

IN DEFENCE OF THE NATION-STATE

An address given to the 2014 general meeting of the Mont Pelerin Society.

Twenty four years ago, a few months after the fall of communism, I attended my first Mont Pelerin Society General Meeting. As some of you may remember, it was held in Munich. It gave me the enormously valuable opportunity to see and meet the famous names of the MPS—Friedman, Stigler, Becker, and many others (but these three were the most visible ones from behind the Iron Curtain).

Unfortunately, they are not among us anymore. The last one of this trio, Gary Becker, who helped in preparing this meeting, died a few months ago. We all miss him very much. Not only that, I hope we feel the enormous responsibility to continue fighting for freedom, democracy, and classical liberal ideas to keep the legacy of the founding fathers of our society alive, as it is permanently endangered and attacked from various sides, places, and perspectives. I remember the atmosphere of victory that prevailed at the first MPS meeting after the fall of communism. We were, perhaps, unduly optimistic at that time. There were some among us who already then considered this victory relative and temporary, but the reversal came faster than we expected.

Why is it so? When I stay in the field of ideas, and this is our arena, there is no doubt that we are being more and more encircled by the opponents of our ideas. The external attack is based on the success of propaganda of something else than individual freedom and liberty by many currently so popular new ‘isms’ that are connected with all kinds of old collectivistic notions and approaches. I talked about it in my speech at our last MPS meeting in Prague when I was still in a position to bring you to the beautiful historical premises of the Prague Castle. This is, however, only half of the problem.

Our additional problem, not less worrisome than the external threats, is our limited capability to be convincing. Is there a problem with us? Are we holding the torch of liberty firmly and tightly enough? Are we presenting our views with the same strong voice and with the same deepness of arguments as it was done by our predecessors and colleagues in the past? I am not sure. We are—hopefully—as strong as before in our beliefs, in our ideology, in our dislike of communism, totalitarianism, collectivism, statism, and other similar ‘isms’—but are we able to defend, promote, and explain our ideas as the older generation of our members was? I always remember Ed Feulner’s presidential address held several years ago when he stressed that ideas are not self-implementing.

And not only that. Are our ideas already ‘closed and completed’ and require just to be repeated? As I said last year at a Conservative Party Conference in Windsor: some ideas do not need a renewal, we just have to return to them. However, some others need to be redefined, reformulated, restated, extended, developed, newly interpreted, newly applied.

The main problem, as I see it, is that we are not able to innovatively use our principal ideas in the current disputes with the holders of opposite views. I am afraid we are just passively repeating our old ‘canonical truths’ instead of



Václav Klaus was president of the Czech Republic from 2003 to 2013.

coming up with new convincing arguments. Why is it so? Do we have enough original thinkers among us now as in the past? Do they not exist or are they not interested in joining our society? Is not our current membership base composed mainly out of administrators of various think tanks (and as one of them I will always appreciate—with all my admiration—their irreplaceable role) rather than of original thinkers? If so, is it tenable?

Europe is at the forefront of the developments leading to post-democracy.

Almost quarter of a century ago when I attended our meeting for the first time, I hardly dared to breathe. I did not dare opening my mouth in front of our founding fathers, Nobel Prize winners, distinguished thinkers and authors. Do the current newcomers to our society have the same—almost ‘sacred’—respect toward today’s MPS members? Not just that. Do we deserve such a respect? Aren’t we satisfied with getting a chance to regularly meet our old friends and/or eventually people from new countries and continents where the MPS succeeded in ‘planting the seeds’ with our views? This, in itself, is a positive thing, but does the MPS remain a source of ideas? Is the MPS considered to be the cornerstone of classical liberal ideas in today’s world? At our meetings, I do miss open and friendly, but serious, debates about that. We listen to presentations that are sometimes excellent, sometimes mediocre, sometimes not so good, but they could be also given at other places, to other audiences. I miss presentations that would deal with us, with our role in the current world.

These issues should be discussed openly. The new elected president should be given the task to come up with some proposals in this respect. This trip to Hong Kong should be more than just a brief visit to this very unique place, the island of economic freedom in rapidly growing South East Asia.

Let me come to the substance of my speech. As I said, our views have been attacked from very different perspectives. At our Tokyo meeting in 2008, I spoke about environmentalism because I felt then that the main threat came from that

direction, from its extreme version, global warming alarmism, which was at that time at its ‘peak’. This threat is still here. It may be even worse now. Fighting climate, which means us, has been taken for granted. Even some of us accepted that it is improper and politically incorrect to get rid of it. It is probably not by accident that this topic is not part of our Hong Kong programme. But I don’t intend to reopen this (hopefully not yet closed) debate.

