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International Day of  
Democracy 2016

Think Piece

# International Day of Democracy 2016

## Looking back to 2030

By David Beetham

### Historical background

It is not possible to understand the changes that had taken place in almost all democracies by the year 2030 without recognising the combination of crises which had occurred in the early 2020s, bringing democratic systems to breaking point. The most obvious site of crisis was at the global level: a new financial collapse and world-wide recession had occurred; climate change had intensified and led to catastrophic meteorological events; and huge population migrations recurred in response to persistent armed conflicts. By that time, many democracies had already become deformed by the rise of authoritarian, populist leaders. They were elected on the promise of 'our nation first', with closed borders, states of emergency, the shackling of independent media and the judiciary, and deepening corruption. Such deformed democracies proved quite incapable of addressing the interlocking crises that struck the world in the early 2020s, offering only intensified repression at home and sporadic armed interventions abroad.

This combination of global crisis and domestic authoritarianism sparked resistance movements simultaneously in a number of countries. At first, these were haphazard and easily crushed, but gradually they became more coordinated through social media, and developed into mass movements occupying key public spaces and offering a direct challenge to the authorities. These movements were led and mobilised primarily by students and young people, who felt cheated of their futures and had nothing left to lose. In a number of countries, they succeeded in toppling the regime, though not without considerable bloodshed. It was not just that their slogan 'down with dictatorship' struck a widespread popular chord. It was also that, through a process of global debate via social media, they had evolved a positive and coherent alternative which became known as 'Agenda 2030'. This agenda proved highly influential, even in countries that had been relatively immune from the turn to authoritarian populism.

### Agenda 2030: domestic

Agenda 2030 comprised two main strands: a renewal of democracy domestically, and an extension of democracy to the global level. Domestic renewal took as its starting point the recognition that, as survey after survey had shown, people everywhere had lost confidence in the capacity of political elites to respond to their concerns or to solve the most pressing problems. Indeed this had proved to be the fertile soil in which authoritarian populism had taken root. Some argued that parliaments and representative assemblies should be disbanded altogether in favour of citizens' juries, internet forums, virtual citizens' meetings, and other forms of direct

democracy. However, this would have amounted to abandoning all prospects of continuity in decision-making and effective executive accountability. Yet, as an important complement, rather than alternative, to representative government at all levels, these participatory methods could have proved invaluable. Governments would be required to involve groups of citizens in a deliberative process for all decisions affecting the regulation and delivery of public services in health, education, welfare, transport, housing and the basic utilities, whatever the source of their provision. Experiments had shown repeatedly that participatory processes involving diverse publics produced the most sustainable decisions in conditions of complexity, and were most likely to achieve wide acceptance. Top-down decision-making by 'big shots' on exorbitant salaries had become discredited everywhere, in business and government alike.

In addition, the representative process itself would be cleansed of the deformations to which it had become subject. Top of the list was the influence of money in politics, which had prevented the financial industry from being effectively reformed after the first crisis of 2008. Political parties would be publicly funded in proportion to their registered memberships. Donations, including those from election candidates, would be limited to the level of the average weekly wage. Lobbyists would be publicly registered, and the content of their meetings with decision makers recorded and made public. A clear separation would be made between public office holders and their own personal financial interests. Government ministers would be subject to a five-year ban on working for any organisation with which they had been involved in the formation or execution of policy.

If these reforms could succeed in creating a more level playing field in terms of policy influence, they could also make parliaments and other assemblies more representative of their electorates. Public funding for political parties would be made dependent on the proportion of women and ethnic minorities represented among the candidates that a party selected. More difficult was the representation in parliaments of young people. Requiring parties to include an appropriate proportion of young voters among the candidates they selected would not create a sufficient body in parliament to overcome the huge bias in policy against the interests of the young, evidenced over previous decades. Young people had been hardest hit by the crises of the early 2020s. It was their futures that had been most placed in jeopardy, and they had formed the vanguard of the protests which had toppled the authoritarian governments. They called themselves 'Generation Betrayed'. Here was what proved to be the most radical domestic proposal in Agenda 2030: that second, revising chambers of parliament would be composed entirely of those aged 18 (or 16) to 25, elected without party affiliation by the same age group. They were debarred from standing for re-election once they had passed the age of 25. The enthusiasm which greeted the introduction of this system in the first countries reformed put considerable pressure on others to follow suit.

### **Agenda 2030: global**

While all the above formed the domestic strand in Agenda 2030, the global element was equally radical. It involved the establishment of a global legislative assembly comprising three elected parliamentarians from each

UN member country, selected for their international rather than narrowly national outlook and record. They were to be called MGPs, or Members of the Global Parliament. They were tasked initially with finding solutions to the three overlapping global crises, and their decisions, requiring the approval of a two-thirds majority, would be binding on all participating countries. While a few countries refused to be bound by those decisions, the content of the earliest ones was so eminently sensible and necessary that they quickly fell into line. Indeed, the wonder was that those early measures had not been introduced before. The reasons were evident: the conflict of national interests, the power of the business and financial lobbies, and the dysfunctionality of the UN Security Council as a global decision-making body.

The first measures passed by the Global Parliament were a so-called 'Tobin' tax on financial transactions; a replacement of profits taxes by duties levied on business activity in the countries where business was conducted; and a requirement of transparency in the ownership of on- and offshore wealth holdings. There was a powerful investigatory body and severe penalties for defaulters. The product of the new taxes would be shared between the country of origin and a global wealth fund. The fund would be distributed to the poorest countries to assist them in achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, in return for tough anti-corruption measures. The initial response to the climate change crisis was the imposition of a global carbon tax. It would alleviate problems in the countries most severely affected, and help them to install the latest alternative technologies. In response to the huge migration flows a commission of MGPs was established with the task of mediating in civil wars and other armed conflicts. A special fund was set up to assist the resettlement of refugees and to meet their most immediate necessities. The combination of these decisions gave the new parliament an enormous prestige.

## **The Future**

By the year 2030 the key elements of Agenda 2030 had been introduced, both at the global level and in sufficient countries domestically to create powerful 'neighbourhood effects' in the rest. Among young people, the slogan 'nunca mas' (never again) proved a potent motivator. The irony was that it was only the breadth and depth of the concurrent crises of the early 2020s that enabled such transformations to win decisive public support in place of a return to 'business as usual', which had been the normal response previously. Whether these democratic transformations would become irreversible once the early enthusiasm had worn off would be a key question for the decade of the 2030s and beyond. Only time would tell.

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