



Deserted gatehouse in Dungu, DRC along borders with CAR and South Sudan
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The Nation State is on the skids

Julian Cribb

The 21st Century will change much that people now take for granted. Among the more shocking possibilities is that it will ring down the curtain on the nation-state as the primary instrument of human governance.

The nation state, established in the Americas and in Europe post-Napoleon, is now so firmly ingrained in our identities, customs and beliefs that many people are unable to imagine a world in which this edifice of self-organisation might disappear, or at least fade into insignificance – like feudalism, monarchy, the ancient imperial systems, or the priest-states and tribal lands before them.

Certain currents are now established in the stream of history whose confluence is threatening the nation as an entity. Everywhere. And it is time we talk about the possibility rather than assume ‘no change’.

The first of these currents is the rise and rise of transnational businesses, whose individual economic might now exceeds that of all but the largest nations. These self-governed entities – they are nearly all autocracies despite the occasional shareholder meeting – now dominate more than half the world economy and do pretty much as they choose. They buy and sell politicians. They bend, break and change the laws of nation states more or less at will. And they pay only a fraction of their fair share of taxes.

This latter impact especially is slowly strangling national governments: they no longer have funds with which to govern. Or, at least, to do all the things for their society which it

demands of them or they'd like to do for the country. The national tax base is quietly withering as economic forces become more global. This attenuation of the fiscal power to govern is rapidly translating into the disillusion and disgust which many citizens now feel for the politicians and governments who over-promise and constantly fail to live up to our expectations. As a result people are deserting political parties globally and fewer now turn up to vote. And political parties take to changing their leaders regularly, in the pious hope that a new face will alter reality.

Second there is the defiance of regulation. National governments can no longer control these giant businesses as they skip adroitly between jurisdictions. One example is the chemical industry, which is quite strictly regulated in western countries and which, rather than relinquish its profitable poisoning of our planet, is fleeing headlong into Asia where regulation is weak and officialdom often corrupt. National governments are powerless to stop its emissions from returning to toxify their own citizens in air, water, food and traded goods. And if national governments can no longer enforce their laws to protect their citizens, then they are no longer governments by definition.

A third reason that the nation state is in trouble is the rise of social media. Yes, social media, that font of trivia and vapid opinion, is rapidly becoming more potent as a determinant of political outcomes than the creaking 'power centres'. Social media was closely implicated in the overthrow of oppressive regimes in Egypt and Tunisia in 2012. It helped determine the outcome of the 2010 presidential election in Colombia. Its lightning-fast reflexes (literally – it operates at light-speed) have foiled all sorts of dinosaurian government plans in countries round the world. In Australia it was an amplifying factor in the dismissal of unpopular leader Abbott. It is a hallmark of the Obama regime in the US. There are countless examples, but the fact is that social media can respond with a freedom, flexibility, immediacy and agility that is simply beyond the lumbering autocrats. Social media has the power to build, reform and alter public consensus on a raft of issues in a way that often leaves governments stranded like the proverbial shags on a rock. Nobody would claim it is carefully thought-through, but at least it's fairly democratic – something few governments nowadays can truly claim.

A fourth reason why governments are failing is their growing impotence. So many issues today are global in nature or context, and individual governments - even great federations of nations like the EU - are relatively powerless to control or influence them. Decisions about what to do about the atmosphere, the oceans, famines, refugee crises, the world economy etc. are being taken by global consensus and through global institutions, emasculating the decision-making powers of national governments. This contributes to the 'revolving door', as successive leaders are judged wanting.

The problem is a compounding one. As national government becomes less capable it ceases to attract quality leaders, innovators and reformers. Instead it draws in a class of bottom-feeders, adept at every trick to gain and retain power, and who reward themselves and their pals with vast entitlements, allowances, perks and pensions. The concept of 'public service' lapses into history as the administrative arm of government becomes politicised and

subservient. This in turn accelerates the spiralling loss of credibility, power and popular support for national institutions.

A fifth reason nation states are crumbling is refugeeism. When the UNHCR was set up post-WWII it had a million people to deal with. Today sixty million are displaced by war, famine, political and religious persecution – and far more still are fleeing for economic opportunity elsewhere or the fear of impending disaster as their home state totters.

By mid-century, with climate-induced famines striking around the world and the outbreak of resulting conflicts, the displaced population may well number hundreds of millions. Water and food crises in northern China, North India and North Africa, possibly compounding into conflicts as they have already done in the Middle East and Africa – could unleash tsunamis of terrified refugees in all directions. At this point, populist measures like Donald Trump's Mexican border fence or Abbott's 'stop the boats' slogan are exposed as Canute-like fantasies. Borders become meaningless against such tidal population shifts. Nation states that cannot defend their borders become equally meaningless. If Africa erupts, then the nations of Greece, Italy and Spain may be swept away. If food and water supplies on the Indo-Gangetic or North China Plain fail, the world will face an immigrant tide in the hundreds of millions, utterly transforming many societies. Russian Siberia, with 25 million inhabitants, might face from 300-400 million displaced Chinese and strategic analysts have already raised the spectre of nuclear conflict in such cases. Today's refugee 'crisis' is a mere foreshock of what the combined forces of resource scarcity, eco-collapse, peak people, climate change and resulting conflict can bring.

Faced with the erosion of its wealth and power, with public disillusion and increasingly porous borders, the nation state is an entity approaching its use-by date. Something constructed on essentially 19th century Bismarckian principles is hardly up to the task of coping with a world in which everything – money, people, power, information, opinion and pollution – now flows globally.

For all their patriotic sentiments, nations have basically been a poor idea. Since the 1850s they've slaughtered around 200 million humans – mostly civilians – in their wars. More, even, than religions. And it wasn't the people who started these wars – it was their governments. Often in the face of majority citizen opposition. If we aspire to world peace in the Age of Peak People, and wish to avoid future nuclear conflicts, we first need to replace the structures conducive to war.

The 21st Century will hopefully witness the citizens of the world coming together, peacefully, to order their affairs by mutual agreement, treaties, and consensual politics rather than the failing party systems of yore. The big decisions will be taken globally and at local megacity level, creating a vacuum for the national tier of government caught in between. The purpose of this article is to call for wider discussion and public debate about what we – the human species – should do, as and when our anachronistic national systems falter and fail in the mid- and late century. It is to ask: what is to be the new Enlightenment?

It is only through timely global discourse that we may be able to solve these problems and build a safer, more sustainable future.

Julian Cribb is a Canberra based science writer and author. His next book explores whether, and how, H. sapiens can survive the 21st Century.

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