

Challenging Conundrums

Modern life is complicated; and whilst most of us want to be good citizens, it's not always easy to know what course of action is 'for the best'. What is not in doubt is that humanity is facing some unprecedented challenges as a result of rapid technological advance (the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution') coupled with competition for natural resources and growing geopolitical tensions — and the very real possibility of (more) zoonotic pandemics, a Sixth Mass Extinction and irreparable damage to the planet as a result of pollution and human-induced climate change.

Today it is difficult not to feel intimidated by these developments, including existential threats, but how do we stave off anxiety and give people, especially the young, hope for the future and the will to fight for a better world? This paper is an attempt to examine some of the many conundrums that are hindering people's efforts to tackle the problems and protect the planet in what has become an increasingly unpredictable and unstable world.

1 What's 'The Problem'?

What is happening is already impacting on our lives — not least the anxiety we all feel — and it is difficult to see the situation improving. Many of us are concerned about the likely impact of events on every aspect of our lives — our health, wellbeing and security, and the freedom to travel and acquire or consume goods and services, and perhaps before too long, access to food (and water?) And what about the threat posed by misinformation and artificial intelligence which can corrupt our understanding of events and our capacity to tackle problems — and the constraints on our ability to plan long-term because of our flawed political systems?



And then more broadly there's the persistent and shameful failure of nation states to sign and ratify various international conventions designed to protect our basic rights, and the failure of international agencies like the *United Nations* to fulfil their promise.^A All of these things limit our ability to respond to major threats, and unless things change fundamentally these issues will limit our capacity to tackle the problems, ultimately condemning us — and more importantly our children and grandchildren — to a bleak future.

So just how should we aspire to become '[good ancestors](#)' — and more's the point, take others with us? In this paper I've identified four areas of concern and attempted to clarify some key conundrums at the heart of each. These issues are: misinformation, Artificial Intelligence, the Internet, and the climate crisis — and social media is implicated in all of the above.¹

Conundrums

Here for starters are two modest conundrums to reflect on — intricate and difficult problems, often ones that have only a conjectural answer. [There are plenty more to come!]

- How do we balance our personal wishes and desires (e.g. to visit a close friend or relative living a long way away, or splash out on some new gadget or zany fashion item) with our responsibility to control our impact on others and on the planet?
- Just how should one aspire to be a good citizen without irritating the hell out of other people (because it makes them feel bad, selfish or inadequate)?

2 Misinformation

Deceiving people with lies and half-truths, or spreading false, inaccurate or misleading information, poses a serious threat to democracy and to our human rights and personal wellbeing — and our ability to tackle global problems. I find it helpful to break down 'The Problem' into the following elements, each of which poses a different kind of threat:

- 1 Misinformation undermines public trust in government, the media, business and civil society. It causes confusion and misunderstanding and damages confidence, morale and reputations, helping to destabilize society and harm democracy.
- 2 'Fake news' and 'alternative facts' turn out to be 'stickier' and more toxic than real news and can have a wider reach on social media.
- 3 People don't know what's true anymore, especially when aspects of a story



^A To provide a context for this discussion I've included a brief comment (in Annexes) on what others have had to say on alternative economic models, the sad state of global politics, and possible reform of the UN

/ 'fake news' are often correct, albeit with information misleadingly or mischievously presented. Deepfakes are of particular concern.²

4 Social media provides a platform for deluded or perverted individuals, criminals,³ denialists, conspiracy theorists, extremists and hostile foreign powers to undermine public messaging, poison social intercourse, damage markets, business and reputations, discredit elections and polarise society.

5 The Tech Giants profit from surveillance capitalism (i.e. commodifying our private data and biometrics). Their business models and 'black box' algorithms are designed to capture and engage our attention; they can drive people towards more and more extreme material and encourage aggressive or antagonistic anti-social behaviour.

6 There has been failure to regulate or control surveillance capitalism and online content (i.e. protect people's data, privacy and security). Coordination between agencies and organisations that are fighting fake and promoting good and objective journalism also leaves much to be desired.

Note 1: I am using the term 'misinformation' to refer to information that is misleading, inaccurate or simply incorrect. Technically *misinformation* is information that is false, but not created with the intention of misleading or causing harm; and *disinformation* is information that is false and deliberately created to cause confusion, disruption or harm. And there are two other categories of bad information: *mal-information* — a euphemism for "true but inconvenient", private or confidential information which has been made public in order to inflict harm; and unfounded *conspiracy theories* — beliefs that some effect or event either did not happen in the way reported, or that some powerful, covert and malevolent organization was responsible.

Note 2: Freedom of speech is not unconditional; it carries with it duties and responsibilities, for example, in the UK we have the *1998 Human Rights Act*⁴ and *1986 Public Order Act*.⁵ People may have a right to freedom of speech on the Internet / social media but *not* freedom of reach (i.e. audience).

Note 3: A growing number of countries have been passing legislation to fine or imprison people for criticising the government.⁶ And some countries are increasingly disposed to digital authoritarianism, including terrorising independent voices for spreading (what *they* say is) 'fake news'. In 2021, authorities in some 34 countries deliberately [cut off internet access](#) on more than 180 occasions. (India is by far the worst offender.)

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- Who should determine what constitutes misinformation online and whether an individual or organisation's reach on social media should be restricted?
- How should society deal with people who spread unproven conspiracy theories when tackling them about their beliefs can often lead to one being accused of being part of the problem — or a member of 'deep state'?
- Should citizens have a right to hide their identity online — or indeed, have incorrect or embarrassing material removed from the Internet? If so, how might this be achieved without the service being abused?
- How can we avoid a future worst-case scenario in which everything has been digitalised (including books & scholarly papers) and we don't know what's true/genuine and what's been created by AI?

