have acquired these huge armaments industries then flog their weapons to the Third World, because that cheapens the per-unit cost to themselves and they make some foreign exchange? . . . I mean surely Iran and Iraq couldn't have been pounding each other for seven years, except that there are so many Western arms on the market.

MICHAEL HOWARD: . . . I am rather a heretic on this. The conflicts in the Third World are real conflicts.