

**The attack on the rules-based order:  
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Lord David Howell**



*When nations begin to break their own rules and ignore agreed customs, instead of refreshing them and building on them all the time, civilisation sickens at its roots.*

Across the international scene there is much talk and much concern about the decline of the rules-based order. The most quoted immediate examples are Russia's flouting of international law, China's similar disregard, at least in some areas, President Donald Trump's attack on world trade rules and general dislike of most multilateral institutions, Syria's destruction of its own citizens, Myanmar's the same, paralysis at the United Nations, civilian slaughter in Yemen and the erosion of global arms control agreements and much more besides.

These are the obvious symptoms, although digging deeper there are even more ominous signs. But before we come to those what do we really mean by the rule-based order?

It is a set of rules by which most nations abide, of promises and undertakings to which most nations adhere. It is a set of institutions, attitudes and customs which have evolved over the last 75 years, during and since the Second World War, but which express the experience of centuries past and draw on the bitter lessons of modern conflict.

It has its roots in cultural disciplines, both humanistic and religious and in the body of beliefs which we label human rights and human obligations—the “rules” which give life meaning.

The international community has created these disciplines, and has supported them up to now with a range of multilateral bodies and treaties, to foster what is good in human nature and to control and restrain what is bad. When nations and peoples begin to break their own rules and ignore agreed customs, instead of refreshing them and building on them all the time, civilisation sickens at its roots. When nations lose control of their own internal minorities and non-state actors take centre stage, the sickness deepens even further.

There is no ultimate alternative to the rule of law within nations, and compliance with a set of rules of behaviour between nations, or to self-discipline, solemn promises kept, customs respected and binding treaties adhered to—no alternative, that is, except the rule of fear backed by terror and international anarchy.

And where that leads, the full global horrors of the war-filled 20th century tell us loud and clear.

The deeper dangers lie in the distortion of democracy itself. Our forbears in the last century learnt painfully that democracy is all about restraint and the principles which should guide good governance. They learnt that when mass “people power” is aroused and ruthlessly mobilised, the outcome is anything but democratic. Principles go out of the window, justice is corrupted, international agreements are smashed and in the name of the people, the people’s freedoms are drained away, and with them the acceptable norms of behaviour between countries.

So the stakes could hardly be higher. The remaining genuine democracies are the world’s most precious assets, India being by far the biggest. Their preservation becomes the centre of the struggle to keep an agreed rules-based world order in place.

Yet today the number of genuine and principled democracies is on the decline. The word is still used to cover up justifications for the use of power, often in plainly illiberal ways. The most visible and horrific forum in which this is occurring is the turbulent Middle East and North African region. There, the empowered mass of street opinion has overthrown established hierarchies and mobilised militias on every side, bringing not stable democratic rule, but a thousand splintering shards of violent cells, factions and tribes, accompanied by the terrorist barbarism which always returns in the end where ordered government fails.

Nor should it be assumed that the rule-smashers are only in what used to be called the developing world. Europe has its full share of populist and nationalist movements, of course calling themselves democratic, but in practice following a path to political disarray and disorder out of which much darker things grow. Even in Britain, supposedly the home of modern democracy and parliamentary government, dangerous forces have been unleashed which work directly against balanced and tolerant attitudes.

For example, the referendum on Brexit has spawned ugly phrases like “the will of the people”, mis-labelled as democracy, but in fact straight forward majoritarianism which threatens to ignore all moderate and minority viewpoints and insist on majority demands prevailing “in the name of the people”. The late Margaret Thatcher abhorred referenda. How she would have had contempt this dangerous phrase to which the Brexit referendum debate

has given fresh currency—and for those on whose lips it is constantly being found. From the all-ruling “will of the people” it is only one step to contempt for tiresome treaties and alliances which constrain sovereign independence, and from there down to a harsher world without rules or responsibilities at all.

So the battle for preserving genuine democracy, and for honesty and good faith between nations, has to be fought again and again—more so than ever in today’s age of total access to mass communication and unprecedented information streams (real and fake), and the volatile and fragmented public opinion it propagates.

The democracies of the Commonwealth have a key part to play in this struggle. The modern Commonwealth network, of which India is the jewel, the outstanding part, must close together in a common front in upholding law, democracy and freedom in new world conditions. The cause must be advanced not just with promises of economic prosperity but with principles, with moral purpose, with deep-rooted law, agreed rules, customs and norms of international behaviour, and with the institutions strong enough to uphold these essential values.

The careless mood, so evident worldwide, that disciplining rules do not matter anymore, must be stopped in its tracks. To generations that believe it is none of their business and that, in the popular song’s words, “anything goes”, it must be urgently and persuasively explained that in such a world everything will soon be gone. And by then it will be far too late.

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