And here are some further questions to reflect on:

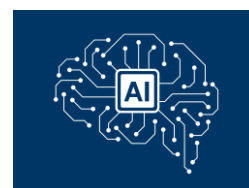
- What's a good strategy for ordinary citizens, overwhelmed by information and 24-7 news, to know what to believe / trust? Much of what's online is misleading, contradictory or plain wrong.
- Might [media authentication technology](#) provide a solution to clandestine text and image manipulation (i.e. digital watermarking⁷) and help trustworthy sources like *Reuters*, *The Economist* and the *BBC* protect their brand / reputation?
- What weight should we give to tech guru Jaron Larnier's recent [observation](#) that AI can be used to make fake news faster, cheaper and generated on a much bigger scale, and that this combination "might see our extinction"?⁸

3 Artificial Intelligence

Few people will be unaware of the remarkable advances that have taken place in AI since the introduction of *ChatGPT* (in Nov 2022), the bot that uses Large Language Models [LLMs] to answer punters' questions or generate convincing essays, summarise arguments, create poems, write computer code, etc. Indeed, some observers have [suggested](#) that *ChatGPT* has already met the Turing Test...

Advances in AI being predicted for *this year* include robots developing the "ability to converse, entertain, and even provide companionship to their owners, engaging in natural conversation and becoming an integral piece of the home" and artificial intelligence finally emerging as "an essential and everyday tool for scientists across domains and disciplines... Just as millions of office workers today rely on email and word processors, scientists will begin to rely on machine-learning models and AI systems in the same way", with some things becoming "as effortless as a Google search".⁹

Last month Microsoft founder Bill Gates said that he thinks the development of AI is "as fundamental as the creation of the microprocessor, the personal computer, the Internet, and the mobile phone."¹⁰

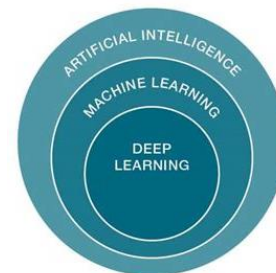


The 2021 Reith Lecturer, [Stuart Russell](#), called it “the most profound change in human history.” And in the absence of adequate regulation this growing recognition is causing deep unease. Indeed the *Future of Life Institute* has just published an [Open Letter](#) signed by over 1,000 scientists, entrepreneurs and thinkers (including Elon Musk, Steve Wozniak, Stuart Russell & Yuval Harari) calling for a 6-month pause on the training of AI systems more powerful than GPT-4 (chatbots latest manifestation). As it says “Society has hit pause on other technologies with potentially catastrophic effects on society. We can do so here. Let’s enjoy a long AI summer, not rush unprepared into a fall.”

Some years ago *The World Economic Forum* [WEF] identified a number of [issues](#) that “keep AI experts up at night”. Their questions are listed below. And theirs is just one of many attempts people have made over the years to explore the diverse range of ethical issues associated with the development of AI.¹¹

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- How do we distribute the wealth created by machines?
- How do machines affect our behaviour and interaction?
- How can we guard against mistakes and eliminate AI bias?
- How do we keep AI safe from adversaries?¹²
- How do we protect against unintended consequences?
- How do we stay in control of a complex intelligent system?
- And how do we define the humane treatment of AI as systems become more complex and life-like?



These questions are primarily for AI developers and regulators to address, but as lay persons we need to be aware of them so that we know what we should be asking and how those responsible for lapses or problems can be held to account. And here’s another:

- How should society balance the undoubted benefits of AI with the threats and inevitable disadvantages?¹³

And here are some additional challenges:

- How might the overall impact of AI on jobs and earnings be managed so as to minimise the impact on people and their pay packets?¹⁴
- Who should be responsible for overseeing and regulating AI development and holding reckless and irresponsible entrepreneurs to account?
- What can be done to stop chatbot operators from exploiting our personal data when training their LLMs — and also prevent criminals from exploiting it?¹⁵

4 The Internet

The Internet provides access to information, communication, education, and employment opportunities. Today it is the backbone of Digital Economy. But much of what’s online (at least in open societies) is in the hands of private companies. This prompted an [editorial](#) in *The Economist* (in Oct 2021) which raised some tricky questions, for example: Should video websites have to review content before they publish it? Where does the boundary lie between hate speech and incitement to violence? and Is pornography created by artificial intelligence an invasion of privacy?"

And the Editorial went on: "These are all hard questions, but behind them lies an even more difficult one: who should provide the answers?" and it noted that "such dilemmas are increasingly being resolved by private firms [which are] deciding what kinds of misinformation to ban." What’s more “web-hosting companies are taking down sites *they* deem harmful." [my emphasis] Some platforms censor material because they fear bad publicity or legal action, and this inevitably has a chilling effect on free speech. Indeed, there are reports that government agencies have been involved in systematically accessing posts on social media platforms and influencing what gets taken down...¹⁶



Conundrums

Here are (what I consider to be) some of the main conundrums associated with the Internet:

- Should big tech be broken up to increase competition and encourage innovation; if so, how?¹⁷
- How should the Internet of Things / Bodies be regulated so that it is not used by the state or bad actors for surveillance / intelligence gathering or criminal activity?
- How should society weigh the benefits of encryption and anonymity against the social, economic and political costs?¹⁸
- How should the Internet / Big Tech be regulated to reduce misuse,



misinformation and criminal activity — or the chilling effect of over-cautious platforms; and who might do this?¹⁹

- Should netizens have rights, including the right to own their data and have protection from prying eyes and surveillance capitalism?²⁰ Indeed, should access to the Internet be a basic human right and if so, how might this be achieved?²¹
- What, if anything, can be done to maintain the Internet as a global resource and prevent its fragmentation into a ‘splinternet’ whereby the network is progressively carved up into different geopolitical entities much as the physical world is today?²²

5 The Climate Crisis

The climate crisis is clearly the ‘elephant in the room’ in this whole debate, and it raises a whole raft of even more complex and difficult conundrums. (I’ve listed a few below.) Some developing countries (and a few rich ones) have for years been experiencing extreme weather events, flooding, droughts and wildfires which has had devastating consequences for tens of millions of people, who have been deprived of their land, property and livelihoods.²³ For nearly three decades these climate change victims have been seeking justice and financial assistance for ‘loss and damage’. It was [agreed](#) at COP-27 in Sharm el-Sheikh (in Nov 2022) — and after much procrastination — that a special Loss and Damage Fund be established. But now comes the difficult part — finding the necessary cash; there is as yet no agreement on who will contribute and how much...



