UNIVERSITY of STIRLING

Weatherproofing Democracy

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21st November 2019

Climate change – or rather, how to cope with it – is a global policy challenge led *by* democracies. It is also a challenge *to* democracy. In the past two centuries, democracy has been tested by population growth and urbanisation, empire-building and decolonization, the industrial revolution and the great depression, expanding human rights in the face of totalitarian threats. Aspirational ideals have conflicted with atavistic fears and base prejudices. The end of the Cold War in Europe was a vindication of democracy. Complacency however is the wrong lesson of history: threats to democracy rarely come singly; struggles to preserve democracy can be long and bloody.

And democracy is in trouble. In a 2018 survey of 27 democratic nations carried out by Pew Research Center, the percent of people who say they are not satisfied with the way democracy is working in their country – and perhaps with good reason - ranged from a high of 85% in Mexico and 83% in Brazil, to 70% in Italy, 63% in Argentina, 58% in the United States, 56% in Japan, and 55% in the United Kingdom. Levels of satisfaction were highest in Canada (61%), the Netherlands (64%), and the Philippines and Sweden (69%), reflecting favorable economic conditions.

No political ideology has a perfect recipe for managing change; catastrophic events can bring repressive regimes down, too. My concern however is with democracy.

Because climate change is about rising sea levels, floods, droughts, the supply and use of energy and water, air quality and waste management, it makes sense to begin with the geographical – or if you prefer, spatial or territorial - dimension of policy.

Policies have not caught up with the fact that spatial change, principally driven by rapid urban growth, has accelerated even before the public became aware of climate change. We often refer to cities as the motors of the economy, but this metaphor tells us very little because even economists struggle to understand what goes on inside them: their models are based on national units, assuming that most of the economy is urban because that's where people live and work, and that efficient markets allocate resources.

As a result, national economic policy, which is largely sectoral, is not intended to take the needs of particular cities and regions into account. Yet these vary widely in ways that affect national economic performance. Mega-cities in Asia and soon, in Africa; rural depopulation in the Great Plans of the United States, western Japan, central France and eastern Germany; the shrinking of distance following the introduction of high-speed rail in Europe and Asia; the transformation of coastlines to accommodate more people and to expand port and industrial facilities – these are just a few examples which tell us that the maps we use, as well as our mental maps, call for continual updating. To cite just one figure: between 1990 and 2000, the increase of artificial surfaces for housing, urban parks, industry, transport in 27 EU states was around 1000 square kilometers per year, exceeding the size of Berlin, and increasing at a rate four times greater than population growth.

Spatial change is about to become even more important. Dramatic economic shocks and de-industrialisation, trends already manifest in the 1970s and 1980s, and more frequent and costly natural catastrophes since 1990, highlight the challenges many regions face when adapting to sudden change, testing their resilience.

Cities and regions will have to be rebuilt both to reduce carbon levels and to cope with storms, floods and fires *not as they were*, but on more sustainable lines; if protection and adaptation measures are not enough, entire settlements in the path of a future catastrophe may have to be relocated. The numbers of people at risk increase in every successive study: estimates of the number of people exposed to flooding, mostly in Asia, has doubled from 400 to 800 million. How much time is needed, given that risk assessment is particularly difficult in coastal zones exposed to a rise in sea level? Uninsured property risks are exploding; at what point will there be pressure to socialize losses – a vote-getter for some, but not for others? What is the vision of how things could be different, safer and better? Who will pay for what? Will there be a return to national planning, common in the 1930s? These questions do not discriminate between democratic and autocratic (or mixed) regimes, but the answers will be different. Much will involve infrastructure, but unsuccessful efforts to boost infrastructure investment after the financial crisis of 2008 are not encouraging. Democratic legal systems with provisions for due process and lengthy appeals were designed to check the arbitrary power of government, but costly delays could jeopardize major projects, exposing millions.

Institutions that look strong on paper prove to be weak when it comes to co-ordinating national and local funding and regulation. Decisions that combine technical expertise and popular assent take time, which is in short supply.

