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“Democratic Governments in a Power Vacuum”

The executive power of national governments has been limited dramatically during the last thirty years... The opposite of powerful and accountable democratic institutions is not some kind of “invisible democracy of the markets”, but the cruel and arbitrary domination of the powerful over the weak.

The continued pressure facing the Euro as well as the weak economies of Southern Europe is both an expression and a symptom of the political weakness of the European Union. The lack of central EU policy-making and policy-implementation mechanisms allows the markets to do what they are best at, i.e. make money for themselves.

This incident is only the latest in a series of crises and failed attempts to co-ordinate governments at the international level. Both the G20 London Summit on the global economic crisis (April 2009), and the UN’s Copenhagen Summit on Climate Change (December 2009) failed to produce specific commitments and tangible measures.

Huge global challenges are emerging, while a lack of political leadership and divisions between developed and developing countries are also discernible. However, the most fundamental root cause of these patterns may be an emerging power vacuum at the heart of liberal democracies – the political weakness of the (democratically elected) leaders and governments to implement solutions that we all know are necessary.

It is interesting that, despite the Democrats’ increased majority in both the Senate and the House of Representatives, President Obama has so far failed to receive a complete bill on healthcare reform; let alone to push a bill on climate change or impose any substantial restrictions to banks and financial markets (in spite of the huge bail-out packages). The loss of the 60th (Massachusetts) seat in the Senate puts Obama’s entire legislative agenda at risk and dampens hopes for quick and effective progress in a range of crucial issues.

The same could be argued for several other European governments facing a crisis of effectiveness, survival or popularity (e.g. France, Spain, Britain, Germany etc). Despite the cultural and political differences, a common pattern has emerged across the US and Europe: the newly elected government starts with a strong popular mandate for change and the will to make substantial reforms. After a period of six months or one year – and after both the government’s symbolic initiatives and the electorate’s enthusiasm have subsided – the governing party progressively loses its power leading to a crisis of legitimacy, having also failed to visibly change citizens’ “everyday life”. Sadly, this failure does not only affect individual political parties but the political system as a whole, including the standing of democratic processes and institutions.

One fairly simplistic explanation for this phenomenon might attribute this generalised frustration with politics to the lack of capable individuals, i.e. strong leaders who are not afraid of sacrificing their personal political capital in order to serve the common good. Another factor may be the mismanagement of society’s expectations, which often demands drastic change within the “first hundred days”, six months or two years without being willing to make the necessary sacrifices in a context of media “presentism”.

However, there is also a third parameter: the executive power of national governments, including the role of the state in the management of the economy, has been limited dramatically during the

last thirty years. At the same time, the economic, environmental and social challenges are becoming ever more complex, pressing and in need of better co-ordination. The deregulation of markets, the privatisation of strategic development sectors, the emergence of systemic or external obstacles (e.g. globalisation of power networks, media segmentation etc) have stripped governments of key power tools. These developments did not happen randomly. They were the result of conscious and ideological choices. They were founded on a populist rhetoric, which suggests that “the government (or the state) is the problem”, thus de-legitimising the role of democratic institutions.

Yet, those who systematically took key policy tools out of the public sphere forgot to mention that the opposite of powerful and accountable democratic institutions is not some kind of “invisible democracy of the markets, but the cruel and arbitrary domination of the powerful over the weak. The same applies to those who thought that the rejection of any reasonable attempt of reform would lead to a glorious revolution or anarchy. If the right-wing model of Thatcher and Reagan bears the bulk of responsibility for the weakening of democratic governance, then the blanket rejection of every meaningful reform proposal by the self-proclaimed guardians of the people does nothing more than maintaining the present crisis and social inequality.

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