Event Report

Communication to members

Building a world fit for today and tomorrow
What is Europe's role?

Policy Dialogue – 25 February 2014

Summary

The world looks likely to be facing a series of major long-term challenges in the 21st century, ranging from pandemics to climate change to cybersecurity to migration. There is therefore an urgent need to prepare for these scenarios. This policy dialogue looked at these types of long-term challenge and what could be done to overcome them. Discussions revolved around a report entitled 'Now for the Long Term' produced by the Commission for Future Generations.

Full Report

Ian Goldin, Director of the Oxford Martin School at **Oxford University**, opened the debate by presenting the main results of the Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations, of which he is Vice Chair.

Pandemics, climate change, cybersecurity and migration are among the many big challenges that the world is likely to face in the 21st century. The central problem is not what can be done but "how to make the politics happen and how to achieve change in a world of very lethargic institutional capacities" he explained.

The Commission for Future Generations brought together a group of top intellectuals and top politicians from every continent with broad experience of how the system currently operates to think through how to create a different sort of answer to how to overcome the gridlock.

The report, entitled 'Now for the Long Term', was divided into three main parts.

The first part sets out the main challenges and argues that there is a need for a different way of thinking. Whilst recognising major achievements such as big advances in disease prevention and poverty reduction, it identifies problems (e.g. rising inequality, obesity, the sustainability of resources, climate change or antibiotic resistance). According to **Goldin**, it notes that globalisation has not benefitted everyone equally and that there has been paralysis in global leadership.

He argued that many issues cannot be dealt with at the local and regional level and, whilst he believes in subsidiarity, the need for coordination and collective outcomes is growing.

The second part focuses on what can be learnt from history about dealing with big challenges. Here the report pointed to the creation of the EU's Single Market as the best example of bringing people (businesses, trade unions, political leaders) together to reach a shared objective. The campaign to eradicate smallpox is another example of a successful campaign. He stressed that it is important to celebrate the success stories but also to recognise the failures (e.g. overfishing, the management of antibiotics, Copenhagen talks on climate change).

One of the big challenges in the report is that of short-term thinking. The pressure exerted by polls on politicians means problems can be pushed beyond the electoral cycle. There has also been a sharp decline in trust in politics and a dramatic decline in the numbers of people turning out to vote.

The third part contains around 15 practical recommendations. These include:

- 'Creative coalitions': This means going beyond the monopoly of global consensus being used as an excuse for not moving and working on ways to build coalitions and build legitimacy into these coalitions. For example, the report suggests an alliance of about 20 countries (who may together account for 90% of emissions), 30 big companies and 40 big cities as a coalition to move the debate on climate change forward. The C40, the 40 biggest metropols, took this recommendation on board at a recent meeting in Johannesburg. This is not a substitute for the Paris meetings on climate change next year but is a building block towards more commitment to action.
- Cyberex, which would be a secure platform to exchange information in the sensitive area of cybersecurity.
- Sunset clauses in which big global institutions are evaluated every ten years or so and questions are asked such as whether they are fit for purpose and fulfilling their mandate.
- Creating institutions (e.g. agencies) that are accountable to parliament but not part of the political cycle.
- Global statistics relating to voluntary taxation information exchange.

The current system has a lot of benefits, said Ian Goldin, but he stressed that "this is the most dangerous time in history". "We're at a crossroads. If we don't grapple with the problems, the situation will be a lot worse for future generations. We need innovative solutions. What we really want is to stimulate a debate on how to think about this," he said.

The report has been downloaded 780,000 times from 150 countries.

Philippe Van Parijs, Director of Hoover Chair of economics and social ethics at **Louvain University**, argued that democracy is ill equipped to face new challenges. He sees three potential tracks to pursue. The first is the 'democratic deficit' as he argued that "we may be too accountable to the electorate". The Commission report suggests insulating agencies from short-term political agendas. He appeared to be in favour of this but wondered if it was too politically incorrect to sell. The second track would be to give children the right to vote from birth (with this right being exercised by a proxy vote by their parents). That may lower the median age of the electorate, (currently age 50) but is unlikely to pass through parliament. The third track is to develop more empathy, even to those not yet born.