Regional disparities are likely to get worse, but we cannot predict which regions will benefit from and which will be disadvantaged by climate change. Regional disparities exacerbate widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of governments.

Under-rated until they became decisive in recent elections in countries as different as the United Kingdom, the United States, Poland, Italy, Germany, Spain, France, they now generate a modest flow of books by social scientists who have been talking about them for years. At the national level, electorates are highly polarized in most western democracies: Poland as well as Israel, Italy as well as the Netherlands, the United States as well as the United Kingdom. Look more closely, and the pattern reflects a polarization between regions with different socio-economic and cultural profiles, rather than between classes across the nation. Rather than tackle the causes of poor resilience that include low levels of skill and educational attainment, chronic health problems, poor connectivity, and a breakdown of co-operation among stakeholders, governments often fall back on compensation or redistribution through subventions and tax measures. Today's regional policies address yesterday's problems, not tomorrow's, and not even well at that. When the stock of public goods is insufficient, policy failures follow. The public knows that government priorities are mis-aligned with local needs, and that government programmes promise more than they deliver.

Why should the voters think that climate change will make government perform better? We need economic growth to provide the resources necessary to adjust to climate change, even though growth may well aggravate environmental conditions. At the time of this writing, real incomes for most people in most western democracies have not recovered from the crash of 2008; productivity and growth rates remain at pre-2000 levels. Greater growth at lower environmental cost remains elusive.

People who only see disruption in their lives are unlikely to make sacrifices for the sake of a distant goal that may never be reached.

Public participation in decision-making may reveal a majority opposed to abatement and mitigation measures especially if these call for taxes, pricing, and regulations. No wonder the electorate is polarized between short-term and long-term priorities. As many people are likely to think that governments are doing too much in response to climate change as not enough.

The point of democracy is to *elect and change a government* and its leaders on the basis of a choice of policy, often reflecting different views of the past and of the future. When a new government takes office, it often repudiates the policies of its predecessor. Policy consistency conflicts with the will of the people: just think of Trump and coal for power generation, Bolsonaro and deforestation of the Amazon, their attacks on the very concept of climate change and thus of the Paris Accord. Their brand of nationalism exposures other countries to cross-border risks, a major problem in international relations. Worse, their emphasis on cutting budgets undermines investment in infrastructure, public sector reform, education, health care – precisely those factors that make places more sustainable and societies more resilient. Implicitly, their tax-cutting efforts break the link between citizens and the services they need and expect to receive. Of course they can be defeated at the polls, to be followed by leaders who put climate change first, but this is no way to hit a carbon reduction target for 2030 or 2050.

And that target calls for a *higher level of infrastructure investment*. Are we spending enough? No!

Just looking at infrastructure needs: In 2006 the OECD released a report indicating that by 2030, global investment in telecommunications, land transport, water and electricity could reach $71 trillion, or 3.5 per cent of global GDP, with the greatest share going toward maintaining and repairing water systems, and the second greatest for power generation. A few years later McKinsey came up with a similar figure for global infrastructure investment of $57 trillion just to keep up with projected GDP growth, and without taking account of further change to cope with global warming and destructive storms. The current rate of investment then, however, was 60% short of what it should have been.

Why? Treasury and central banks, fiscal rules, regulations all constrain public and private investment in different ways in different countries, but the cumulative effect is real nonetheless. Moreover shortages of equipment and trained personnel limit what can be done efficiently as the problems of subway construction in Greater Paris illustrate.

Policy consistency over time does matter. And so does co-ordination: reforms are more successful when several countries undertake them simultaneously. We are at a critical moment because millions of people and businesses have been making decisions until now on the basis of environmental policies, taxes, and the like which were set in place years ago at a time when climate change was not a priority. Climate change calls for different regulations, incentives, taxes, all directed toward curbing the rate of increase in the mean temperature and the accumulation of greenhouse gasses, and coping with their effects.

Uncertainty and electoral swings compromise long-term investments in capital (buildings, energy) based on costs (including taxes). Policies and rules across a dozen or more sectors should be mutually reinforcing, not working at cross-purposes as they often are. As things stand, climate change agendas are not likely to restore trust in government, and may further depress it.