To set this in context, in Mar 2023 the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* published a [Synthesis Report](#), which (once again) points out that “the pace and scale of what has been done so far, and current plans, are insufficient to tackle climate change.” This follows on from the IPCC’s important 2018 report, which highlighted the unprecedented scale of the challenge required to keep global warming to 1.5°C. The challenge today is even greater due to a continued increase in greenhouse gas emissions. Indeed, UN Secretary-General António Guterres has [stressed](#) that rich nations need to be pressing a “fast-forward button” on their goals and committing to “reaching net zero as close as possible to 2040.”

Conundrums

- How fast should countries / communities aim to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions to net zero, and what are likely to be the opportunity costs of doing or not doing this?²⁴
- Should meat and other foodstuffs — especially items that are not locally-sourced — be rationed, and if so how? (Should this be by something more than price?)
- Should flying be restricted (one long distance trip a year perhaps) or subject to progressive taxation (the more trips, the higher the fare)? If so, how might this be done fairly, and how might it be policed?
- What if any restrictions should be imposed on the use of air conditioning, especially where it is run on non-renewable energy? How might this be done?
- What if anything can be done about growing climate anxiety, especially amongst the young?²⁵
- Who should pay for the damage caused by human-induced climate change, especially in low-income countries; and how should this be decided?
- How much effort should go into minimising the damage to nature / the natural world resulting from man-made climate change as compared to that which goes into helping people adapt?
- What should happen to people who lose their land and or livelihood as a result of climate change / sea level rise? Where might they go and how might this be organised and supported?
- How should countries and global institutions like the *United Nations* manage the global commons to ensure sustainable development? (See Annexes 1 & 3 for more on this...)



Note 1: Being worried or anxious about the climate and ecological crisis is a reasonable and predictable response to a dangerous situation. As one psychologist [puts](#) it “we should expect an increase in distress and complex emotional responses [which] can be overwhelming and debilitating. We do need to find ways to manage it both individually and collectively, while recognising that eco-anxiety is, in many ways, a ‘healthy’ response... if everyone redirects the responsibility of climate action to others, then climate solutions are unlikely to get much traction.”

Note 2: An increasing number of individuals and groups are actively trying to tackle some of these conundrums, in some cases by filing legal claims in the courts;²⁶ and last month (29th Mar) the *UN General Assembly* [adopted](#) a resolution that should make it easier to hold polluting countries legally accountable for failing to tackle the climate emergency.²⁷

Note 3: One of the main obstacles to tackling climate change is dogged insistence by virtually all nation states on economic models that promote GDP and pay little or no regard to externalities (the full environmental & social costs of consumption). (Bhutan is an exception²⁸) See Annex 1 for three alternative approaches which prioritise people’s happiness, health and wellbeing, and living within one’s means.

What's the Solution?

“Every year of insufficient action to keep global warming below 1.5°C drives us closer to the brink, increasing systemic risks and reducing our resilience against climate catastrophe... It's time to end the relentless — and senseless — war on nature and deliver the sustainable future that our climate needs, and our children and grandchildren deserve.” [António Guterres](#) [UN Secretary-General]

I don't mind being labelled 'green', but I hope readers will not think me naïve in attempting to scope the conundrums society is facing. [I've listed several dozen.] For me this exercise provides a useful insight into what are eye-wateringly complex issues; and I think it provides a glimpse into the kind of things that need to be done. I am aware of the sheer enormity of the task — the institutional inertia and the extraordinary diversity of interests, views and aspirations that need to be accommodated — and the urgency of the mission. Where I think we can all have a role is in helping to prepare our families, friends and communities for the change that is coming, and together find radical ways of reducing our individual environmental footprints. We can also give our support to dedicated NGOs and lobby our MPs about some of the issues raised.

We *can* aspire to be good citizens: it may irritate the hell out of others but staying quiet and trying to ignore what's going on is not a responsible option; and it won't bring peace of mind or make us feel any better. You / we may not succeed, but at least we will have the satisfaction of having tried. And no one can ask for more.

Mike Flood^B [v3; 18th April 2023]

Annex 1: Economics as if People Mattered

Many great minds have made the case for switching away from economic models based on GDP growth and to what Fritz Schumacher ([‘Small Is Beautiful’](#)) called 'economics as if people mattered' — i.e. fundamentally different economic models that focus on promoting health and wellbeing and living within our means. Here's a (very brief) introduction three related approaches: 'humanistic economics', 'ecological economics'²⁹ and 'doughnut economics':

1a) Humanistic Economics

Humanistic Economics is at the heart of Sustainable Development.³⁰ One of its proponents, Hans d'Orville, argues in a 2015 [paper](#) that: “Global problems like climate change, environmental degradation, shortages of natural resources, the pollution of the ocean and the loss of biodiversity, growing social inequalities and lack of inclusion, economic uncertainty, shrinking cultural diversity and disappearing languages, social upheaval and new forms of conflict and war put to test the progress of human civilization and the very core of the humanist idea.”

And he notes that “the need for an inclusive, sustainable development concept has never been so critical.” Humanistic economics [seeks](#) to “describe, analyse and critically assess prevailing socio-economic institutions and policies” and “provide guidelines on how to improve them in terms of human (not merely 'economic') well-being.” It takes into account basic human needs, human rights, human dignity, community, cooperation, economic democracy and economic sustainability. It raises profound questions about social institutions, such as the relationship between government and the market, as well as social policy goals like full employment, industrial democracy, and balanced international trade.



