



The Need for a Global Government: Democracy in the Planetary Age

Jo Leinen

Member of the European Parliament, Germany;
President, European Movement International

Andreas Bummel

Co-founder and Director of Democracy Without Borders;
Fellow, World Academy of Art & Science

Abstract

One of the key challenges of modern times is the increasing gap between accelerating technological innovation and slow political adaptation. Economic, social and technological developments have led to the emergence of an interdependent world system that revolves around the entire Earth. The functioning of this complex system and perhaps the survival of human civilization depend on the provision and management of global public goods. Abolishing nuclear weapons and halting anthropogenic climate change are just two of a myriad of unsolved global challenges and new ones such as artificial intelligence that are emerging rapidly. The enduring fragmentation of the world's political order in around 200 nominally sovereign nation-states makes effective global action impossible. While this status quo represents a threat to humanity and helps erode the institutions of the nation-state, there is a growing transnational elite that benefits from weak political processes and institutions at the global level. Based on their book 'A World Parliament: Governance and Democracy in the 21st Century',¹ the authors argue in this piece that achieving a peaceful, just and sustainable world community requires an evolutionary leap forward towards a federal global government.

Human civilization may not be able to survive if we do not manage to create a global government. This proposition may seem out of place at a time of rising international tensions, nuclear instability, nationalist populism and so-called identity politics which fuel a crisis of multilateralism. Yet, the idea cannot be contradicted; these and many other problems are strongly rooted in the fact that no global government exists.

One of the key challenges of modern cultural evolution is the time lag between rapid technological development and slow political adaptation. The United Nations that represents the best governance model humanity could come up with for the management of global affairs is now frozen in time. Its underlying principle of national sovereignty goes back to 1648, a hundred years before the industrial revolution even started. Yet, today we live in the 21st century, the world population is approaching eight billion and technological development continues to accelerate. Hence, a model of global governance to catch up with the accelerating pace of change is greater than ever before.

1. Addressing Environmental Threats

Humanity now shares a common destiny. Whether they like it or not, all people are now linked together in a shared civilization which comprises the entire Earth. The dangers posed by nuclear war, global pandemics, environmental devastation, or climate change affect everybody. Carbon dioxide in the atmosphere knows no borders.

The human impact on global public goods such as the atmosphere must be regulated so that planetary limits are not transgressed and the stability of earth's ecosystem is not jeopardized. Furthermore, the supply of important public goods like food security or the stability of the financial and economic system depends on how well global structures are working. Regulating research and development in fields such as artificial intelligence, genetics, biotechnology or autonomous weapons must be on the global agenda. Based on the collaboration of 193 nominally sovereign states, global regulation will never work well. Hence the need to move to a model of global government that transcends the boundaries of the nation-state.

“Regulating research and development in fields such as artificial intelligence, genetics, biotechnology or autonomous weapons must be on the global agenda.”

2. Transcending the Nation-state

States can freely decide whether to join or not to join an intergovernmental treaty. There is no way to determine global rules except through inter-state negotiations. The more ‘states’ participate, the more difficult it is to achieve results. As compromises must be reached, the content of treaties often merely represents the lowest common denominator of state parties. In this process, the primary purpose of governments is to pursue what they believe is in the national self-interest. There is no body that represents the interest of the world community at large. Even if a treaty is concluded and ratified, a state can withdraw again. The international order recognizes no higher authority for decision or enforcement. All in all, the international order lacks many of the hallmarks that characterize a functioning legal system, which we take for granted domestically.

Socioeconomic development and political action are no longer connected. The forces of acceleration have globalised and compel the states, in a self-reinforcing dynamic, to push forward their own erosion. Cash flows and commercial entities have no loyalty to any nation-state. Processes of product development and manufacturing are globally networked. A transnational elite has emerged consisting of the owners and top management of transnational corporations, both supported by high-level officials, politicians, scientists, and media representatives who are ready to pursue common economic interests in an environment of weak regulation and poor political processes. The concentration of wealth and global inequality has reached unprecedented levels. The gap between productivity and workers' wages is increasing dramatically.

We are witnessing the emergence of global social strata that are giving rise to vertical social tensions. The dividing line will no longer be between rich and poor countries but between the super-rich and the rest everywhere. The transnational elite exercises a powerful influence. They can play national governments against each other, if need be. National governments face serious limitations to resist the race to the bottom. In former times the creation of powerful nation-states was often driven top-down by the elite. Notions of a global conspiracy to set up a global government are far off the mark. Today, the elite uses the interstate system to their benefit and actually resists the emergence of a global government that could constrain their actions.