Every paper of this kind is expected to present a series of recommendations. In theory, we know what to do; putting theory into practice is hard. Governments have seen lists like these before, but have done little for two reasons: first, the longer the list, the less likely that anything happens simply because the scale is too great, and the resistance of adversely affected groups too intense; and second, the political rewards are too remote. Nevertheless, and given the focus of this paper on the challenges for democracies when addressing climate change, I want to set out a couple of areas for reform which are pre-conditions to the design and implementation of policies to cope with climate change. Setting targets for 2030 or 2050 is easy; working out how to meet them is not.

The problem of public sector reform is not unique to democracies, but the interplay between rule of law, institutions and the legitimacy of government affect the pace and direction of reform in them if they are to rise to the challenges of climate change – coping with changes which are irreversible,

coping with crises which are more frequent and costly, and coping with changes in our way of life to curb global warming:

- National policy-making: identify policies, subsidies and taxes that have the unintended consequence of promoting unsustainable development; spend more on infrastructure while money is cheaper.

- Multi-level governance: reduce administrative fragmentation, restructure regulatory agencies with overlapping or incomplete responsibilities; re-balance responsibilities with resources, build planning capacity at local level;

- Crisis management: invest in public education and health, key for resilience; carry out strategic planning assessments to determine what can and should be changed in the aftermath of a catastrophe.

- Sea level rising: assess risks and vulnerability, including thresholds of critical change; adapt vulnerable cities and regions by changing building codes, plans and design standards; pay for redundancy in key infrastructures; anticipate physical relocation of people and critical assets.

What is striking about these four "policy portfolios" is the extent to which they are inter-related, making sequencing difficult. There are successful examples here and there, but because different countries tackle problems in different ways, it is difficult to assess overall progress or to identify best practices.

Structural reform in the past advanced through the application of cost-benefit analysis and time-tested principles of political economy, but given the complexity of the interrelations between the drivers of spatial organization, economic trends, and sectoral performance, it is very difficult to

assess the impact of a mix of urban policies on greenhouse gas emissions, climate vulnerability, and economic and social welfare. Bold targets and big policy announcements are likely to under-deliver, further adding to public frustration with democratic politics.

Until there is a paradigm shift, fundamental reforms to deliver better regional development policies, and to deliver coherent policy packages more consistently over time, are unlikely. Our current paradigm based on economic growth and low unemployment does not give us confidence that it can address the challenges of climate change. A paradigm shift, to succeed, must help individuals align their private, personal goals with broad social and political trends, thereby reducing the level of anxiety people feel, enhancing their sense of control, and increasing their confidence in public actions. We have been there before: indeed, western civilization has executed once-in-a-century paradigm shifts successfully, but not painlessly, since the 17th century. In every case since c. 1650, a paradigm shift has lasted a generation and been resolved only after an accumulation of crises which provoke a radical change in social and political aspirations. When the ends of public policy change, the means will change as well. Most recently, economic collapse in the interwar period became an existential threat to democracy. The day is not yet when electorates see environmental collapse in the same way.

By default, in the short term we are likely to rely on *personal initiative and on innovation* outside the political sphere. Fortunately both are strengths of democracies. *Innovation* is key for energy supply and use, construction, infrastructure, but also for fashion and health care as climatic extremes become more frequent. Government will have to respond to civil society and the private sector. This calls for a mix of research investment and regulatory reform to promote, test and diffuse new ideas, services and products, and well-functioning markets.

But there is no magic in technology: the use of big data and the introduction of artificial intelligence in the service of carbon reduction alters the interface between government and markets, calling for innovation in how government delivers and regulates services. Innovation, in other words, is a virtuous cycle.

Research and innovation are linked to high levels of human capital, robust and well-regulated financial institutions, ready access to information, property rights, open trading systems, and cultures that promote risk-taking and problem-solving. Because the pre-conditions for innovation systems are more favorable in democracies, they have first-leader advantages to set up a rules-based framework for their diffusion and use. Innovation is however disruptive: people and firms who in the present will have to pay more, or find that their investments are worth less, may well protest, which explains why France canceled ecological taxes twice in recent years.

