

14 Towards Global Parliament

An Affirming Reassessment after 22 Years

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In this chapter, we reassess our advocacy of a Global Parliament over two decades following our earlier promotion of the idea.

When in the 1990s we began our efforts to advance the Parliament, it seemed as if economic development would supersede international conflict. But then came the 9/11 attacks on the United States. Almost immediately, this produced what Barry Buzan and others have called the ‘securitisation’ of international relations (see, for example, Arcudi 2006; Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998), a series of wars and interventions, leading to a drastic recalibration of earlier prospects that democratisation at the United Nations and elsewhere would underpin global governance arrangements.

This re-militarisation of foreign policy was accompanied by a surge of nationalism, at least in part as a reaction to the culturally detached privileging of capital over people during the market-driven globalisation wave of the 1990s. Reviving the advocacy of a Global Parliament in such an atmosphere might seem a fool’s errand. But we write from a strong conviction that the twin pressures of global-scale challenges, including nuclear weapons, climate change and pandemics, together with a rising chorus of anxious demands emanating from civil society for a greater voice in the formation and implementation of global policy may come to exert decisive pressures for more effective and inclusive problem-solving mechanisms. Under such circumstances, we believe that a Global Parliament could play a constructive role in correcting the shortcomings of existing structures and behavioural modes of global governance.

The 2001 Case for a Global Parliament

On January 1, 2001, our article making the case for a Global Parliament appeared in the journal *Foreign Affairs* (Falk and Strauss 2001). We argued that the two trends defining the previous decade of the 1990s, democratisation and globalisation, were for the first time in history converging to make the initiation of a popularly elected Global Parliament a realistic political project. After all, in an increasingly democratic world, we reasoned, wouldn’t the contradiction between an undemocratic global order and a globalising economy, which required global decision-making, eventually collapse under its own weight? The catalyst for the Parliament, we suggested, could be the rise of global civil society and transnational business, which, in their role as powerful non-state actors and constituents for the Parliament, might be encouraged to support its initiation.

Of course, even back in the ostensibly halcyon era of the 1990s, we acknowledged that a parliament—if regarded as an incipient centrepiece of a powerful world government—was not a realistic, nor likely well-advised, political project. Instead, we offered an incremental transition strategy to an-as-yet inchoate system of democratic global governance. If as few as 20 to 30 economically and geographically diverse countries were to agree on a treaty framework for free and fair elections and an organisational structure for an initially advisory body, such a political project might become an achievable goal.

This incremental transition strategy was responsive to the challenges that likely would emanate from the large geopolitical actors, the United States, Russia and China, with veto power in the United Nations. Their non-participation in such initiatives as the International Criminal Court and the recently ratified Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (UNODA 2021) is indicative of the kind of opposition to be expected from states that are most reluctant to weaken their sovereign autonomy and freedom of international manoeuvre for the sake of strengthening global governance.

Once in place, we anticipated that the Parliament's visibility and singular claim to global democratic legitimacy would draw both state and non-state actors into its orbit. Useful to both as a vehicle to identify global problems (including those that were not receiving required attention), once they found themselves with a seat at the table, and became collaborators in the Parliament's processes, they would likely participate in the Parliament as a vehicle for consulting on appropriate political accommodations. In this way, the mere existence of a Global Parliament would mount a challenge to existing patterns of governance and give it a platform over time to enhance its own influence, prestige and, ultimately, legal authority.

This projection was not merely a product of our fertile imaginations. Rather, it is inspired by the trajectory that the directly elected European Parliament has followed. At its inception in 1958, that body's powers were largely advisory, but appealing to its status as the only popularly elected mechanism to provide democratic checks and balances within the European architecture,¹ it has gradually attained more powers for itself in successive European Union treaties.² Today, it holds status as a primary law-making body alongside the European Commission and the European Council. A similar pattern would likely evolve with the Global Parliament as a direct outgrowth of its ability to build its own support network from a wide range of constituencies, including those asserting dissident views that would otherwise go unheard.

