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The Big Read

Keep it cruel

Life in a world dominated by psychopaths

Neil Mackay

The world can seem hostile at times and no wonder – it has always been dominated by psychopaths, and the 21st century is supercharging their predatory behaviour. In a Herald on Sunday exclusive, leading authority on psychopaths Kevin Dutton reveals all ...

IF you have ever thought that the world seems to be run by dangerous psychopaths, don't worry, you're not paranoid – you're right.

Spend some time in the company of the 21st century's leading authority on psychopaths, Dr Kevin Dutton of Oxford University, and it soon becomes horribly clear the world isn't just run by psychopaths – it was built and created by psychopaths as well.

Psychopaths have been shaping our lives since humans were hunter-gatherers on the African savannah. Society has been constructed by psychopaths over millennia, and civilisation itself is just one long story of psychopaths rising inevitably to the top.

Dutton, who has just brought out the latest edition of his acclaimed bestseller *The Wisdom Of Psychopaths*, says we need to realise that psychopaths are literally everywhere. If you think psychopaths are just killers, predators, rapists, monster bosses, corporate villains, or playground bullies, you're terribly wrong. We're all, Dutton has discovered, somewhere on the psychopathic spectrum – and evolution has ensured that those of us who can regulate and harness those psychopathic skills the best are the ones guaranteed success.

If you possess the kind of personality where your "psychopathic dials" are turned all the way up then you'll probably end up in jail; if, like most, you register low to middling on the

psychopathic register then you'll probably wander through life, relatively normal but unnoticed – neither fame, nor infamy, your destiny. But if you've got just the right mix of psychopathic tendencies – if your personality is in this grim "Goldilocks zone" – then the world is your oyster, though you'll probably trample over innocent people on your way to success.

Talking to Kevin Dutton about psychopaths is like fine-tuning a wonky television – slowly but surely, with disturbing clarity, a stark image emerges of the world, history and human nature. At the heart of all human life, there is the horrible germ of our psychopathic tendencies.

But let's start at the beginning – what is a psychopath?

The traits

"WHEN most people hear the word psychopath," Dutton explains, "they instantly think of Hannibal Lecter or Ted Bundy [the American serial killer]. When psychologists talk about psychopaths we're actually referring to a distinct subset of individuals with a specific constellation of personality characteristics."

The key traits are: ruthlessness, fearlessness, mental toughness, coolness under pressure, self-confidence and emotional

detachment – as well "trade mark deficits" in conscience and empathy.

We all of us have these traits to a greater or lesser extent, says Dutton. "None of these characteristics are necessarily a problem in themselves. In fact all of them, dialled up at the right level and deployed within the right context, can actually prove rather useful – but the key is context and level."

So, a successful surgeon, spy, lawyer, entrepreneur, soldier, performer – and especially politician – will all be high on a range of psychopathic traits. They have to be to make it in those fields. One of Dutton's closest friends is the former SAS special forces operative Andy McNab – a self-confessed,





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Dutton, crucially they aren't dysfunctional when in the right context. Psychopathy is a "spectrum – there's a grey zone – and we're all on it". It's not a case of "us and them".

Politically-minded

POLITICIANS, in particular, show high degrees of psychopathy. Think of the decisions political leaders have to make – like sending troops into war. Few of us could make such a call. Psychopaths – who are extremely utilitarian in their thinking – find such decisions relatively easy. Take this to its worst extension, however, and you get someone who can kill without a second thought.

Psychopaths – again like many politicians – are extremely good at presentation skills: phoney charm, feigned empathy, unfaltering self-confidence, ruthless focus, and sly manipulation. "I don't think it comes as much of surprise that these are the kind of qualities you're going to have in leaders who make it to the top," says Dutton.

History's villains

HE has studied a host of leading political figures from history. And guess what? It's a gallery of psychopaths. Of course, history's villains are unsurprisingly psychopathic – Ivan The Terrible and Vlad The Impaler may as well have worn a T-shirt saying "Born to Kill" – but the so-called "heroes of history" are also, at heart, psychopathic. Winston Churchill, for example – "high on the psychopathic spectrum", says Dutton. It makes sense when you consider the man – he was able to make umpteen life-or-death decisions in a single afternoon, the enormity of which would paralyse most of us with fear and guilt.

