



Donald Johnston

Honorable Donald J. Johnston PC OC QC was Senior Minister in the Canadian Government: President of the Treasury Board; Minister of State for Science and Technology; (under PM P. Trudeau) Minister of State for Economic and Regional Development (cabinet of PM J. Turner). Secretary General of the OECD Paris (1996 – 2006), nomination of Canadian PM Jean Chrétien. The first non-European to occupy this prestigious position, Johnston was elected to a second term in 2001.

Taking for granted... be wary

The title of these comments is inspired by my personal experience in important areas of public policy both as a politician beginning in the 1970s and more recently as Secretary General of the OECD from 1996 until 2006. That was a very important decade as it ushered in the period which some day we thought would be known as the beginning of globalization on a grand scale.

When I took up my responsibilities in Paris at the end of May 1996 it was a time brimming with optimism about the great future ahead for our children and generations to follow! We were about to say goodbye to one of the most brutal and bloody centuries in human history. Physical human suffering was compounded by poverty and misery of hundreds of millions, especially in the developing world.

Many of us involved at the international level in public policy saw major opportunities to address challenges which had eluded us in the past. Indeed we took a great deal for granted and I must confess that I certainly did. Why? Here are a few examples and the reasons for taking so much for granted.

1. We had just witnessed major geopolitical restructuring in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Soviet Union had collapsed and we assumed that the threat of nuclear war had disappeared with it;
2. With the replacement of the GATT the (WTO) we took for granted the exciting prospect of global free trade and investment, which would bring economic growth and rising prosperity everywhere, but especially to the developing world. We expected “*trade*” not “*aid*” to be the route out of third world poverty;
3. The expansion of the proven Marshall Plan formula to regions fractured by division and conflict. We took for granted that such approaches could bring peace to the war torn Balkans and perhaps even to the Middle East and the Arab World;
4. We took for granted that with the publication of the Brundtland Report “*Our Common Future*” on Sustainable Development followed by the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, followed by the commitments in the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, that the decades long stalemate of slowing greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) (and therefore global warming) had been broken and that multilateral international commitments would ensure the protection of the biosphere and its natural capital;
5. We took for granted that improvements to the stunning success of healthy capitalism through universal principles of good corporate governance, supported by an *Anti Bribery Convention*, would control the greed inherent in the undue exploitation of unfettered capitalism. We took for granted that the wealth and wage disparities would narrow, especi-

ally in the United States;

- 6 We witnessed the remarkable rise of the European Union (EU) uniting former enemies. We took its expansion and global role for granted. Regarding the EU, I often quote a paragraph from the preface of *A History of Europe* by H. A. L. Fisher, a warden at Oxford University in the 1930s. He wrote: “[No] question [would be] more pertinent to the future welfare of the world than how the nations of Europe ... may best be combined into some stable organization for the pursuit of their common interests and the avoidance of strife “;
7. We also took for granted the gradual spread of democracy and democratic institutions into the former countries of the Soviet Union and elsewhere in central Europe, South America and Asia;
8. Early misgivings about the ideological bent of **Recep Tayyip Erdogan** as the Prime Minister, and then President of Turkey, were dispelled as he initially seemed supportive of good governance, freedom of the fourth estate, free speech and democratic principles. We believed him and took for granted that the remarkable reforms introduced by Mustafa Kemal, known as Atatürk, would ensure the survival of a secular democratic Turkey;
9. We took for granted the United States as a lone global superpower, magnanimous and fair, the first true united nation with people drawn from all corners of the planet to its robust democracy and unlimited opportunities.

As we look back over the past 25 years it is obvious that much too much was taken for granted. Given that so few of the opportunities we assumed would bring the world to a much better place were seized by my generation, what do you perceive as a better way forward? When we open that discussion in a few minutes, I hope I have convinced you to take little for granted. Be wary, if not skeptical, about those who foresee only a prosperous and peaceful future for this wonderful planet.

We need to remind ourselves of the following and address the questions I raise in our general discussion.