Our assessment of the Global Parliament's potential evolution based upon the experience of the European Parliament does not depend upon a romanticised view of the European Parliament. In fact, it is quite the opposite. The European Parliament's trajectory towards greater and greater importance has continued despite a good deal of often justified criticism of its institutional weaknesses, including charges of co-optation by special interests and elections manipulated by money and national governments. Just as is the case with the European Parliament, a Global Parliament, to be viable, would not be another worldly utopian institution but rather one grounded in the same kinds of real-world challenges that plague parliamentary institutions the world over, and like them, it would have to struggle to sustain a reputation of political independence and overall legitimacy.

While not naïve to the Parliament's potential shortcomings, we believed at the time, and still believe, that the global governance argument for the establishment of a Global Parliament is strong. Not only did we suggest that it would bring much-needed equity, as well as democratic checks and accountability to the global system, but the Parliament

could over time act as a force to bring states under a functional system of democratic administration of the rule of law. As we put it in the *Foreign Affairs* article,

Unlike the United Nations, this assembly would not be constituted by states. Because its authority would come directly from the global citizenry, it could refute the claim that states are bound only by laws to which they give their consent. Henceforth, the ability to opt out of collective efforts to protect the environment, control or eliminate weapons, safeguard human rights, or otherwise protect the global community could be challenged.

(Falk and Strauss 2001)

If the organised constituencies whose compliance states must command to maintain their power—i.e., corporate and civil society interests—were to be drawn into the Parliament's democratic processes and correspondingly accept the legitimacy of its results, the stage would seem set for the transfer of increasingly binding authority to the Parliament.

In a world that is still preoccupied with war, seemingly much more poised for a civilisational or even species-ending conflagration than it did 22 years ago, the further case for a Global Parliament, as a precursor to peaceful coexistence, has only grown stronger. Existing global governance structures bolster the war system with their dependence on heavily armed nation states, and on particular leading states, which continue to invest billions in militarised forms of security. In our view, then and now, because elected delegates would represent individuals directly instead of states, they would not feel as obliged to vote along national lines. Thus, in the politics of the Parliament, shifting and problem-solving pacific coalitions, formed along the lines of interests, values and ideology—as occur in many national parliaments of democratic countries—would supplant states as the constituent units of decision-making. As we explained in the *Foreign Affairs* article:

[C]ompromises among such competing but nonmilitarized coalitions might eventually undermine reliance on the current war system, in which international decisions are still made by heavily armed nations that are poised to destroy one another. In due course, international relations might more closely resemble policymaking within the most democratic societies of the world.

(Falk and Strauss 2001: 217)

At the time of the writing of the *Foreign Affairs* article, we were also making the case for a Global Parliament in many other venues, including a series of articles in the *New York Times International Edition*, the *Nation* and many other academic journals and books, and we spoke about it widely. While the proposal never came close to fruition, the receptivity that many in the mainstream media and elsewhere had to such ideas and proposals reflected the more globalist *zeitgeist* of the times and the sense of progressive possibility in the air as a dual consequence of the end of the Cold War and the trade and investment successes of economic globalisation.

Assessing the Possibilities in 2023

Looking back 22 years later, that *zeitgeist* and sense of possibility have been supplanted by the worldwide spectre of ethno-nationalist-authoritarianism. The seeds of unravelling were already sown in the 1990s by the decade's greatly expanding economic inequalities

and the missed political opportunities offered by the end of the Cold War. Nevertheless, if the cascade of events leading to the currently gloomy global situation could be pinpointed to a particular place and time, it would be the United States in the first year of the new millennium: namely, January 20—19 days after the publication of our *Foreign Affairs* article—with the inauguration of the George W. Bush administration and nine months later, with the 9/11 attacks on New York’s World Trade Center and Pentagon, edifices which many considered to be the symbolic touchstones of the world’s most powerful country. With these seminal events, and the second Iraq War that followed, the momentum for a post-Cold War global vision that sought to bring the nations and peoples of the world together around an ostensibly more harmonious order came to a screeching halt. And in its place, we have been watching as a two-decade descent towards global discord and disunion continues to unfold.

In many ways, the initiation of a Global Parliamentary body as a pluralistic antidote to ethno-nationalist authoritarianism is needed now more than ever. For it could give motivation and hope to those aspiring to a benevolent future for humankind. Given the current climate, however, and today’s weapons of mass destruction and fragile ecological conditions (principally brought about by climate change), is there any conceivable prospect for the initiation of such a body before the world community experiences a global disaster on a scale as great, or greater than, the two world wars?