1b) Ecological Economics

In 'Prosperity Without Growth' Tim Jackson, one of the foremost proponents of ecological economics, analyses the complex relationships between growth, environmental crises and social recession and argues that "prosperity — in any meaningful sense of the word — transcends material concerns" and that, "beyond a certain point, growth does not increase human wellbeing." Jackson argues for a redefinition of "prosperity" in light of the evidence on what really contributes to people's wellbeing. His prescriptions for change include returning control of the money supply to the state, sharing of working hours, longer-term investment in services and natural capital, counter-cyclical spending by governments (i.e. reducing or neutralizing anti-social effects of economic cycles) and more careful regulation of the financial markets. His hope is that we will rediscover a deeper view of humanity beyond *homo economicus*, beyond jobs and shopping, and a more rounded view of what counts as prosperity and discover new economic 'engines' for a sustainable low carbon/green tech economy.

The reason so much emphasis is placed on GDP is that there must be growth for investors to make a return. But that is becoming increasingly difficult, and this accounts for a number of undesirable effects: downward pressure on wages, globalisation in the search for overseas markets, the practice of operating businesses with little or no reserves, and pressure on individuals to live on debt rather than holding savings for a rainy day. In the latter two cases we have been encouraged to spend our savings in the interest of GDP growth and as a consequence have reduced our resilience. And this is not sustainable. [*ibid*]

1c) Doughnut economics

Doughnut economics provides a [visual framework](#) for sustainable development which combines “the concept of planetary boundaries with the complementary concept of social boundaries.” The 'hole' in the centre of the doughnut “depicts the proportion of people that lack access to life's essentials (healthcare, education, equity and so on) while the crust [on the outside] represents the ecological ceilings (planetary boundaries) that life depends

^B For the record I have a lifelong interest in the environment and worked for many years in international development. I am Chair of *Milton Keynes Humanists* and the [Future of Humanism Group](#). I also run the [Fighting Fake](#) website, which aims to provide a one-stop-shop for people seeking to understand the threat posed by misinformation.

on and must not be overshot." The approach was developed by Oxford economist Kate Raworth and elaborated upon in her book '[Doughnut Economics](#)', which is based on the premise that "Humanity's 21st century challenge is to meet the needs of all within the means of the planet. In other words, to ensure that no one falls short on life's essentials (from food and housing to healthcare and a political voice), while ensuring that collectively we do not overshoot our pressure on Earth's life-supporting systems, on which we fundamentally depend – such as a stable climate, fertile soils, and a protective ozone layer."



The main goal of the model is to re-frame economic problems and set new goals. An economy is considered prosperous when all twelve social foundations of the model (listed in the centre — see diagram³¹) are met without overshooting any of the nine ecological ceilings (around the rim). The Doughnut framework has been used to map localized socio-environmental performance in China, Scotland, Wales, the UK, South Africa, Netherlands, and more. A 2018 study compared over 150 nations using the doughnut model (*ibid*).

Conundrums

- How do people get their government to adopt economic models based on happiness,³² human well-being and sustainable consumption / development rather than on profit and growth in GDP?

Annex 2: The Sad State of Global Politics

This Annex reflects on the sad state of global politics and the yawning gulf between what the great powers proclaim and what they *practice*. It comments too on the First Past the Post [FPP] electoral system (which disenfranchises large parts of the electorate), and finally the pros and cons of democracy and autocracy. No attempt is made to address the issue of corruption which is endemic in all systems to a greater or lesser degree...

2a) East / West Rivalry

In their propaganda the United States / Western nations like to emphasize democratic governance, human rights, environmentalism, and globalization, whilst Russia and China tend to stress the sovereign equality of states, non-intervention in the internal affairs of states, the settlement of disputes by mechanism to which states have consented, the immunity of states and their officials, and the condemnation of double standards in the treatment of states. In practice, the policies and actions of both 'sides' are deeply flawed. The US, Russia and China — and many minor powers that they defend or protect (such as Israel, Iran, Myanmar, Nicaragua & North Korea) — consistently flout international law. And we're seeing relations between the US and China going from bad to worse.³³



A major conundrum for statesmen and women down the ages is whether or not to attack another country or territory in order to neutralise a perceived security threat or protect national interests or perhaps to relieve the land of a dictator / repressive regime — and all too often divert attention from domestic failings / economic woes (Russia and Ukraine?) Political leaders end up damned if they do, and damned if they don't. Recent examples of the former include the disastrous occupation of Iraq,³⁴ Syria, Afghanistan and Libya.³⁵ This is a sad state of affairs which the *United Nations* is ill-equipped to address given the way it was setup and the power of veto held by individual members of the Security Council.³⁶

2b) Disrespect for International Law

The US promotes a 'rules-based international order' but as legal scholars have pointed out, this is a vague and ill-defined concept that lacks clarity and consistency and is often used as a cover for the exercise of power by dominant states. Moreover, it undermines the principles of international law, which have been developed over centuries and are based on a consensus among nation states. This includes, for example, the prohibition of the use of force, the right to self-determination, and the obligation to respect human rights. As South African law professor, John Dugard, has [pointed out](#) "An international order founded on the UN Charter and international law as it has evolved since the end of the Second World War is a sounder recipe for peace than the amorphous and discriminatory rules-based international order" [RBIO]. Indeed, Dugard sees the RBIO as "an unnecessary and harmful obstacle to attempts to agree on international law as a universal order governing all states. Examples of the countries flouting international law are legion. Here are two of the main villains:

