

### **18.03.19- The Japan Times\_ Technocracy replaces Philosophy**

Amongst the unending flood of global news in recent weeks there was one item which received almost no media comment but which could in the longer run be the most significant of all.

This was the reported remark of President Donald Trump, whilst in Hanoi, that if Kim-Jong-Un would play ball in halting his nuclear programme, then America would assist in turning his North Korean 'hermit' nation into another Vietnam.

Vietnam? Surely not. There must be some mistake. Was not Vietnam the place where 55000 American soldiers died almost half a century ago in a vain effort to stop the Vietnam domino falling into the spreading Communist dictatorship grip? Was it not in the very front line in the world struggle between freedom and tyranny, individual liberty and state dictatorship?

But, no, there was no mistake. Mr. Trump, with his famous transactional mindset, was looking though the slogans of yesterday and discerning utterly changed conditions on the ground. There is plenty to criticize Mr. Trump for as he keeps playing the openly populist tune back in Washington. But it could be that in this instance he and his advisors are seeing the real world more clearly than the armies of analysts, party politicians, academics and ideologues who love to fight the battles of long ago.

For of course what lies behind the Trump view of things, and maybe the view prevailing through at least the two thirds of humanity which populate modern, fast-rising Asia, is that the left-right ideological struggle is over and that in the digital age it is technocracy and technology that now reign supreme.

The Vietnamese Government calls their country a 'Socialist' or 'Peoples' Republic'. In practice it now has strong capitalist characteristics. Is it therefore a free economy or a socialist planned economy? The answer is neither. Is it moving towards the Western model of democracy and market economics? If this means weak and volatile government, widening inequalities, slow growth, lagging infrastructure, rising crime and frequent street protest, the answer to that is 'No' to that, too.

The truth is that the political vocabulary of Western societies and institutions, the political dialectic evolving over the last two hundred years or more, cannot explain the patterns of governance now emerging round the world. The words are just not there. A digitally empowered and connected populace is now in a position to demand, insistently and continuously, outcomes which may well contradict

each other but just do not fit into the old spectrum of Right and Left which still shapes much of the Western political colloquy.

Instead the desired new goal can best be labelled Quality Government. That translates into calls for highest quality education, much better health care, homes, real gender-equality, security, law and order on the streets, jobs for the young, care for the old, a fresh and clean environment, water and reliable energy, a good supply of dignity and identity recognition, and riddance of corruption, always the telling and fatal mark of bad governance.

Where systems and regimes can deliver on these fronts, political stability is going to prevail. Where the system is too slow to realise that the people are now in power, protest and the populist virus will inevitably take over.

In the West, certainly in Europe and America, this is already happening. Long stable democracies are grappling with completely unfamiliar new forces and threats. Old political parties, formed round the axis of past debates, are breaking up.

Modern Asia has its quarrels and challenges but it also has the chance to leap frog the Western experience and carve out new political paths. The new emerging pattern might be labelled techno-democracy. It requires neither a coercive state too strong and oppressive, nor a state too weak to regulate and administer the rule of law evenly and firmly.

The great causes of freedom and liberty, for which the West has expended so much blood and treasure are not dead but require restating in the language and concepts of successive generations. So asserts one of the great defenders of individual freedom under the old order – Friedrich Hayek, in his massive ‘bible’ ‘The Constitution of Liberty’.

But Hayek lived before the ubiquity of the cellphone, the internet, the world-wide web, and the age of connectivity and transparency they bring. These things rewrite the whole score. They reallocate the sources of power somewhere new between the state and the individual. They propel socialist and once divided Vietnam into new types of capitalism. They could yet do the same for a united Korea. They are even now in China itself allowing technocratic governance to shred the old doctrines and ‘isms’ of one-party rule.

Donald Trump is an unlikely herald of this new pragmatic order. And anyway, in his own words, wants to keep America out of more foreign ventures. But at least when he travels abroad he shakes off some of the theories and dogmas which are paralysing Western institutions and political progress. And for that there should perhaps be a small moment of thanks.