There are many reasons to be pessimistic. Ethno-nationalist authoritarianism is on the march around the world. But even among progressively minded citizens, there is widespread disillusionment with democratic politics and with so-called global institutions. Despite all of this, we still hold out hope for the viability of the parliamentary project. In a rejoinder to our sober-minded detractors, who even in the aftermath of the post-Cold War optimism proclaimed us to be utopian idealists,³ we firmly believe that political forecasting cannot ultimately assess when history—making a creative advance into novelty (to borrow from Alfred North Whitehead⁴)—will produce a Global Parliament as a progressive initiative that gains credibility by means of strong civil society support throughout the world.

By way of comparison to political forecasting, it is well known that financial analysts have a notoriously poor record of predicting trends in the capital markets.⁵ While assessing the accuracy of political prognosis defies, for example, the simple up or down, right or wrong, calculus of stock picks, there is every reason to think that the technology of political prognostication is no better than that applied to finance.

With only 5 per cent of the Universe actually observable—roughly 68 per cent of the Universe is made up of opaque dark energy, and 27 per cent is made up of opaque dark matter—we have an extraordinarily limited understanding of the basic forces of nature that act upon us. To the extent that the primary dynamics that animate history are even intrinsically knowable—a big question in itself—we have only a very dim view of what those forces are or how they operate.

It is no surprise, therefore, that almost all of the major political discontinuities of the past generation have taken political experts completely by surprise: Lech Walesa’s jump over the Gdansk Shipyard wall, leading to the end of the Soviet empire; Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation in Tunisia, launching the Arab Spring; and Donald Trump’s election to become the President of the United States, leading to the political upheaval that followed. In a bleak time like the present, contradictory currents cloud even the ability to extrapolate from current trends. The disposition to dispel cynicism that novel change is possible is not only born of a healthy cosmic humility, but it leaves open the

possibility that hope in itself can induce such transformative feelings, thoughts and collective action as to make credible the self-fulfilling possibility of a better future.

With full acknowledgement of our own limited abilities to predict fundamental discontinuities from the political past, we can, however, glean several trends that augur well for the initiation of a Global Parliament in the present world. The decline of the United States as the *hyper power*, as accentuated by the rise of China and the emergence of an increasingly multipolar world, may lead, before long, to a new openness by the United States and its allies to geopolitical alternatives. When the United States was more powerful and more respected, *Pax Americana* constituted a powerful geopolitical force and the organising principle that militated against the creation of a more diffuse and democratic structure around which to organise the global polity. For example, implicit in the writings of many American-oriented elites during that period is the concern that more inclusive global structures would indirectly weaken its control over the flow of history. Such a development may still seem at odds with the current U.S. commitment to huge permanent peacetime military budgets, augmented by far-flung commitments to defend the status quo in all parts of the planet. However, if the future alternative of a more pluralistic global model looks to be domination by another state, the calculation of leaders from the United States and its allies may become less hostile to experimenting with global democratic alternatives to a hegemonic oligarchy of powerful states, especially as the dangers from unattended global risks grow worse by the year.

With democracies very much on their heels, a receptive ear for a Global Parliament may also be found among those who feel the urgent need to secure their own democracies, given that the best road to maintaining national democracies may, in fact, run through a democratic global system. Within entrenched multilevel democratic countries, it is difficult, if not impossible, for one subcomponent of the system, say one town, to carve out for itself an authoritarian enclave. That is because the town is embedded in a mutually overlapping and reinforcing democratic structure. Because citizens are typically constituents of local, subnational and national parliamentary structures, it is difficult for aspiring local despots to convince or coerce enough of their would-be subjects to follow their commands so as to make their rule impermeable to the broader democratic structures. At the national level, however, there is no higher democratic structure to buttress democratic rule. At present, when authoritarians seize control of national governments, the international system, despite quixotic and inconsistent protesting, has little choice but to deal with such leadership as the chosen representative of the sovereign state.