United States: The US is not a party to a number of important multilateral treaties that constitute an essential feature of international law (e.g. the Law of the Sea Convention) or fundamental treaties governing international humanitarian law (including the 1977 Protocols to the Geneva Conventions on the Laws of War, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, the Convention on Cluster Munitions, and the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention). Nor is it a party to the Rights of the Child Convention or the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Moreover, the US has placed interpretations on international law justifying the use of force and the violation of international humanitarian law that are controversial and contested. The interpretations placed on Security Council resolutions by the US (and the UK) to authorize the use of force in Iraq in 2003³⁷ and Libya in 2011 have been much criticized as unlawful pretexts for regime change. The denial of prisoner-of-war status to Taliban soldiers (and [others](#)) detained at Guantanamo Bay following the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2002 has been questioned on the ground that it violates Article 4 of the Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War etc. etc. The US is unwilling to hold some states, such as Israel, accountable for violations of international law. They are treated as *sui generis* (i.e. unique) cases in which the national interest precludes accountability.³⁸

China: The global community has begun to describe China's 'Strike Hard' campaign against Uighurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang using terms including 'genocide' and 'concentration camps'. "The campaign,

questionably framed by the Chinese government as a counterterrorism operation, violates a half dozen international treaties, along with China's own constitution." They "violate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, all of which China has ratified. China is also summarily and indefinitely detaining individuals without due process, a flagrant violation of basic human rights. In many cases, relatives are unable to communicate with detainees and may not be aware of where they are for years. "The world must now decide how far it will allow China to go in its human rights atrocities without facing global repercussions."³⁹



2c) Flawed Democratic Voting Systems

Over [60 countries](#) use the FPP system for electing heads of state or legislatures. In the UK [Make Votes Matter](#) believes that such a system "has no place in a modern democracy, and should be replaced by a system of Proportional Representation [PR].⁴⁰ It points out that over the past few hundred years, "society and democracy have developed and changed beyond recognition. However, our voting system has failed to keep pace." With FPP Parliament does not reflect the way we vote. It denies millions of people representation of their choosing.⁴¹ When so many voters are denied a voice, Parliament fails to reflect the people it is supposed to represent. Millions of us go without a say in crucial national decisions — excluded not only from government, but from holding government to account. This isn't just bad for democracy; it's bad for our entire politics and society."

"The idea of a minority ruling over the majority goes against our most basic ideas about democracy. But with FPP it's the norm. For about 90% of the time since 1935 we've had single-party 'majority' governments, but not one of them had the support of a majority of voters. The Conservatives currently hold a majority of seats with just 43.6% of the votes. In the 2019 election they gained an extra 48 seats despite an increase of only 1.2% of the vote share. Almost since the first general election, politicians who most of us didn't vote for and don't agree with have had the power to govern the UK however they like."

2d) Democracy Vs Autocracy

Democracy is clearly far from perfect (as the previous example illustrates) and as Brian Klass notes (in [The Atlantic](#)) it is "messy... and can be shortsighted. Many powerful democracies, including the United States, are dysfunctional. But at least our leaders face real constraints, real pushback for their miscalculations, and real criticism from their population. And, crucially, there's a built-in mechanism to replace our leaders when they start to behave irrationally or irresponsibly. That's why it's time to jettison the myth of the 'savvy' strongman, or the dictator who's a geopolitical 'genius'... Autocrats such as Putin eventually succumb to what may be called the "dictator trap." The strategies they use to stay in power tend to trigger their eventual downfall. Rather than being long-term planners, many make catastrophic short-term errors — the kinds of errors that would likely have been avoided in democratic systems. They hear only from sycophants, and get bad advice. They misunderstand their population. They don't see threats coming until it's too late. And unlike elected leaders who leave office to riches, book tours, and the glitzy lifestyle of a statesman, many dictators who miscalculate leave office in a casket, a possibility that makes them even more likely to double down."



Conundrums

- How might powerful vested interests be hobbled to prevent them from sabotaging the best efforts of people to tackle major conundrums?⁴²
- What should citizens do when their government flagrantly flouts international law? What recourse is available to them, and how can they exercise it without being threatened or otherwise mistreated?
- What should citizens do when their government support or condone unfair electoral systems (like FPP rather than one or other form of [PR](#)), which ensure that a majority of those eligible to vote are effectively disenfranchised?
- The model of western liberal democracy appears to be in decline;⁴³ what can be done to rescue it?

Annex 3: Reform of the United Nations

Much has been written about the need to reform of the *United Nations* so that it can undertake its many duties more efficiently and effectively, from running its Secretariat and the Security Council, to maintaining its peacekeeping operations, emergency responses to epidemics, humanitarian operations for natural disasters, famines, and refugees and protecting the global environment. The main problem is that it depends on the goodwill and generosity of member states.⁴⁴



3a) UN Expenditure

In 2021 the UN's overall [expenditure](#) on specialised agencies, funds / programmes, and the UN Secretariat was around \$56 billion. This included \$6.7 billion spent on international peacekeeping and security, \$4.1 billion, spent primarily on sustainable development and humanitarian assistance, and \$3 billion spent on the Secretariat. With a world population of around 7.9 billion, this equates to an average annual *per capita* expenditure of just \$7. Here are some (useful but dated) suggestions for what needs to be done. They are from the [World Economic Forum](#):

- *increase* funding for the UN, with high-income countries contributing at least \$40 per capita annually, upper middle-income countries giving \$8, lower-middle-income countries \$2, and low-income countries \$1. With these contributions "the UN would have about \$75 billion annually with which to strengthen the

quality and reach of vital programs, beginning with those needed to achieve the SDGs” [Sustainable Development Goals];

- *strengthen* the UN’s expertise in areas such as ocean health, renewable energy systems, urban design, disease control, technological innovation, public-private partnerships, and peaceful cultural cooperation” with some UN programs “merged or closed, while other new SDG-related UN programs... created.”
- *revise* “the UN’s governance, starting with the Security Council, whose composition no longer reflects global geopolitical realities.”

