Disruption

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Disruption and change appear to be the only constant at present. We are on the verge of hearing the results of another crucial American election[1] (as my colleague Professor De Ruyter noted – the world is hanging by a thread). More prosaically (and perhaps selfishly), as England enters a "lockdown-lite", my ability to see family and friends will be curtailed and all manner of venues and activities will close.

I feel profoundly for those unable to work during the period and for those who live alone. In the context of the current pandemic, I am one of the lucky ones. Many have been living under quite profound restrictions for a long time: I have not seen my Welsh family members for months and my brother lives in Manchester. The same will be true for those living across Scotland's central belt.

However, perhaps this sense of such kaleidoscopic changes are something of a mirage: after all the world has always seen disruptive upheaval. We (human beings) simply have tendency to dismiss the magnitude of this when it occurs far away from us.

After all, the 1990s saw the end of the Soviet Union and "Eastern Bloc". A vastly more disruptive period for the average person in most of central Europe than the current populist upheaval (which is surely rather tame in comparison).

Similarly, you'd be hard pressed to argue to the average Iraqi that Covid is more disruptive than the 2003 invasion and its aftermath. For many, particularly in countries around the Pacific, a form of relative normality has emerged. For those of us living in countries being ravaged by the pandemic this suggests a sobering lesson: the spread of Covid can be controlled with the right policies in place.

What do I take away from all of this? Firstly, the period of profound change in that part of the world often lazily labelled "the west" is going to continue with a vengeance. Although we appear on the verge of a Biden presidency, at the time of writing, Donald Trump has received

almost 70 million votes – millions more than either he or Hilary Clinton received in 2016.

This is far from an emphatic Biden victory. Indeed, it is almost certain that Trump will receive more votes than Obama did in 2008. Irrespective of the result, populism in the US isn't going away. The same is true in Europe.

Here in the UK, the governing Conservative Party, which swung to power on the back of a broadly populist platform encapsulated by a promise to "get Brexit done", continues to poll only marginally below the level achieved in the 2019 election[2]. In spite of squeals of pain from many in the business community, the UK is on the verge of a hard Brexit (whether or not a trade deal is agreed) in under 2 months.

Across Europe, the same pattern is visible. This year, Poland saw the re-election of President Andrzej Duda, of the right-wing populist "Law and Justice" party. In France, the "National Rally" party (successor to the French National Front), fronted by Marine Le Pen, continues to poll quite well although is unlikely to win the presidency.

Whilst no longer actively pushing for France to leave the EU, Le Pen is deeply Eurosceptic and the party is considerably more socially conservative on many issues than its British counterparts. Hungary continues to pose a thorn in the side of the EU and Fidesz remains the dominant force in Hungarian politics. The list goes on.

My point here is merely that these disruptive forces – label them populist if you will – are here to stay. It is likely that they will either spend significant periods in power or sufficiently close to have a powerful strong impact on policy.

Similarly, there are likely to be a number of other highly disruptive forces buffeting those of us who live in "the west". Who seriously believes that Covid-19 is the last pandemic we will face in our lifetimes? Likewise, many of us have been relatively untouched by climate change so far. That won't last.

How best do we deal with such turbulence? Ironically, the rise of populist politics is driven in large part by change itself. Job security has evaporated, particularly for those at the lower end of the income

scale. It is hardly surprising that individuals who see this every day (even when not directly affected themselves) would vote for someone who promises to shake up the establishment and change things.

People move more than in the past. As a result, areas that were previously culturally and ethnically homogenous have seen an influx of migrants from different parts of the world. This trend is likely to persist and accelerate, but that does not alter the fact that many are uncomfortable with it.

The final strand is a perception of a lack of agency over this. Where once there was a (perceived) strong national government which had control over who came to live here, enforced the social contract and set the parameters within which others acted that no longer appears true.

Today, globalisation, multinational companies, global value chains and supranational bodies appear to predominate. There is widespread disaffection with national government amongst many communities as a result, and a sense that “my voice doesn’t count”. This is as much (or more) political than economic.

There are no easy answers to these problems: many of these changes are outside the purview of national governments. Meanwhile, too much continuity fosters sclerosis. If there is a way to square this circle, it must surely involve more powerful local governance – bringing people a clearer sense of agency in their local area.

I am equally sure that offering individuals some semblance of stability to replace that lost to the vagaries of a rapidly shifting job market – perhaps by a basic income – will be a part of the answer. Whatever transpires, it is clear that change is indeed the only constant. Disruption is here to stay.

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[1] Although as one friend sardonically remarked – we might see world peace before knowing the results!

[2] https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/united-kingdom/#97380