

We can seize the day

The task is not to overthrow globalisation but to use it for a democratic revolution

Last week Jack Straw illuminated the depths of his political cowardice by shining upon them the full and feeble beam of his political courage. He proposed to alter the constitution of the UN security council. He would like to double its permanent membership, though without granting the new members the privileges accorded to the five existing ones. He must know that this scheme will be rejected by the proposed new entrants, yet he fears to tread more firmly upon the toes of the incumbents.

But Straw is desperate to save this undemocratic instrument of global governance. He wants to save it because it provides a semblance of legitimacy for a global system otherwise crudely governed by Britain's principal ally. By tearing down the security council to go to war with Iraq, George Bush has ripped the veil off his own intentions. The ambitions of his project now stand before us, naked and undeniable. Straw, like a frantic tailor, is seeking to restore his client's modesty. He knows that a naked emperor cannot govern unopposed for long.

Straw's scheme is a response to two colliding realities. The first is that the principal instruments of political globalisation are in trouble. The security council, the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, having already lost the support of the world's people, are now losing the support of their principal sponsor. Other nations are beginning to face a stark choice: they must either accept direct global rule from Washington, or bypass the superpower and design a new, multilateral system of global governance.

The second is that economic globalisation, driven by corporate and financial integration, sweeps all before it. It destroys, but it also creates. It is extending to the world's people unprecedented opportunities for mobilisation. It is establishing a single, planetary class interest, as the same forces and the same institutions threaten the welfare of the people of all nations. It is ripping down the cultural and linguistic barriers that divide us. By breaking the social bonds which sustained local communities, it destroys our geographical loyalties. It forces us to become a global political community, whether we like it or not.

Simultaneously, it has placed within our hands the weapons we need to attack the existing means of global governance. By forcing governments to operate in the interests of business, it has manufactured the disenchantment upon which all new politics must feed. By expanding its own empire through new communication and transport networks, it has granted the world's people the means by which they can gather and coordinate their challenge.

We may, in other words, be approaching a revolutionary moment. Economic globalisation has made us stronger than ever before, just as the existing instruments of global control have become weaker than ever before. But the global justice movement, vast and determined as it is, is in no position to seize it. The reason is simple: we do not possess a political programme. Without a programme, we can only oppose. Without a programme, we permit our opponents to select the field of battle.

We hesitate to develop one for two reasons. The first is that hundreds of disparate factions have buried their differences within this movement to fight their common enemies. Those differences will re-emerge as we seek to coalesce around a common set of solutions.

The second is that many of us have mistaken the context for the problem. We have tended to reject not only the undemocratic global governance which prevails today, but also global governance itself. As a result, we remove ourselves from the determination of precisely those issues - such as war, climate change, international debt and trade between nations - which most concern us, for these issues can be addressed only at the global level. Global governance will take place whether we participate in it or not. Indeed, it must take place if these issues are not to be resolved by the brute force of the powerful. Our task is not to overthrow globalisation, but to capture it, and to use it as a vehicle for humanity's first global democratic revolution.

But, despite the fact that many people understand these issues, we still hang back. We leave the rest of the world with a question, repeatedly asked but seldom answered: we know what they don't want, but what do they want?

I have sought to provide an answer, with a series of proposals for a system of global

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governance run by, and for, the world's people. I don't regard them as final or definitive: on the contrary, I hope that other people will refine, transform and, if necessary, overthrow them in favour of better ones. But until we have a programme to reject, we will never develop a programme we can accept.

I have suggested the scrapping of the World Bank and the IMF, and their replacement with a body rather like the one designed by John Maynard Keynes in the 1940s, whose purpose was to prevent excessive trade surpluses and deficits from forming, and therefore international debt from accumulating. I have proposed a transformation of the global trade rules. Poor nations should be permitted, if they wish, to follow the route to development taken by the rich nations: protecting their infant industries from foreign competition until they are strong enough to fend for themselves, and seizing other countries' intellectual property rights. Companies operating between nations should be subject to mandatory fair trade rules, losing their licence to trade if they break them.

The UN security council should be scrapped, and its powers vested in a reformulated UN general assembly. This would be democratised by means of weighted voting: nations' votes would increase according to both the size of their populations and their positions on a global democracy index. Perhaps most importantly, the people of the world would elect representatives to a global parliament, whose purpose would be to hold the other international bodies to account.

I have also suggested some cruel and unusual means by which these proposals might be implemented. Poor nations, for example, now owe so much that they own, in effect, the world's financial systems. The threat of a sudden collective default on their debts unless they get what they want would concentrate the minds of even the most obdurate global powers.

You might regard this agenda as either excessive or insufficient, wildly optimistic or boringly unambitious. But it is not enough simply to reject it. Do so by all means, but only once you have first proposed a better one of your own. For until we have a programme behind which we can unite, we will neither present a viable threat to the current rulers of the world, nor seize the revolutionary moment which their miscalculation affords us. We cannot destroy the existing world order until we have a better one with which to replace it. #

George Monbiot's book, [The Age of Consent: A Manifesto for a New World Order](#) is published this week.