Another phenomenon giving rise to confidence that the geopolitical context could be open to the possibility of a Global Parliament is the resilience of globalisation against the rising tide of tribalism. Given the economic nationalist headwinds, there has actually been relatively modest cross-border economic decoupling. To be sure, there is much current discussion in the West about ‘de-risking’ from China, and transformative new trade agreements along the lines of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the World Trade Organization (WTO) or North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) have largely come to a halt. Nevertheless, despite a few high-profile challenges to the global trade and investment order (such as the *Trump tariffs* against China), international trade and cross-border capital flows stand at, or near, all-time highs,⁶ and global foreign direct investment remains robust (OECD n.d.). Thus, the imperative for the continued development of a functional global system of collective decision-making continues as in the 1990s, but with an admitted anti-globalisation, quasi-autarchic pushback.

As Anne-Marie Slaughter argued in her 2004 book, *A New World Order*, much of this decision-making is linked to communications in the digital age and is taking place under the radar among informal networks of bureaucrats, judges, and civil society and corporate actors (Slaughter 2004). It, therefore, seems likely that despite the visible geopolitical fault lines, this process of incrementally weaving together structures of global governance in response to regulatory needs is likely to continue. As early as the 1940s, David Mitrany and the other so-called international relations functionalists—and their successors, the neo-functionalists—developed a useful depoliticised framework for describing the geography of regulations in the decentralised international system (Mitrany 1966: 93–97).

For Mitrany and his successors, the path towards a more governable global system was not being developed and would likely not emerge from a utopian vision to create a centralised sovereign authority. Rather, individual regimes were being created to deal with specific regulatory challenges (see, generally, Mitrany 1933). In the functionalist telling, if pathogens were spreading across the planet, a sensible response would be to establish institutional capabilities of the sort associated with the World Health Organization. If transitional air travel had to be coordinated, then the response would be the involvement of the International Civil Aviation Organization. If industrial standards had to be harmonised, then the response would be the introduction of the International Standards Organization, and so on (Rosamond 2000).

Over time, Mitrany thought that the growing problem of what is currently called *fragmentation*—the phenomena of the myriad of different international regimes creating mutually inconsistent rulings over areas of overlapping jurisdiction—would lead to the need for greater and greater global coordination. As we have argued before, some ultimate authority with a superior claim to legitimacy will be the best candidate to exercise supervision over a globalised bureaucracy that has been built up from the ground, blade by blade, along the lines that functionalists predicted and promoted. Even today, despite sharp criticism on the part of both transnationalists and democratic decision-makers, there is no more obviously legitimate alternative for achieving a wider policy input and more promising dialogue than a parliamentary assembly that is organised in such a manner as to incorporate the ethos and practices of procedural democracy.

The final and arguably most compelling rationale for the viability of a Global Parliamentary project in the intermediate term is its potential influence as an animating force for countering the disturbing ethno-nationalist-authoritarian perspectives now driving much of the global discourse. Despite a tremendous, almost palpable, yearning on behalf of tens of millions around the world for a progressive alternative to the dead-end offered by ethno-nationalist-authoritarianism, current prevailing forms of parliamentarianism and internationalism are failing, even in democratic societies, to galvanise the public's imagination. National parliamentary systems and global cooperation, to the extent present, are largely taken for granted. They are acknowledged (if at all) by the global public more for their inward-oriented limitations and corrupt practices than for their potential contributions to a more functional and satisfactory global governance that reflects the imperatives of equity and empathy in the quest for solutions to global challenges that threaten the well-being of humanity as a whole.

Unlocking this dormant energy behind aspirations for a better world will come if organisations promoting the initiation of a Global Parliament, such as Democracy Without Borders (n.d.), can come to link the parliamentary project with the deep-seated aspirations of many for that better world. In this regard, perhaps a leaf can be taken from the

books of the various nationalist partisans who have connected inspirational modes of nationalism with deeply held religious and spiritual sentiments (e.g., Davutoglu 2020; Falk 2001; ‘Fred Dallmayr’ 2022; Kung 1998).