As the article points out: “Western Europe and Other Group (WEOG) now accounts for three of the five permanent members (France, UK & US). That leaves only one permanent position for the Eastern European Group (Russia), one for the Asia-Pacific Group (China), and none for Africa or Latin America.”

Moreover “the rotating seats on the Security Council do not adequately restore regional balance. Even with two of the ten rotating seats, the Asia-Pacific region is still massively under-represented. The Asia-Pacific region accounts for roughly 55% of the world’s population and 44% of its annual income but has just 20% (three out of 15) of the seats on the Security Council.

Asia’s inadequate representation poses a serious threat to the UN’s legitimacy, which will only increase as the world’s most dynamic and populous region assumes an increasingly important global role. One possible way to resolve the problem would be to add at least four Asian seats: one permanent seat for India, one shared by Japan and South Korea (perhaps in a two-year, one-year rotation), one for the ASEAN countries (representing the group as a single constituency), and a fourth rotating among the other Asian countries.”

Conundrums

- How should the *United Nations* be reformed so that it has real teeth and is better able to tackle some of the main geopolitical and human rights issues humanity is facing and help lift low-income countries out of poverty (without dramatically raising the levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere)?

Acknowledgements

I’m most grateful to friends and colleagues who have sent helpful comments on earlier drafts. [This is version 2.] The images I’ve used are taken from: *The Week* (p1); *dailyexcelsior.com* & *intellectualpoint*, (p2); *Open University* & *Investopedia* (p3); *Huffpost* & *chinadailyhk* (p4); *faunafloraandfauna.com.au* & Kate Raworth (p5); *industrywatchers* & *Business Insider* (p6); *CGTN* & *UN* (p7).

End Notes

¹ I have chosen *not* to include nuclear weapons proliferation in my list. I simply note that in Jan 2023 the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* reset the [Doomsday Clock](#) to 90 seconds to midnight “largely (though not exclusively) because of the mounting dangers of the war in Ukraine.” This is “the closest to global catastrophe [the clock] has ever been”. Other existential risks are available — see for example the work of the [Centre for the Study of Existential Risks](#) at *Cambridge University*...

² Often photos and videos are quickly identified as generated by AI, but despite this — and as Lindsay Gorman explains in [The Real Story](#) — “seeing an image puts an idea in the mind, even if you later know that it’s false” and this is profoundly concerning.

³ Figures on cybercrime are hard to come by. Back in 2016 cybercrime accounted for more than 50% of [reported crime](#) in the UK. What proportion of *all* crime today constitutes cybercrime is anyone’s guess...

⁴ Under Article 10 of the *1998 Human Rights Act*: 1) Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers... 2) The exercise of these freedoms, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary.

⁵ It is an offence (under the *1986 Public Order Act*) for a person to use “threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviours that causes, or is likely to cause, another person harassment, alarm or distress”. This law also includes language that is deemed to incite “racial and religious hatred” as well as “hatred on the grounds of sexual orientation” and language that “encourages terrorism”.

⁶ An article in [The Economist](#) (from Feb 2021) provides examples from a number of countries (including: Bangladesh, Egypt, Hungary, Jordan, Myanmar, Russia, South Africa, Turkey and Zimbabwe). It notes that between Mar and Oct 2020 17 countries passed new laws against ‘online misinformation’ or ‘fake information’ and that “If politicians are enacting laws against fake news to catch people spreading deliberate lies, ‘that’s one thing’... If, however, they are putting in place broad, vague measures that are in fact intended to curb the freedom of the press and free speech more widely, ‘that’s a huge problem’.”

⁷ A [digital watermark](#) is a kind of marker covertly embedded in a signal such as audio, video or image data, typically used to identify ownership of the copyright. Watermarking is the process of hiding digital information in a carrier signal.

⁸ One leading AI voice, Gary Marcus, [thinks](#) there’s a bigger near-term concern than sentient artificial ‘superintelligence’, and that’s ‘mediocre AI’, which he says we already have. What’s more it’s “widely accessible and just smart enough to cause mass death and chaos in the hands of ‘criminals, including terrorists’ — after all, ‘a single idiot with the nuclear codes could destroy the world.’”

⁹ The quotes are from *Amazon’s Ken Washington* and *DeepMind’s Pushmeet Kohli*. See also the March issue of [Humanistically Speaking](#) which is devoted to ‘AI & Robots’.

¹⁰ Here’s the full [quote](#): “The development of AI is as fundamental as the creation of the microprocessor, the personal computer, the Internet, and the mobile phone. It will change the way people work, learn, travel, get health care, and communicate with each other. Entire industries will reorient around it. Businesses will distinguish themselves by how well they use it.”

¹¹ In 2018 *House of Lord’s Artificial Intelligence Committee* published a much acclaimed [report](#) on AI. Amongst other things this

argues that AI: “should be developed for the common good and benefit of humanity”; it should “operate on principles of intelligibility and fairness” and should “not be used to diminish the data rights or privacy of individuals, families or communities.” And it concluded “Autonomous power to hurt, destroy or deceive human beings should never be vested in AI.” See also: the [‘Asilomar AI Principles’](#); the [proposal](#) that AI practitioners take an oath analogous to the Hippocratic Oath; and the [European Commission’s Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI](#). And most recently [Partnership on AI’s](#), guidelines on how to produce and share AI-generated content responsibly. The late Chief Rabbi, Lord Sacks, [spoke of AI](#) as one of “the most pressing moral issues of our time”.

¹² Here’s an example from a new [Europol report](#): (which details how AI language models can fuel fraud, cybercrime, and terrorism). Given the complexity of the LLM models that power bots like *ChatGPT* “there is no shortage of new workarounds being discovered by researchers and threat actors. [The report lists five examples.] Some of the most advanced and powerful workarounds are sets of specific instructions aimed at jailbreaking the model. One of these is the so-called ‘DAN’ (‘Do Anything Now’) jailbreak, which is a prompt specifically designed to bypass OpenAI’s safeguards and lead ChatGPT to respond to any input, regardless of its potentially harmful nature. While OpenAI quickly closed this particular loophole, new and ever more complex versions of DAN have emerged subsequently, all designed to provide jailbreak prompts that can navigate through the safety mechanisms built into the model.” The *Europol* report concludes: “Given the potential harm that can result from malicious use of LLMs, it is of utmost importance that awareness is raised on this matter, to ensure that any potential loopholes are discovered and closed as quickly as possible.”