Dutton analysed Donald Trump and found him "extremely high on the psychopathic spectrum". Dutton adds: "I wasn't having a go at Trump. I was saying if you're going to be President of the United States, you're going to be high on the psychopathic spectrum."

He employs another analogy – this time the Olympic decathlon. Imagine, he says, that the decathlon is made up of events which all score on the psychopathic register. Most people might score high on one event – maybe fearlessness – but are pretty average all round. Someone like Churchill or Trump, however, "never has a bad event".

"The vast majority of people who get into positions of power are going to be high on the psychopathic spectrum", Dutton says. That doesn't necessarily mean they're always "bad", though, surprisingly. He turns to the world of sport to explain. "People like [tennis champion] Roger Federer – on centre court he's the most ruthless sporting predator you'll ever meet – and yet, off court, he's one of the nicest guys. That's an example of dialling up those psychopathic characteristics in the right context."

Psychopathic civilisation

THINGS get disturbing when Dutton considers the passage of history. If psychopaths tend to be the people who get into power – that means they're also the people who created the systems in which we live: our laws, governments, culture and society. So is civilisation a "psychopathic construct"? Yes, says Dutton.

We often talk about violent criminals acting "in cold blood" or being "cold and calculating". Dutton says: "In order to lead anyone, you've got to be calm.

high-functioning psychopath. How could McNab not be psychopathic to some degree given the nature of his life?

Dutton uses the analogy of the "mixing desk". Psychopathy is like autism, he says – we're all somewhere on the spectrum. Slide down the "psychopathic dials" and you have a timorous character who nobody will notice. Slide up the dials to just the right level and you've got the makings of someone just ruthless and charming enough to cut a swathe through life. Of course, slide the dials up too far – then add in a messed-up or abusive childhood – and the traits could well manifest as murder rather than career success. Throw in some natural talent, though, when the dials are relatively high –

but crucially not too high – and you might find a sporting hero, film star, tycoon or future Prime Minister.

Good psychopaths?

SO far, the world has only really focused on "bad psychopaths" – the killers in prison. But with "precision engineered psychopathy", says Dutton, we get a quite different type of character – a person who might not be "good" in the traditional sense of the word, but is perhaps best seen as "morally grey".

"Let's say you've got the skill set to be a top surgeon," Dutton suggests, "but you lack the ability to emotionally disengage from the

person you're operating on. It's not going to work. I've spoken to so many surgeons who say, 'you've got to treat the person you're operating on like a scientific problem'. If you start empathising with them as a person you're in trouble."

Or imagine a great legal mind who just doesn't have the charm and narcissism to be the centre of attention in court? Or the CEO who is a financial genius but just can't be ruthless when it comes to sacking people and wrecking their lives. Or the politician who doesn't have "the coolness under pressure to ride out a storm or the balls to take a risk".

The traits needed for success in so much of life are clearly psychopathic – but, says

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“You’ve got to be confident, dominant, ruthless. You’ve got to take risks.” He calls this “the James Bond profile ... the classic example of the successful psychopath”. Like Bond, many psychopaths are promiscuous. “Psychopathic genes”, he says, are going to proliferate. That might account for “dynasties” of powerful families. It doesn’t take a genius to work out that the Tudors of medieval England were probably pretty much all high on the psychopathic register.

One horrible truth is that in evolutionary terms, we’ve always needed people with psychopathic tendencies – coupled with relatively decent levels of intelligence – to do the difficult, necessary jobs. Being a ruler is one example, so is being a spy. Dutton draws on the famous phrase “good men sleep sound in their beds because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf”. Even in today’s pandemic – just like during war – decisions are being taken by political leaders which many of us would balk at: who gets vaccinated first, do we share vaccines with foreign countries, who’s financially supported? Key to that decision-making is switching off natural human empathy.

Wrong ‘uns

PSYCHOPATHS – the killer type, that is – are able to spot a perfect victim. Experiments have shown they can quite literally smell fear. Politicians are also adept at spotting weaknesses, Dutton says. Trump, he explains, “saw a weakness in the American political system” – the so-called “left behind” voter – and was able to exploit that to win power. Trump spotted the “left behind” the way Ted Bundy spotted a victim in a car park, Dutton believes.

“Psychopaths have a vulnerability radar,” he says. Studies have shown that psychopaths can actually predict who has been a victim of crime just by looking at them – they’re “psychological cat burglars”, Dutton says.