“A Tobin Tax on currency transactions or a progressive global tax on billionaire capital will not work with a piecemeal approach.”

In fiscal policy, for instance, multinational corporations and the super-rich are able to avoid paying taxes using loopholes and weaknesses in the international taxation system. Corporate taxation rates and tax revenues continue to fall. This contributes to rising inequality, higher relative taxation of the middle classes, and social tension. Paradoxically, these problems are exacerbated by the nationalist policies they fuel. In the United States, for instance, the nominal corporate tax rate was drastically reduced after the election of Donald Trump.

Efforts to combat this trend in the framework of traditional intergovernmental collaboration have proven ineffective. A Tobin Tax on currency transactions or a progressive global tax on billionaire capital will not work with a piecemeal approach. There are potential funding sources for social welfare measures like a global social protection floor or a global basic income that cannot be tapped.

3. Current Challenges and Pitfalls of the System

Citizenship is connected to individual states and thus citizen rights are exclusive. The promise of the global village is only valid for the rich. In many countries, they can even buy national passports. The carbon footprint of those well off is disproportionately higher than that of the poor. At the same time, the age of Westphalian territoriality has not ended for those at the bottom. Free movement is not for them. Quite the contrary. The planet has never before seen more border fences and walls separating states. In fact, the system of nation-states helps contain populations within state borders, allows to play out workers against each other and to exploit illegal immigrants.

Economic, cultural and social insecurity seems to be a common contributor to nationalist populism as well as illiberal and antidemocratic sentiments. As global forces become more influential, democratic institutions of the nation-state are hollowed out, and people, justifiably, lose trust in leaders' capacity to represent their interests. Even if all the countries in the world were perfect democracies, they still would not be in a better position to steer globalization into the right direction.

The security dilemma, according to which states are pushing each other, in a spiral dynamic, into military spending, research and armament, is inherent in the Westphalian system and strong economic interests are at play to keep it that way. Just as fossil fuel industries and their owners resist decarbonization of the economy, the military-industrial complex resists global pacification. They do not necessarily need war. Military equipment that is developed and produced at high cost does not even need to function properly. But what they do need is the mere possibility of war and a permanent feeling of insecurity. The opportunity costs are massive.

“The idea of humanity’s unity can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy, the Hindu Upanishads, Tamil Sangam literature, Confucian teaching or the ancient Chinese concept of Tianxia.”

War between nuclear armed adversaries is potentially suicidal as it may lead to mutual destruction. As large-scale conventional conflict can spiral out of control, it is not an option that can seriously be considered in the power rivalries between nuclear states. It still may happen intentionally or by accident. Even a limited nuclear war would have a devastating impact on today’s complex world system.

After the invention and deployment of the atomic bomb, many nuclear scientists argued after the Second World War that a world government establishing a system of collective security with a monopoly on the use of force was needed in order to control nuclear technology and to prevent a nuclear Third World War.

The possibility to strike any state at any time anywhere with a nuclear bomb or conventional missiles has made traditional concepts of sovereignty anachronistic since states, even in theory, can no longer control the use of violence on their territory and potentially can be wiped out. Ensuring a world free of nuclear weapons remains a key argument in favor of a global government.

Once, the internet was expected to be a driver of democratic change and global understanding. Yes, it helped spark democratic revolutions. But it also provided the means for unprecedented state surveillance and systematic control of citizens. In Myanmar, social media was used to incite genocidal violence and it is being used by authoritarian states to project their influence. China’s ‘Great Firewall’ shows what governments can do to cut their population off from free global information flows.

4. Moving towards Equality: Why we need a World Republic

The fundamental values that underpin the arguments for a global government remain as valid as ever. The idea of humanity’s unity can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy, the Hindu Upanishads, Tamil Sangam literature, Confucian teaching or the ancient Chinese concept of Tianxia. It is the realization of the equal value of every human being and that all humans need to respect and treat each other accordingly, which is at the core of

cosmopolitanism and global citizenship. Morality that is exclusionary because it is only accepted as valid for a certain group is no morality at all. In a coherent ethical system that is based on equality, the same standards must be applied to everyone.

“A federal world republic and a system of multilevel government would bring about a new understanding of sovereignty.”

This was already understood at the time of the French Revolution. For a short period, the French Revolution had a cosmopolitan moment. Liberty, equality and fraternity were ideas not limited to a French nation that did not even yet exist. It was not obvious why the sovereignty of the feudal rulers should be transferred to individual states. At the time, Anacharsis Cloots promoted the indivisible sovereignty of humanity and a universal world republic.

