

Decades of Terrible Decisions

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In politics there are no friends, only interests, to fudge and combine two hackneyed phrases on the subject. But what does that still mean in an era in which acting against our own interests is becoming the norm? From the 2007 financial crisis to Brexit, the handling of the corona pandemic, the war in Ukraine and inaction on climate change, the last couple of decades have been marked by startling acts of national and societal self-harm. The previous century started in a similar vein, and see what that got us.

We were supposed to have learned lessons. From the distant and also the more immediate past. But those lessons were forgotten or lost on the people who loosened financial regulations so much that the subprime mortgage crisis was able to contaminate the entire financial system. They were ignominiously ignored or perverted by those who promoted narrow self-interest over a united Europe, by those who put a brake on sensible and timely anti-pandemic measures, those who prioritised making money off Russia above holding the Putin regime to account and by those still insisting that somehow we'll deal with climate change without taking any effective measures.

The lesson should be that we don't learn lessons, but that too will be forgotten or ignored. Those who thought we'd build back better after the pandemic should be particularly stricken by the way things have turned out. All the hardship from those two years was thought to have brought about a moment of global self-reflection. Nothing has turned out to be further from the truth, not on environmental issues, such as flying less, nor on big societal questions of equality and solidarity. The one area in which it may have changed attitudes for the lucky few, whether for the short or medium term, is on individual lifestyle priorities, such as taking more time off to travel, less focus on work etc. Mostly these choices are self-involved and lack a societal and institutional framework that can render them more beneficial.

It's not as if any of the abovementioned acts of national and societal self-harm passed without warning or opposition. In all cases there were sizeable minorities that tried to stop what was going on. And in some cases we were led to believe that indeed, the right choice had been made. Build back better is still a slogan, but it's only that. The same goes for getting serious about climate change and indeed supporting Ukraine against Russian aggression. Large parts of the populations in the West might think that we're still on track on all these issues even while they're being actively subverted or entirely ditched. The single-minded pursuit of interests taken to an extreme by nations – or national or transnational lobbying groups – has been allowed to become detrimental to the long-term interests of us all.

Volumes have been written about this; how our decision making processes focus on immediate or imminent dangers and not on longer term ones, such as climate change, and how our attention drifts when even the more urgent issues drag on, such as the war in Ukraine. To that has been added the technology-enabled ease of purely performative participation or protest, by clicking or posting

our outrage online. It's an added form of disembodied posturing that doesn't require us to be physically involved. Yet, while the rise of social media coincides with it, this does not explain the series of harmful decisions that have been taken since the start of this century. From Occupy and anti-Brexit demonstrations to Extinction Rebellion and anti-war protests, people do go out in large numbers to support their causes. And, as noticed, a century earlier without social media a plethora of harmful decisions was also made, with disastrous consequences.

Historical parallels are often misleading and one aspect of the current rash of terrible decisions is that it seems to be anchored in a crisis of confidence in the West rather than in an acute and pressing decline. The financial crisis caused a lot of hardship for people but it doesn't stand comparison with the depression years of the previous century. Inequality has been growing for decades but most people have never had it so good, particularly in the West. That picture is, of course, extremely partial and obscures many differences and inequalities. And it ignores some very negative trends, such as the whittling away at the welfare state and the social safety net, which increases the sense of precarity that many have nowadays, the breaking down of workers' protections, the unsustainability of health and pension systems for a rapidly aging population and the growing feeling that votes and other forms of democratic processes don't have an impact.

Whatever the causes of the current crisis of confidence in the West, what is eerily similar to the developments of the early 20th century is the way populations and nations respond. Migrants and minorities are again the first to be scapegoated, along with so-called out of touch cosmopolitan elites – grouped under various dog-whistle terms. Populism and extremism are rising and powerful interest groups, which are completely different from the aforementioned cosmopolitan elites, are allowed to manipulate both politics and the economy. Leaders of the so-called free world are either ineffective in their resistance to many of these developments or worse, are cravenly going along with them. Ukraine 2022 is very different from Spain 1936; the country is invaded, not wracked by civil war, and in 1936 there was no threat yet of nuclear warfare. But the way that it's left to face a common enemy by itself is similar and should make us all reflect on the West's priorities.

We might think that a lot of the crucial issues that the world is now grappling with are grounds for legitimate political disagreement. And it's hard to argue otherwise, for that is what democracies do; argue the merits and submit such questions to a vote. But if there's such a prolonged period of national and societal self-harm and we're staring down the barrel of not one but several global crises that have the potential to dramatically reshape the world, the least we can do is stop for a moment and ask ourselves if this is where we want to be heading.