Of course, with these types of psychopathic traits needed to get into power that means we can often end up with “wrong ‘uns” leading us, Dutton says. Clearly, that’s very dangerous. Humans are the planet’s apex predator, and psychopaths are the apex predator among apex predators. So, we’ve always been controlled by the whims of quite dangerous people throughout history, because they’ve had the character traits required to get into power and then set the rules.

Life without psychopaths

AT heart, Dutton says, we’re fascinated by people with psychopathic characteristics. Psychopaths operate without “moral or emotional hangovers”, Dutton says, and “maybe deep down there’s part of us which envies the psychopath’s existential freedom ... we secretly want to be them, but we realise we can’t handle the emotional and legal fallout”.

Imagine a world without psychopaths, Dutton asks. On one hand, it might seem wonderful – no spies, no hitmen, no admen – but would we get anything



Professor Kevin Dutton, left, a leading authority on psychopaths, analysed Donald Trump, above, and found him ‘extremely high on the psychopathic spectrum’

done? Dutton speculates if there was an island comprised entirely of non-psychopaths, the first thing which would happen would be that “a boatload of psychopaths would come along and turn them all into slaves”.

Human development seems horribly, inevitably, linked to the preponderance of psychopaths among us. Obviously, the world wouldn’t work if we were all psychopaths – it would be one eternal dog fight. So, in evolutionary terms, we’ve become a world with enough psychopathic genes going around to do the jobs most of us would never dream of doing – and then some. Need a spy who’s good at deception and manipulation? Well, there’ll be a functioning psychopath somewhere for that role. Obviously, though, those genes won’t always lead someone into a life in MI6 – they could, instead, end up murdering a stranger in a park. Sheer chance also means that there will be times when dangerous psychopaths just advance too far for the good of us all. Enter the likes of Adolf Hitler.

Crime-free psychopathy

WE need to shake off the image of the psychopath, though, as drooling predator, Dutton says. “You don’t need to be a pervert to be a psychopath, or a sexual deviant. These are other things you’ve got knocking about in the back of your personality cupboard. They are

going to introduce you to a level of violence you never knew existed.” Dutton adds: “It was chilling.” The men just “filed out” quietly.

Dutton says if anyone else had such a confrontation there’d be a cooling off period – McNab ordered another round of drinks. People like McNab, says Dutton, are different to the rest of us. They have to learn! how to respond emotionally like other people. So, if McNab hears someone’s cat has died, he feels nothing, but realises he needs to show emotion. Emojis, Dutton says, help McNab as they “signal the emotion you should be feeling”.

Life in black and white

PSYCHOPATHS, Dutton says, “don’t need to be able to see in colour to know how a traffic light works – they just need to know which bits light up, the order they come in. Psychopaths don’t see in emotional colour – they see in emotional black and white”.

That doesn’t mean they don’t experience some degree of empathy. Killers like Bundy, for instance, did feel the fear his victims experienced – but crucially where the pain of others makes most of us sad, it made Bundy “happy”.

“Autistic people generally don’t get it,” Dutton says of the concept of “empathy for others”. “Psychopaths get it, but don’t give a f***.” They have “cold empathy” compared to the “hot empathy” most of us experience.

Cold empathy means psychopaths can take difficult decisions in split seconds. Dutton compares this to the “surgical drapes” doctors put on patients before operations. “You’ve just got this square where you’re going to make the incision. It’s like psychological blinkers.”

Social media psychopaths

THE 21st century has super-charged the nature of our “psychopathic society”. Social media, says Dutton, bears all the hallmarks of a psychopathic construct. Anonymity, cruelty, manipulation, cynicism, lack of nuance – “it’s the perfect arena for psychological bloodletting,” he says.

Dutton points to the concept of “unfriending” someone on social media. Imagine, he says, doing this in real life – walking up to someone and saying, “I never want to speak to you again”. Such behaviour treats others as disposable. It’s an inherently psychopathic act. So, social media is perhaps triggering the latent psychopath in all of us.

“It’s an enabler and facilitator of psychopathic characteristics,” he says. Psychopathic behaviour also “does well” online – with narcissism and manipulation key to getting “clicks”.

In a way, psychopaths – as the ultimate predator – have always been in search of the most resources. Today, the greatest resource is the attention of other people. When it comes to psychopaths and social media, “we’re back on the savannah,” says Dutton.