Initiative means accepting greater responsibility for what we do, rather than wait for others to act. When national policy lags, mayors take the initiative.

Cities are on the front lines because carbon reduction will affect how we work and live in them. And cities represent the form of democracy that is closest to the people in their daily lives; mayors are often the highest elected official people ever see, even when there has been a disaster.

People have a right to ask what the city of the future will look like. Visionary urban planning fell into disrepute following the collapse of centrally-planned economies and the ascendancy of market-based policies to allocate resources. (Perhaps this helps explain why infrastructure investment has been insufficient; in any case, the public-private finance model which became popular in the 1990s is unlikely to support infrastructure investment given the wide range of uncertainty affecting the life-cycle for energy or transport beyond the 2020s). Computer-based design and big data will not tell us what vision of a better life should be projected when a district has to be rebuilt or a new town planned: they are tools to an end. The powers of imagination which create dramatic images of the collapse of civilization in science fiction reflect our fears, but not our hopes.

We need images and plans that reflect our aspirations for civic identity, social welfare and safety, health, culture, skills and the satisfactions that come from using them at work, and the enjoyment of leisure. This is an urgent task for mayors, but it can only accomplished only if there is a comparable investment in professional training and in the education of public officials and the public as well.

But mayors can do only so much on their own. Some will do nothing; some will do the right thing for the wrong reasons; some, perhaps well-intentioned, will make things worse, but won't be in office when the problem becomes urgent.

Free-rider problems will arise as some cities adopt stronger measures than others. The electoral dynamics in many democracies are over-weighted toward rural areas at the expense of cities, where most people live. Think of how much more could be achieved if national fiscal, sectoral and regulatory policies and urban initiatives complemented each other, which is why public sector reform is so critical. But history shows that reforms of this magnitude are difficult to carry out in normal times; it takes a revolution, a major war, or a shock of similar magnitude to accelerate the pace of change.

We do not yet see how to reduce the current high level of uncertainty and bring the anxiety we feel under control. There is more: this feeling of things being out of our control feeds fear and drives the demand for security, whatever the cost. Our era, when emotions lie close to the surface and indeed are often difficult for people to control, is similar to the era 1890-1914 when "neurasthenia" was common, the emotional early 17th century, and even the late 14th century characterized by Johan Huizinga, a famous historian writing after World War One, as "overstrung sensibility". People lack perspective; they are inclined to believe that things are getting worse when arguably our levels of welfare have preserved the gains made over at least a generation. The great stagnation cannot be compared to the great depression. An objective view however also has to take account of the unusually high levels of stress that people report they experience, and find difficult to control. We should not be surprised that this can have significant electoral consequences.

We are stuck with gradual change, perhaps too little and too slow to be called progress. An incremental approach has its advocates: trial and error favor innovation and evaluation; people learn what works through practice; large-scale policy disasters are avoided; more discretion can be given to local authorities. But this comes at a cost. Under-performing places add to the overall problem; distributional effects are higher; complacency takes hold; people do not see that enough is being

done against the scale of climate change. And when there is a crisis, people will hold their leaders accountable: why, they will want to know, was more not done sooner?

All political societies are value-laden; politicians appeal to different electorates by using words and phrases that imply that "we" are different from "them". These differences matter to our survival because they help to mobilize deep reservoirs of thought and energy: we just do not often spell out what our values are. Applied to sustainability, democracies stand out for their commitment to evidence-based decision-making. Individuals are everywhere responsible for their actions. In a democracy, leaders can make mistakes, admit to having made them, and remain honorable; in autocracies, those who make mistakes can be, and often are, simply eliminated. The benefits of living in a democracy are shared among strangers, breeding trust: we pay our taxes, often at a high level, knowing that services will be provided even if as individuals, we do not benefit from many of them. This is part of the social contract. Finally, democratic man looks to the future knowing that he has some control over his destiny because he has a say in how he is governed. But democracy, to return to the beginning of this paper, is in trouble.