¹³ A good example is real time Facial Recognition Technology (FRT), which can spot wanted criminals and ‘lost’ children on the street, but is a potential threat to our personal privacy — and all too often makes mistakes... **s**

¹⁴ A recent [report](#) by investment bank *Goldman Sachs* says that AI could “replace a quarter of work tasks in the US and Europe” (the equivalent of 300 million full-time jobs), but it may also mean new jobs and a productivity boom and eventually increase the total annual value of goods and services produced globally by 7%. The report notes AI’s impact will vary across different sectors — 46% of tasks in administrative and 44% in legal professions could be automated but only 6% in construction 4% in maintenance...

¹⁵ Italy’s data regulator *Garante* has just issued a temporary [emergency decision](#) demanding *OpenAI* stop using the personal information of millions of Italians that’s included in its training data. Others may follow...

¹⁶ Experienced journalist Mark Taibbi recently [testified](#) before a *US House Judiciary Committee* that he and a colleague had been asked by Elon Musk to go through several years’ worth of *Twitter’s* correspondence. What they found was that the *FBI* and many other government bodies were given complete access and that they then directed censorship. Material taken down included items that were true, people’s views, and criticism of government policy...

¹⁷ Some argue that big tech companies have become too large and powerful, and that this stifles competition and innovation. Companies have shamefacedly engaged in anticompetitive practices (such as predatory pricing or acquisitions of potential competitors). Others maintain that breaking up the big corporations would be detrimental to the sector, and the economy as a whole. One option might be to support alternative platforms through government funding or other incentive schemes.

¹⁸ Encryption and anonymity play an important role in protecting privacy, freedom of expression, and security online. They also enable secure transactions (financial information, medical records etc.) and reduce the risk of data breaches; and they enable journalists, activists and whistle-blowers to report on corruption or human rights abuses without fear of retribution. But encryption is also used to shield hate speech or criminal activity (such as drug trafficking and money laundering), which can complicate law enforcement and make it more difficult to investigate and prosecute crimes.

¹⁹ Some argue that the government should play a greater role in regulating the internet to protect users’ rights and promote public safety; others, that regulation should be left to industry self-regulation, with government oversight to ensure compliance with standards. Some Big Tech companies are a law unto themselves: they are fabulously wealthy and often appear to treat fines as little more than a business expense...

²⁰ Regulations could (should?) require platforms to disclose their policies, procedures, and practices related to content moderation, data privacy, and advertising, and require them to obtain user consent before collecting or sharing data, giving users the ability to access, correct, or delete their data; and where concerns are raised, implement stronger cybersecurity measures to protect users’ data and keep users informed about potential cybersecurity risks. Users should also have the right to move their data between different services and platforms.

²¹ Access to the Internet is considered a [basic human right](#) in at least seven countries. To achieve universal access would require governments to invest heavily in infrastructure in remote or under-served areas, subsidize the cost of internet service for low-income households, and promote digital literacy, to ensure that everyone has the skills to use the internet effectively. Free public Wi-Fi might be provided in public places such as parks, libraries, and community centres. There could also be funding programs to provide internet access and digital literacy in low-income countries.

²² There may be technical ‘solutions’ to internet fragmentation, notably virtual private networks but these may not be assured in some countries. The use of VPN in a country like China (which operates a near impenetrable firewall) can be [complicated](#) — VPN is considered essential for business, but using it as a private citizen can get you into trouble, especially in politically sensitive parts of the country.

²³ A [study](#) in 2021 by *Christian Aid* highlighted the devastating economic impact climate change will inflict on the world’s 65 most-vulnerable countries: if global temperatures were to rise by 2.9°C, their average GDP will fall by 20% by 2050 and 64% by 2100.

²⁴ Germany is aiming to reduce net carbon emissions by 95% by 2045. But climate scientists and activists believe this isn’t soon enough; they say the country will already have exceeded its carbon budget by 2031. On 26th Mar 2023 the residents of Berlin voted in a [referendum](#) on whether to bring the city’s climate neutrality target forward to 2030. This was initiated by *Climate Reset Berlin* and supported by a bevy of local environmental and other groups. But critics say that the cost of the building renovation required, and cutting back on private vehicles, will cost in billions and take funding away from other areas like education. In the end a small majority, 50.9% of voters, supported the motion. However, overall turnout was less than 50% and not enough people voted in favour of the motion for it to become law.

²⁵ In one recent study almost three-quarters of 16- to 24-year-olds in the UK reported that the climate crisis was having a negative effect on their mental health. One worried parent [commented](#): “It’s not like the monsters-under-the-bed fears of small children. These are real concerns that I can’t just magic away.” Indeed, the wider society has begun to experience a worrying psychological response to ‘climate trauma’. People report sadness, anxiety, anger, powerlessness, helplessness and guilt.

²⁶ Thousands of elderly Swiss women recently [joined forces](#) in a ground-breaking case heard at the *European Court of Human Rights* in Strasbourg, arguing that their government’s “woefully inadequate” efforts to fight global warming violate their human rights. The group claim that their country’s inaction in the face of rising temperatures puts them at risk of dying during heatwaves. Theirs is

by no means the only case: in 2015, a group of 21 young environmental activists in America sued the U.S. government for "insufficiently protecting against climate change". Complaints have also been filed (by children) in Peru, young people from Portugal, And there have been other court cases in Belgium, the Netherlands, the Republic of Ireland, France and Canada.