1. We failed to engage Russia with the West and as a result are now strengthening NATO in an effort to contain Putin’s aggressive behaviour. History may show this to be the most egregious of all Western public policy failures in the post-Soviet Union period because of its impact on other areas of global concern where Russia should have been a partner. Is it too late to recover from a failure to engage Russia despite the Russian adventures in Crimea and the Ukraine?
2. The EU is increasingly fragile, with concern about the future of the euro common currency and the EU’s capacity to deal with massive immigration from the war-torn areas of the Middle East. Do the weaknesses of the EU reflect a too rapid expansion without strengthening institutions which would move it toward a more federalist structure promoted by the Spinelli group?
3. Tensions have grown between China and its neighbours over territorial disputes, convincing the United States to pivot from its European focus and increase its military presence in Asia. Does this refocussing plus a strengthening alliance between China and Russia herald the reigniting of another Cold War like the one my generation grew up with?
4. Now many more nations (and possibly terrorist groups) have access to nuclear weapons. Does that greatly increase the possibility of a 21st century nuclear war?
5. The global free trade agenda is in the doldrums with the failure of the Doha Round and the concomitant rise of protectionist rhetoric, especially in the United States, at the highest political levels. Does this mean that global free trade is now beyond reach?
6. Is the prospect of eliminating poverty in the developing world through trade and investment dying?

7. Reductions in GHG emissions, especially CO₂, but also methane, continue to elude us after decades of effort, showing how ineffectual the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change process has been and will be. The widely heralded but unenforceable Paris Agreement in the context of a history of failures is even dangerous because much of the public thinks our leaders have come to grips with this challenge (as we all did after the Kyoto Protocol was adopted in 1997). Do they do not realize that even if the agreed upon targets are achieved they are not sufficient to keep global temperatures below the level that the scientific community tells us is necessary to prevent dramatic and irreversible climate change? Is there resistance to developing a Plan B as a last resort to prevent unacceptable global warming? Solar radiation management, a form of geo engineering, seems to be broadly under consideration. Is that good or of concern? As areas of the world may become uninhabitable, will there be mass migration from areas of the developing world to more temperate climates?
8. For those who believe in democracy and perceived it as beginning to take root after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union do subsequent developments undermine the confidence that many democratic governments may be in retreat? In some countries, such as Thailand, there has been a return to a military dictatorship. In others, such as Russia and other countries that were formerly part of the Soviet Union, there is only a pretense of democracy with rigged elections, as in Belarus. There also appears to be backsliding in Turkey, a very important global player and a bridge between Asia and its historic Western allies. The situation in Turkey, which held such promise only a decade ago, is very worrisome. President Erdogan seems increasingly autocratic and intolerant of criticism and dissent. Failure of this democracy could be a sad, even tragic, development. Turkey is a major regional and global power, and through the influence of Atatürk it became an emerging secular democracy with a majority Sunni population straddling Europe and Asia. Atatürk showed the world what individual leadership supported by ethical standards could accomplish in a short period of time.
9. Is the world faced with a growing number of autocratic strongmen who would prefer to destroy the important international infrastructure if it constrains their personal ambitions? It would appear that when one combines the far east, parts of Eastern Europe, Russia, Turkey, China, North Korea, the Philippines, Thailand etc, more than 50% of humanity is or will soon be governed by "strong men". With few exceptions such as Atatürk, history shows that such people have only one interest "me".

President **Donald Trump** gives every indication *that* he is **anxious to join** the ranks of these strongmen, initially by withdrawing the United States from the central role it had played through visionary leadership by building and helping to maintain the post war international and institutional architecture. His slogan "*America First*" should be interpreted for what it really is, namely, "*Donald Trump First*".

There is a disquieting commentary in the New York Times of 16 December 2016 entitled "*Is Donald Trump a Threat to Democracy*" by Professors **Steven Levitsky** and **Daniel Ziblatt** of Harvard University. Here is an excerpt: "*Donald J. Trump's election has raised a question that few Americans ever imagined asking: Is our democracy in danger? ... Past stability is no guarantee of democracy's future survival ... Our research points to several warning signs. The clearest warning sign is the ascent of anti-democratic politicians into mainstream politics. Drawing on a close study of democracy's demise in 1930s Europe, the eminent political scientist Juan J. Linz designed a "litmus test" to identify anti-democratic politicians. His indicators include a failure to reject violence unambiguously, a readiness to curtail rivals' civil liberties, and the denial of the legitimacy of elected governments.*"

Mr. Trump tests positive on all counts. In the campaign, he encouraged violence among supporters and pledged to prosecute **Hillary Clinton**;

He has threatened legal action against unfriendly media, and continues to suggest that he might not accept the election results saying the election will be rigged. If he loses will he in some way

resist leaving office?

Since his 2016 election he has not changed his attitude on any of these issues.

David Frum, a Conservative and traditional Republican and a senior editor at the Atlantic published a book two years ago "*Trumpocracy - The Corruption of the American Republic*". It has recently been released in paperback with a new preface by Frum which reviews the appalling record of this individual to whom Americans have entrusted the leadership of the most powerful nation in history.

