

Lord Howell of Guildford
Upgrading democracy – not just a Western issue
speech to House of Lords 03.02.22

My Lords, I congratulate the noble Lord, Lord Browne, on mounting this debate. He has been absolutely tireless in promoting more international co-operation and co-ordination on all the really existential issues threatening the world in an extremely dangerous time for us all. This debate is a marvellous further step in that direction.

I also agree with my noble friend Lord Balfe that we need to start on this question of defeating the autocracies by looking at and repairing our own weaknesses in democracy. I agree with most of what the noble Lord, Lord Hannay, said on the same theme. I think I was a bit naive in agreeing with my noble friend Lord Balfe that there was going to be a non-partisan approach to these totally new issues, but I am afraid that was soon disabused. Maybe my naivety will have to be put aside.

We have to know what the weaknesses in the democratic pattern are in this digital age. About a year ago, the Cambridge Centre for the Future of Democracy produced an extensive and extremely alarming report examining the views of millennials and Generation X—the people born after 1990—who, by a large majority, delivered the view that they were losing faith in democracy. I think it was rather a general question. They did not really mean that they were against democracy; what they meant was that the systems of democracy that are around are not delivering for these people in the way that perhaps they did for my generation and those in between.

I therefore think we have to be ready to move outside the old western camp view of thinking and maybe search into Asia where, frankly, all the great growth, all the booming economies and possibly all the biggest dangers will be over the next 10 or 20 years, and see what additional lessons we can learn in a world that is no longer ideological in the old Cold War language, with neat ideological divides between the systems and so on. I do not think the world is at all like the sort of thing that George Soros was wrongly stating the other day, with two economic systems lined up against each other. The reality is that the economic, social and therefore political mixtures ahead, in all continents, will turn out to conform neither to the isms of the past nor to the clichés of 20th-century European political discourse.

Just as what we continue to call democracy in the West seems to many people not very democratic at all, so what the Chinese, for instance, call socialism is really not very socialist either. Wise leaders should avoid attaching the old ideological labels to either of these models and recognise instead that revolutionary technology has fundamentally changed the behaviour of individuals to one another, of businesses to one another, of economies and of nations. A new kind of populist connectivity is pushing its way through just about everywhere, regardless of the doctrines and labels to which officials continue to cling.

I was particularly supportive of the concept advanced by the Foreign Secretary, Elizabeth Truss, when she talked about the need for understanding the world in terms of networks, and in particular a “network of liberty” of like-minded countries broadly dedicated—not always succeeding—to democratic values in lining up a security and defence chain, as it were, against the outright flouters of democracy, which are obviously to be found in Moscow and Beijing. This is the new pattern, which I think we have to apply our minds to.

I would like to see a prize awarded to the genius in the vanguard of thinking who can come up with a new language to explain to, inspire and guide confused millennials and the younger generation just about everywhere. Just as our forefathers invented the words “capitalism” and “socialism” only a couple of centuries ago to describe the new industrial world emerging, so we need the same inventiveness to describe the digital world that has replaced it. It is a challenge for thinkers and leaders in both East and West.