One of the most significant social developments of the last half-century has been the widespread emergence of a popular new religious and spiritual orientation that does not fit neatly within traditional religious structures. Often referred to by self-adherents as ‘spiritual but not religious’, it manifests in such cultural phenomena as the worldwide spread of heretofore Eastern practices of yoga and meditation, a new genre of best-selling literature that focuses on new-age spiritual growth, the growing interests in various ‘non-rational’ forms of knowledge and a quest for a sense of connected wholeness to all humanity, Gaia and even the cosmos.⁷

This emerging religious and spiritual sensibility, lacking the institutional structures of traditional organised religions, remains largely politically inchoate. However, should a congenial initiative, such as a campaign for a Global Parliament—representing a holistic planetary consciousness sensitive to the practical urgency of human unity—successfully tap into it, the unlocked power could be potentially explosive. Perhaps it is not too much to hope, then, that the transformative aftershocks from that explosion could come to provide an antidote to the worldwide spread of ethno-nationalist-authoritarianism.

Concluding Remarks

Charles Dickens’ famous observation, referring to the state of affairs in Paris and London in the era of the French Revolution (Dickens 1960) that it was the ‘best of times and the worst of times’, applies to the global contradictions of the present day. This period of our writing, some two decades after the publishing of our *Foreign Affairs* article, carries its own unique set of contradictions and confusing signals as to the direction of the global order. Seeing, admittedly, therefore, through the glass darkly, we offer our updated assessment of the potential for, and benefits of, a Global Parliament in the hope that we might constructively contribute to finding a way out of the present morass.

While we suggest what we regard as a practical plan for how the Parliament could be brought into existence, our intention is only to provide a general schematic to demonstrate concretely that there is a conceivable real-world path to the creation of such a body. Within the community of activists dedicated to the establishment of a Global Parliamentary body, there are various approaches and plans for how the Parliament might come to fruition and how it might be structured (e.g., Brauer and Bummel 2020; Strauss 2007). Our desire at this important historical moment, therefore, is to participate in encouraging an interactive, broad-based global discussion about how the Parliament might be established and what its agenda and sense of mission might be rather than to presuppose final outcomes.

Past institutional innovations in governance have come about through the blending of ideas and action; these have taken place in contexts where change is needed, and risks of systemic collapse are in the foreground of political consciousness. Governments have been slow to address longer-range issues, and it is high time that the peoples of the world raise their voices, not only for their own protection but to assert concerns for the well-being of generations to come, as part of what the French philosopher Jacques Derrida meant by his call for ‘a democracy to come’.⁸

Notes

- 1 Direct elections to the European Parliament first occurred in 1979.
- 2 The Lisbon Treaty (2007) consolidated many of the considerable powers of the European Parliament and introduced the concept of digressive proportionality for the allocation of parliamentary seats among the European Union's 27 member states. At present, the European Parliament has 705 deputies, with the largest contingent coming from Germany, with 96 deputies. Malta, Luxembourg and Cyprus have six deputies each.
- 3 See for example, Kennedy (2006): 'The practical and political problems with this sort of utopian thought are numerous' (214); and Anderson (2011): 'Some dreamers dreamed—and still do—of a planetary parliament directly elected by populations around the world. Most others—even many who are otherwise deeply committed to the political ideals of global governance in a globally federal system—accept that planetary democracy in that sense is meaningless and unachievable' (871, footnote omitted).
- 4 For general background on Whitehead's cosmology, see Whitehead (1929).
- 5 See, for example, Burton Malkiel's (1973) classic work, *A Random Walk Down Wall Street*. In one famous demonstration of the unreliability of analysts' predictions, the *Wall Street Journal* had a running series comparing stock picks by professional analysts with those of chimpanzees throwing darts at boards and found that the chimpanzees frequently outperformed the analysts. See the McGriff Alliance (2017).
- 6 For trends in international trade flows, see World Trade Organization (2023), and for trends in cross-border capital flows, see Milesi-Ferretti (2022).
- 7 See, generally, Wilber (2017), examining the evolution in human spiritual consciousness towards greater holism and integration. See also Heelas and Woodhead (2005) exploring the rise of spirituality and the decline of traditional religious institutions in Western societies.
- 8 For background on Jacques Derrida's notion of *a democracy to come*, see Derrida 2005 and 2010.

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