In a concluding paragraph of the book he writes: "*President Trump is cruel, vengeful, ignorant, lazy, avaricious and treacherous...*"

Later he adds: "*We are living through the most dangerous challenge to the free government of the United States that anyone alive has encountered. What happens next is up to you. Don't be afraid. This moment of danger can be your finest hour as a citizen and as an American*"

Today I cast Frum's challenge to each of you in a global perspective rather than just American.

Yes, democracy can be fragile everywhere.

We who live in well-established democracies must never be complacent or smug about the success of our societies. The comments of the Harvard professors above echo that concern.

Our democratic societies and their political systems must adapt to a rapidly evolving world. We are increasingly in that global village through forces of globalization amplified by communication and transportation technologies.

In line with the work of **Charles Darwin**, it has been said that "*it is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.*" The same could be said of democratic governments and even empires.

What happens next to global free government is up to your generation of leadership. It is a humungous challenge, especially in countries where the seeds of democracy have never been planted or where they have enjoyed short life spans, Thailand and especially Turkey come to mind.

The future of democracy across the globe could be destroyed if the autocratic motives and moves of Donald Trump succeed, as they well might if I read the current political climate in the United States correctly. Despite shortcomings which need correction such as the unfortunate influence on elections through Super PACs, the United States has been perceived for years as a remarkable democracy which others attempt to emulate. This may be about to change as it is increasingly viewed as government by the rich, of the rich and for the rich, and Trump does not appear to feel constrained by the institutional checks and balances of the constitution. He could put American democracy on the terrible path to an autocratic state which he seems to admire, especially in the Russia and Turkey of today.

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In summary, what looked to be a promising future in all the major areas of concern in the 1990s has evolved into what could best be described as an economic, social, and geopolitical mess. But as bad as that story is, we have succeeded in making the future even more problematic with the arrival of global terrorism.

My generation must recognize the extraordinary failures of the past decades. Your generation must do better.

It seems that efforts to create consensus on major issues amongst many sovereign nations does not work. Is there not a better way forward in global governance? This is the last question I leave you with.

Have 190 countries not offered proof of the impossibility of finalizing an international and binding free trade agreement known as the *Doha Round*, or as almost 200 countries have done in their efforts to find consensus on concrete solutions to address the challenges of climate change. Neit-

her set of efforts, the first initiated through the WTO process and the second through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change process, has delivered the results sought and it is unlikely they ever will.

Is starting small and gradually broadening an international consensus a better option? The EU successfully evolved from a small base but has it expanded too rapidly to consolidate and build upon its remarkable and successful beginnings? Even the G20 may be ineffectual because of size and economic and social diversity.

Does the difficulty of building broad consensus on these issues suggests that a structure more resembling the UN Security Council would be more effective? Could the Security Council itself with a limited membership of powerful countries become a global steering group and replace the G-7 process?

Whether we like it or not, each major power has spheres of influence over smaller regional powers through shared history, culture (sometimes language), and trade and investment.

When we compare human and societal evolution to a relay race one generation must pass the baton on to the next. In a small way that is what I am saying to you today. I hope our discussion will touch upon a number of these important and often controversial issues.

We have fallen behind in many respects in the early years of this 21st century, perhaps even forfeiting many of the hard-earned benefits of good capitalism and democracy to an ever increasing number of corrupt strong men and autocratic regimes.

Is that the future?

Remember the words Shakespeare attributed to Brutus: *“There is a tide in the affairs of men, Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries.”*

I am persuaded that the latter may be our fate. We did not take the flood of opportunities at hand in the 1990s. Is it too late to recover through hard work, sacrifice and creativity in restructuring global governance for a better world.

What should we do? What can you do?

It will depend to a large extent on your personal values which I hope have not been irreversibly warped by admiration for the material success of greed and visible wealth of the famous 1% who dominate power and politics in the USA and increasingly elsewhere.

I have described the state of the world today as analogous to the fireplace at my country home. It is usually fully loaded with tinder, kindling and dry wood. All it awaits is a match. Unfortunately, in the world today there are many matches waiting to be lit and spread their deadly destruction to regions, if not the planet as a whole.

This text is exclusively made as supplementary for a university lecture held on 28 OCT 2020. It is a part of the so-called ‘Geneva Lecture Series – Contemporary World of Geo-economics’, conceived and conducted by prof. Anis H. Bajrektarevic for the Swiss University in Geneva.

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