Natural catastrophes formerly raised questions about moral justice – why innocent people suffer, or whether those who died were being punished for their sins.

Read the abundant 17th century literature during the Little Ice Age, or Voltaire on the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. The idea of progress and the concept of reason helped to bring disasters, or at least their high cost, literally down to earth. But no longer is the atmosphere conducive to constructive discussion. There is a real risk that those in favor of more measures to address climate change, and those opposed, will cancel each other out: facts, as C. Wright Mills wrote in 1959 in The Sociological Imagination, "may be reduced to mere assertion and counter-assertion; then we can only plead or persuade.

And at the very end, if the end is reached, moral problems become problems of power, and in the last resort, if the last resort is reached, the final form of power is coercion." (p. 77) In this way democracy mutates into autocracy: if there is no alternative, autocrats can coerce better than others.

Autocracies however are handicapped in other ways when it comes to addressing climate change. They are more likely to centralize knowledge in a set of secular and religious beliefs which cannot be safely or freely questioned, reducing the scope of individual initiative and responsibility. Fatalism, or, which comes to the same thing, a belief that the ruling system will always triumph, explains why there is so little outrage when major accidents happen – the exception of Chernobyl having been too big to cover up. Moreover, many autocratic countries, heavily dependent economically on natural resource extraction, face a threat from the policies adopted by highly developed, democratic economies to abate climate change.

Cross-border co-operation is critical to planetary solutions, but effective responses must focus on local vulnerabilities that vary widely across regions.

There is a foreign policy dimension as well: our societies are exposed to the consequences of climate change in Africa and the Middle East where fragile states and eco-systems make for a volatile mix and contribute to international migration, aggression and terrorism. Countries in the Middle East and Africa most affected by desertification are precisely those also affected by a future of falling demand for energy from northern countries. These countries already face major problems of social control and sectarian conflicts. To the question, "Are authoritarian states better than democratic ones at fighting climate control?, The Economist (21 September 2019) answered that on balance, they are not: the free press, essential to transparency and evidence-based evaluation, cannot thrive in an autocracy. Because change to the status quo would be revolutionary for them, it is to be feared; when events happen that appear to overwhelm the authorities and reveal their weaknesses, the system tends toward repression rather than an accommodation with social, economic and cultural trends. Climate change is a threat to autocracies which may be under greater domestic stress as a result.

We learned during and after the global financial crisis of 2008 that states are indispensable. Those who believe that democracy is regressing tend to see threats from without – globalization and immigration in recent years. Pessimistic about the future, many people feel vulnerable and powerless, and vote for populist nationalists who see inter-dependence as a threat, not a strength. Identity politics undermines the assumption of economists that people act rationally.

The question is not whether democracy is advancing, or regressing, but how well democratic government copes with crises. We have been there before.

At a critical time in the history of the West a century ago, in his first inaugural address, 4 March 1913, Woodrow Wilson, acknowledging that the consequences of industrialization overwhelmed people in their daily lives, called for collective action and promoted the regulatory state. Wilson saw this task as essential to justice, the only "firm basis of government." Just as economic growth and an expansion of human rights are inter-linked, so should environmental security. Ultimately, democratic governance will evolve to improve the kind of decision-making needed to cope with climate change as it has in the past when faced with other threats. We just don't know quite how, or when.

Questions and discussion:

A wide range of questions reflecting the scope of the paper and different disciplinary perspectives came after the lecture. Some would require another paper! Consider this question:

- If so much of the damage that has been done is a consequence of population growth coupled with the growth of capitalist economies, how can economic growth continue to be a target for development?

Let's not confuse things. The world's population reached only a billion around 1800. The question implies that capitalism is responsible for environmental damage and inequality. But waste and inequality are also social and political choices, not inevitable outcomes. Capitalism is the system which best corresponds to political, civic freedom – a form of equality, – to property rights, and to an information system, through pricing, which has been effective at targeting threats to the environment, health, and liberty. There are of course market failures, just as there are policy failures, when governments fail to regulate markets, or provide an adequate level of public goods, and collective failures, when people with the rights and power to do so fail to protect public institutions. How markets are regulated, toward what outcomes, and how inequality and suffering are addressed, remain the key questions, whether climate change is the over-arching concern, or something else. Those questions have to be decided somehow, hopefully democratically. Hence my paper, about why this is proving to be so difficult.