While a world republic would unite humanity as a whole, the constituent subjects are individual persons and the starting point is to respect and protect their human rights as global citizens. Recognizing the equal right of every human being means that all need to have an equal opportunity in shaping the political affairs that affect them all. It follows that a directly elected world parliament needs to stand at the centre of the world republic. At some point this representative body may be complemented by means of electronic direct democracy open to all world citizens. Setting up a world republic with a global government does not mean that separate units would disappear. On the contrary, it would be a federal system of multilevel government. States represent an indispensable level of government and decision-making. Following the principle of subsidiarity, functions and powers would be dispersed vertically between the different levels of government from the local to the global and always at the lowest level possible. In some cases, subcontinental or continental levels of government that lie between the national and global levels may take over responsibilities, too. In addition, states can carry out administrative responsibilities on behalf of the world federation, thus avoiding the creation of a large central bureaucracy.

While the world republic would determine the rules governing the legitimate use of force, it would not have the factual monopoly as certain military and police capabilities would be dispersed following federalist principles. In a system of global fiscal federalism, the power of taxation would also be divided across different levels. A federal world republic and a system of multilevel government would bring about a new understanding of sovereignty. No one has a right to unlimited self-determination or to the unlimited exercise of power, or indeed the capacity for either. All states, institutions, bodies and actors are in one way or another accountable to others and bound up with them. None is sovereign over the others in the classical sense, or can act or be allowed to act as if they were. Sovereignty is always limited. In this sense, we may continue using the term to describe core competencies of the respective levels of government.

Democratic participation and representation of citizens as well as the rule of law, separation of powers, checks and balances and the protection of minority rights would have

to be implemented at all levels. A world republic structured along those lines would put the world's citizens in political control and counterbalance the influence of the transnational elite. This structure will help to protect diversity, pluralism, group identities, traditions and minorities in individual states and across states.

“We need to rally for a bold vision of our common future on this planet and must be ready when a window of opportunity opens.”

5. Converting Ideas into Action

The creation of a world republic means a transition from today's system of international law to world law.² The global government envisaged here may be the result of a consolidation of today's system of global governance into a coherent framework based on a world constitution.* The legislative branch could be composed of a World Parliamentary Assembly elected by the world's citizens (similar to a House of Representatives) and a General Assembly as representation of member states (similar to a Senate). On matters of global concern and based on the principle of subsidiarity, this world legislature would be empowered to adopt framework legislation that needs to be transposed into national law and global regulations with direct and immediate applicability. Today's Security Council could be replaced by a Joint Security Committee set up by the two legislative bodies.

The UN's secretariat and the administrative structure of the UN system can be transformed into a World Commission, acting as an executive branch with cabinet functions. A reformed International Court of Justice can be made responsible to oversee the World Commission, and to ensure that global legislation is in accordance with fundamental human rights and equally applied across member states. Legally it will be necessary to amend the UN Charter and numerous intergovernmental treaties. The goal may be to draft one Comprehensive Reform Treaty that would include all necessary provisions to change all treaties concerned. Proposals to convene a Charter Review conference or a global constitutional convention have existed for a long time.

Authoritarian government regimes represent the biggest obstacle as they oppose any democratic self-determination of their citizens and the advancement of democracy in the world. But it is not only them. Most governments, even if they are democracies, will only take action if they feel it is very popular. While many people indeed recognize their identity as citizens of the world, others are turning to the myth of nationalism and reject global cooperation, let alone global government. What is more, immediate day-to-day issues divert attention from the need of solving the world's structural problem. Finally, a democratic global legal order, with a constitution, a clear structure and division of powers, clear rules

* Based on Andreas Bummel, "A Renewed World Organization for the 21st Century" *Democracy Without Borders* 2018. <https://www.democracywithoutborders.org/files/DWBGCFAB.pdf>

and democratic decision-making processes, is something that much of the transnational elite will consider to be adverse to their interests.

We do not know when the right moment will come. However, there have been many surprises in history that even the best experts did not foresee. That is why we need to rally for a bold vision of our common future on this planet and must be ready when a window of opportunity opens.

Authors Contact Information

Jo Leinen – Email: jo.leinen@europarl.europa.eu

Andreas Bummel – Email: bummel@democracywithoutborders.org

Notes

1. Jo Leinen and Andreas Bummel, *A World Parliament: Governance and Democracy in the 21st Century* (Berlin: Democracy Without Borders, 2018) <https://www.democracywithoutborders.org/world-parliament-book/>
2. Andreas Bummel, “A World Parliament and the Transition from International Law to World Law,” *Cadmus* 2, no.3 (2014): 121–28.