What I see as the main threat these days is the accelerating shift to transnationalism and global governance. These developments were already evident in the latter stages of the Cold War and in the early post-Cold War era, but it is different now.

As someone who lives in Europe, I feel very strongly about the EU undemocratic arrangements. As regards my country, I should be partly blamed for bringing it in. I tried to do my best but didn’t succeed in explaining to the people the difference between their dreams of becoming a ‘normal’ European country again (after decades lost in the Soviet empire) and the harsh reality of entering the EU. This absolutely fundamental but arguably subtle difference proved to be unexplainable. It would be perhaps possible in sophisticated academic discussions, but not in simplified public debates. As a result, it was ironically me who as prime minister sent a letter to Brussels asking for EU membership and who as president signed the Accession Treaty. However, that’s my personal story.

Europe is at the forefront of the developments leading to post-democracy, to post-politics, to the post-nation-state ‘brave new world’. A major event in this development was the Maastricht Treaty. John Laughland has correctly said that ‘the European leaders are profoundly convinced... that they are in the vanguard of an inevitable moment of historical progress’. Very similar views are expressed by Roger Kimball in his introduction to a recent symposium on the nation-state, where he speaks about the ‘naiveté’ to establish ‘rule by committee or the courts’. The Europeans—and this is a debatable term; I prefer to say the citizens of European countries, because there is no such species as *Homo Europensis*, it exists only in the heads of European apparatchiks—are not yet fully aware of that.

Non-Europeans do not experience it directly. They are being endangered by the growing power and intrusiveness of institutions of global governance, but this is still much softer and less serious as compared to the European, sub-global governance which we are exposed to on a daily basis. We can disagree with the policies of our own governments but we still have a chance to do something about it. We can eventually win the next domestic elections and start doing things differently. At the European level, this becomes impossible. There is no government and no opposition there. There are only politically unidentified international bureaucrats and judges.

The growth of global and pan-continental institutions has many reasons but, in most cases, the main justification for their emergence is not the authentic existence of public goods and externalities at that level as it is claimed by green thinkers in all contemporary political parties. There are not many public goods at that level. We do not live in a world dominated by externalities. Dealing with global (and European) public goods represents only a small fraction of everyday activities of these institutions. The main motivation for shifting the bulk of decision-making out of the nation states is to get rid of democratic control which—with all its limitations and imperfections—still exists in the nation states.

Some of our friends and colleagues have been repeatedly heralding the role of international organizations as a method to weaken the role of the state in society. I would add: of *their own* state, which they—understandably—dislike very much. This is one of the traditional MPS positions. By attacking the nation-state, we eventually help to weaken our own nation state, but not the state as such. As a result, we are getting a much more distant, much more untouchable, and much more undemocratic state (or state-like administrative authorities).

This is not an improvement. I am very much in favour of our own domestic democratic decisions—however imperfect, if not sometimes totally wrong they might be—as opposed to the arbitrary decisions of the international *nomenklatura*. In a democracy, we don't need any undemocratically selected elites who have a power to mastermind our

lives and to tell us what is good for us. Our main question should be whether the decisions are made by means of democratic institutions or not.

We are not winning this era. The winners are all kinds of vested interests, lobbyists, rent-seekers, international bureaucrats (perhaps unconsciously supported by the short-sightedness of the insufficiently motivated citizens), who try to escape the nation-state. They all are eager to live in a world of supranational institutions devoid of democratic control. They want to escape politics, because it places much needed constraints on their activities. They prefer to live in a post-political paradise. I agree with Paul Seaton that this is partly a 'post-political illusion', partly an 'antipolitical temptation'. Members of the MPS have different goals and ambitions. We want politics because without it, democracy can't exist. We want the nation-state, not just an empty shell of a neutral 'central human agency'.

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To a great regret of some of us, the unresisted rise of global governance is here, and is here to stay. We have become witnesses of a quiet, creeping, almost invisible revolution towards a post-democratic global and (in the case of Europe) European governance.