One megatrend in the world he pointed to is growing urbanisation. The key question here, he argued is: "How can we convince younger generations that you are going to consume less than our generation but your lives will be better?" According to him, it is "essential to have a dramatic improvement in public spaces in cities". A planned pedestrian area in the centre of Brussels is an example of this.

Vladimir Vasak, a journalist at **Arte TV**, asked rhetorically whether someone who is brilliant and clever (such as Pascal Lamy) can be elected today.

He underlined the pressure coming from the media, the fast pace at which things are moving, the fact that so many people get their information on their phones and that politicians have a shorter and shorter term view. He questioned whether a long term view is possible today.

He argued that it is the power of images that makes countries and the world change. "If there had been no film by Al Gore, there would not have been the political pressure to make climate change an issue," he said.

With regard to the media, he said that "we need to think about the future of media, not just in terms of putting short-term pressure on politicians but to help us all think about our future".

Responding to **Vasak**'s point about Pascal Lamy, **Goldin** said that he has worked with very able politicians such as Mandela and does not therefore see intelligence and ability as a "disqualification" but stressed the issue of quality of leadership.

Referring to the recent rise of the National Front, he said that people feel threatened by phenomena such as the financial crisis, cyber-attacks, pandemics and climate change as these are "real and scary". But we "can't stop threats by being more isolated as we have to be more joined up". "People are becoming more local and saying no because they feel

threatened. The task for us is to prove them wrong," he said. "Unless we get our act together to make globalisation work, the jury is out that people may become more nationalist and xenophobic and things will fall apart," he warned.

Discussion

Asked about the gender balance of the report, **Goldin** conceded that there was gender imbalance but that that reflected the situation in the world. However, there were women on the commission, such as Julia Marton-Lefèvre, Michelle Bachelet, and Arianna Huffington.

Asked about the role of faith-based organisations, Ian **Goldin** said that they had a "significant role" and that the plan was to engage with them on what should be done to take the recommendations forward.

On a question about production being mobile and the lack of environmentally sustainable capitalism, he said that there is a need for a more inclusive system. He underlined that there was consensus in the report on broad principles such as the need to tackle the problems of growing inequality and unemployment.

He also argued that there is a sense that democracy is being hijacked by money, pointing to the lobbying power of interests (e.g. from the coal industry in the US) and that this has a significant effect on how democracy functions.

He sees the role of the Commission as being to stand up to the maelstrom of national daily politics and argued that it is "at a crossroads". "Is it able to grapple with tensions, play a leadership role in a bigger Europe with more and more commissioners and can it tackle migration, climate change, financial issues and inequality? The answer is we hope so. It is the best hope we have," he said.

Van Parijs drew a bleak comparison with the past, in which capitalism had a human face and markets played an important role in democracies, whereas now democracies are in the market, leading to "an obsession with competitiveness". He argued for the need for a caring Europe that looks after the future and the most disadvantaged.

There was also discussion about whether the world could be divided into different categories, such as 'stay-at-homes' and 'movers' or 'educated' and 'non-educated'. On this question, **Goldin** cautioned against generalisations as the "the debate is more complicated than that".

Van Parijs argued that sustainable development is a misleading term and that "what we need is a sustainably generalisable standard of living/way of life (e.g. using a bike rather than a car)".

With regard to this year's European Parliament elections, he also pointed to a 'voter's paradox' in that people know that when they vote, their vote will make little difference with some 300 million voters. He stressed the importance of understanding the competences of the European Parliament, as even people who are well informed have difficulty explaining this. He suggested that some deep and "out of the box" thinking was needed so that some bold and politically incorrect proposals could be put forward.

Vasak concluded by suggesting that, given high unemployment levels in countries such as Spain and Greece and low unemployment levels in countries such as Austria, it could be explained to people so that they may need to learn German and be helped to move to other places.

He also wondered if it was "easier" for statesmen to stay at the European level, which he described as "cosy and elitist".