- How will young people, who only know a communication era since the creation of social media, live through a paradigm change?

Social media compromise inter-generational bonds at a time when more people are living longer; how paradoxical. They may be cut off from the experience of previous generations.

There is another dimension to the future for people now in their twenties. And as in the 30s, they face a future very different from the world of their parents, marked by reduced upward social mobility. Revolts in Greece earlier this decade, in 2011 in London and Israel, in 2014 and 2019 in Hong Kong, in 2018 in France and 2019 in Chile about housing, jobs, the cost of transport - the list

continues. Is there even a future for the middle class when so many young people with jobs and qualifications cannot aspire to home ownership? What stake do they have in the status quo? But then, what is the model of housing (and its ownership) most suitable for the transition to a zero-carbon era?

In 1940, writing his auto-biography and last book, John Buchan, an author whose name should still resonate in Scotland, wrote about social opportunity and mobility. At the end of the 1930s, taking account of the high degree of specialization that has transformed the nature of work, the prospects for young people were probably inferior to those of the previous generation. "The result in the end must be revolution, the most dangerous kind, a revolution of the middle classes. It is on their discontent that the dictators today have based their power…The dictators have won their power largely by an appeal, not to the suffering proletariat but to the forgotten 'little man; of the middle classes whom reformers in the past have unaccountably neglected." Buchan concluded, "I regard this shrinking of opportunity as one of the gravest facts of our age."

We have indeed been there before. The expanding horizons of the postwar era in social terms were positive; social revolutions of the kind that accompanied the end of World War One did not erupt in the West after 1945.We are now dealing with the environmental consequences of the huge increase in carbon which accompanied that era, and the threat of autocracy.

- What then is different about climate change as a crisis for democracy?

Climate change is the ultimate cross-border crisis. (See the final chapters in my Cities and Crisis). Trends, some of them with origins years or decades in the past, coincide with catastrophes and developments in the short term which were not predicted. Heterogeneity defines the complex inter-relationships between different problems to be confronted at the same time.

For example, the design of school buildings in flood-prone or earthquake-prone risks: is it a safety problem? Or a matter of public-sector funding? Community development? And finally, unlike war, we do not see the end in sight, and could not ever define the end of the crisis: how would we know when it is over?

Like war, the threat is cross-border but unlike war a restoration of territorial borders and of national sovereignty will not reduce the threat. Unlike war, there is no unifying enemy or threat.

On the contrary, climate change exposes internal fractures in society, highlights regional disparities and social inequalities, and undermines the sectoral delivery of public policy and services which has worked rather well for several decades. Two more points: unlike decolonization, there is no short-term, obvious political solution; unlike unemployment, there is no economic or fiscal remedy. And finally, it compels co-operation between democratic, mixed and autocratic regimes, thus blurring distinctions about respect for law and human rights that otherwise define our differences.

- Do universities have a role, beyond formal instruction?

Universities are increasingly international, a transformation that parallels globalization but seems immune from the populist-nationalist reaction to it. In the past, faculty had global interests in terms of research, but few students studied abroad. Now the population of researchers is becoming as highly multi-national as the study body. Universities have a convening power, protected in some sense from political pressures by academic freedom to disseminate knowledge, carry out research, and perhaps most important, help prepare people to *unlearn* as part of the climate change transition, as well as to *learn,* and *what to retain and apply from the past.* Lifelong learning, for everybody. Universities, like cities, date from past political regimes, yet have survived. Is there a lesson in this?

We confront the challenges of climate change at a higher level of human and social capital than ever.

Yet jeremiads dominate the opinion pages of the media: we are told, often without evidence, that things are getting worse, and irreversibly so. We desperately need perspective, imagination, and against fear, hope.

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