²⁷ The vote has been hailed as a historic victory for climate justice. The resolution, which was co-sponsored by more than 120 countries including the UK, but not the US, will help establish a legal litmus test of sorts for the global climate justice movement seeking to hold countries to account for climate failures in the courts.

²⁸ [Bhutan](#) is a small, landlocked and impoverished country best known for its philosophy of promoting Gross National Happiness over Gross Domestic Product — and despite, or perhaps because of, this outlook, the country has experienced impressive growth in the past four decades.

²⁹ 'Ecological economics' should not be confused with 'environmental economics', which "borrows a worldview and terminology from existing theories of economic growth and development" and "fully integrates concepts such as welfare and capital from existing theories but applies them to environmental ends. See [Barnaby Thinks](#) for a more detailed explanation of the two approaches and the commonalities and differences between them.

³⁰ Sustainable development — "development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" has three pillars — economic, social and environmental. Education for SD is at the heart of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) which recognize that all countries must stimulate action in the areas of "people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership" in order to tackle the global challenges that are crucial for the survival of humanity...

³¹ A larger versions of the doughnut diagram can be found [here](#), along with a second that maps out the current shortfalls and overshoots for Planet Earth as a whole.

³² [Happiness rankings](#) are a useful countervailing force in a world that tends to take GDP as a proxy for a country's success, and in recent years some governments have launched initiatives dedicated to their citizens' life satisfaction. For example, the UK appointed a minister for loneliness, the United Arab Emirates appointed a minister of happiness, and New Zealand reviewed its national budget based on how government spending would affect people's well-being...

³³ *The Economist* [reported](#) recently that "In the halls of government Communist Party officials denounce what they see as America's bullying. They say it is intent on beating China to death. Western diplomats describe an atmosphere laced with intimidation and paranoia. In the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse, multinational executives attending the China Development Forum worried what a deeper decoupling would mean for their businesses. The only thing both sides agree on is that the best case is decades of estrangement — and that the worst, of a war, is growing ever more likely."

³⁴ "In the aftermath of the disastrous war in Iraq, the lesson seemed clear: the West should never intervene in foreign conflicts. But then came the Syrian civil war, and the invasion of Ukraine, and the withdrawal from Afghanistan." 20 years on, in '[A choice of horrors](#)' Caroline Wyatt examines how the legacy of that fateful decision the West faced in 2003 and how it has shaped foreign policy today, for good or ill.

³⁵ Who knows what might have happened if the major powers had taken military action to topple any number of dictators — Mugabe's regime in Zimbabwe, or the Generals in Myanmar, or Kim Jong-un's despotic dynasty in North Korea? The list is a long one... The West seems to favour some dictators whilst doing everything in its power to unseat others. This [piece](#) in *Global Reach* provides a useful starting point for a discussion on this issue...

³⁶ On the 1st April Russia took over the monthly presidency of the [UN Security Council](#). "Putting Russia in the driving seat of a world body tasked with 'maintaining international peace and security' seems like a cruel April fool's joke... The last time Russia held the gavel was in February 2022, when Putin declared his 'special military operation' in the middle of a council session on Ukraine. Fourteen months on, tens of thousands of people have been killed, many of them civilians, cities have been ruined and Putin has been indicted by the international criminal court for the mass abduction of Ukrainian children..."

³⁷ On 29 March 2023 the US Senate passed legislation to repeal two decades-old authorizations for past wars in Iraq, as Congress pushed to reassert its role in deciding whether to send troops into combat 20 years after the last invasion. The Democratic-led Senate voted 66-30 in favour of repealing the [1991 & 2002 Authorizations for the Use of Military Force](#) (AUMF), a bipartisan majority well above the 51 votes needed to pass the measure that would formally end the Gulf and Iraq wars. To become law, [the repeal of the two Iraq AUMFs](#) must still pass the Republican-led House of Representatives. [[Reuters](#)]

³⁸ Edited extract from Dugard's piece in [Cambridge University Press](#).

³⁹ Edited extract from [Just Security](#).

⁴⁰ With [Proportional Representation](#) political diversity is reflected in Parliament, not suppressed. PR makes sure the share of seats each party gets matches the share of votes they receive. It would mean that if a party gets 20% of the vote, it wins 20% of the seats. Parliament would accurately represent the people's range of views and perspectives.

⁴¹ In the 2019 general election, the *Green Party*, *Liberal Democrats* and *Brexit Party* received 16% (5.2 million) of votes between them, yet they shared just 2% of seats...

⁴² The list of vested interests is rather long; it includes the super-rich, the fossil fuel lobby, the military-industrial complex, and numerous other business interests (building, aviation, pharmaceuticals, tobacco, etc. etc.).

⁴³ According to *The Economists'* [Democracy Index](#): "The average global index score stagnated in 2022. Despite expectations of a rebound after the lifting of pandemic-related restrictions, the score was almost unchanged, at 5.29 (on a 0-10 scale), compared with 5.28 in 2021. The positive effect of the restoration of individual freedoms was cancelled out by negative developments globally. The scores of more than half of the countries measured by the index either stagnated or declined. Western Europe was a positive outlier, being the only region whose score returned to pre-pandemic levels."

⁴⁴ On 1st April, the *BBC World Services* 'The Real Story' ran a fascinating [programme](#) entitled: 'Who will run the world in 20 years?' It should be required listening. Here's the blurb: "At the end of a friendly meeting in Moscow, President Xi of China told President Putin of Russia that they are driving changes in the world the likes of which have not been seen for a century. Meanwhile this week President Biden kicked off a Summit for Democracy with \$690m funding pledge to democracies all over the world and the European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, called on Europe to reassess its diplomatic and economic relations with China before a visit to Beijing next week. So what changes are President Xi talking about? Who will be running the world in 20 years time? Is conflict between rival powers inevitable? And is the model of western liberal democracy in decline?"