Some of us are true believers in the economic way of thinking, so eloquently defended by one of our former members, the late Paul Heyne, in his well-known textbook. It motivates us to raise the obvious economic question: is the growth of global governance demand-driven or supply-driven? My experience tells me that the ordinary people do not ask for it. The motivations on the supply-side are much stronger. These motivations are based both on interests and on ideas.

Some people keep advocating and promoting the shifting of political power away from elected politicians towards the international *nomenklatura* of civil servants (transformed into permanent functionaries) and towards judges because they are convinced that the rent-seeking (as we see

it in Brussels) is easier there. Some other people, adherents of cosmopolitanism and Europe-ism, want to create something superior to politics. Something superior to democracy. They want to create a world where there are subjects but no citizens. Where the dominant force are the anointed. Their ambitions are based on 'ideas' —not on our ideas. For all true cosmopolitans and Europe-ists, the notion of citizenship is superfluous or wrong. They want a universal personhood.

The growth of cosmopolitanism and global governance is also connected with the growing—undoubtedly in many respects positive and desirable—openness of individual countries. As someone who spent almost half a century of his life in a closed or semi-closed communist country, I probably don't need to demonstrate how much I enjoy living in our (currently still to some respect) free and open society. I want to raise a different question: is this openness a blessing only?

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Is it a blessing even for new and inevitably fragile countries? Doesn't it have its other side as well? I know it is almost a forbidden question here. The MPS has traditionally advocated freedom and unlimited openness for many good reasons which I fully share. In the world where oppressive states played such a role, it was an undisputable (and unquestionable) political and ideological stance. Is it the same now? Isn't the current danger hidden elsewhere? Isn't it connected with global governance?

Some people would correctly argue that openness of individual countries is something other than the shift towards global governance. It undoubtedly is, but I am afraid there is a very strong connection between these two phenomena in a case when the openness (or opening up) is

connected with the weakening, if not evaporation, of nation-states as it is happening in the current world, especially in Europe. The nation-state has been attacked as a sanctuary of nationalism and a fertile land for wars and hatred among nations. This is something I can't accept. I fully agree with Pierre Manent that 'the nation is the Whole within which all elements of our life come together' and that 'the nation-state is not merely just one of the innumerable instruments of governance', because 'it provides a concrete context and gives 'flash' to the democratic abstractions of the sovereignty of the people'.

The idea of a nation-state has become a politically incorrect concept, especially in Europe, but the sovereign nation-state is a modern institution; it is not a historical anachronism. The current attacks on it offer a very trivialised and conceptually wrong interpretation of the substance of nation-statehood, which has nevertheless been accepted as the conventional wisdom. And as conventional wisdom, it has its consequences. It directly leads to the advocacy of global governance, because everyone is afraid of an unorganised state of affairs, of anarchy.

We have to look at it differently. The nation-state has an undeniable meaning and role as a guarantor of democracy. Without a strong nation-state there can't be democracy. The residual entity, just an administratively ruled geographic area, can't float in the air. It has to belong somewhere. It needs to find an alternative identity and commanding heights. The problem is that it very often finds it at a higher level, at a continental or even global level. And, in addition, almost everyone is welcome there. The representatives of global and continental institutions are eager to find a new sheep in their herd, which increases their power and prestige. With more members they are also less accountable. Their anonymity grows as a result. It leads to the rise of cosmopolitan elites and—as Bernard Connolly puts it—to the rise of 'a global nomenklatura'.

I know I am not saying anything new. What I wanted to achieve with this speech was to point out some of the not-always-mentioned connections and consequences—the law of unintended consequences is always there.

The majority of MPS members used to come from the West. They used to believe that the internationalising (and globalising) tendencies of recent years help to disseminate Western values of liberty, human dignity, civil rights, individualism, etc., all over the world. But we live in a different era now. We have already entered the post-West world order. I agree with G. R. Copley that ‘the Age of the West has ended’. Paradoxically, what we see is not the victory of Eastern or Southern values but the victory of the Western multiculturalist crusade

against Western (and European) culture and civilization.

To protect liberty—and this is, or should, be our main interest—we need to rehabilitate the sovereign nation-state. We also have to clarify the fundamental difference between defending the nation-state and celebrating patriotism. We have to concentrate on the political context of the nation-state as opposed to its narrowing to the concept of ‘cultural identity’. We need to re-establish real citizenship, not a universal personhood. We need responsible citizens anchored in domestic realities, not cosmopolitan, selfish individuals ‘floating’ at the surface and searching for short-term pleasures and advantages—without roots and responsibility.

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