

“NATIONALISM IS THE IDEOLOGY OF OUR AGE. NO WONDER THE WORLD IS IN CRISIS”, AN OPINION FROM FORMER PM GORDON BROWN

At the very moment the world needs to work together to address global problems that cannot be resolved without global solutions, it is being pulled apart not just by conflicts but also by a rising protectionism. [...]

Pillars of the post-cold war world order are tumbling down as we leave behind the unipolar, hyper-globalised, neoliberal era. Those who try to build the present in the image of the past are finding themselves wholly ill-equipped to meet the challenges of the future. I argue we now need new models for growth, national economic management and global cooperation.

No one can deny the significance of the emergence of new power centres around the world, the growing importance of services and the digital economy at the expense of manufacturing; the education-rich and education-poor divide that is replacing the old manual/non-manual divide, and the serious, existential threats to our planet. No growth model can meet the needs of the 21st century without incorporating rising concerns about environmental and economic equity and re-evaluating the role of finance. And the manufacturing-led, export-driven, low-wage models of development that until recently served every industrialising country are being overtaken not just by demographic shifts but by technological advances that mean more goods can be manufactured by a markedly smaller workforce.

All this is determining the seismic shifts in our geopolitics. First, as we move from a unipolar to a multipolar world, no single country [...] has the power to command and control us, only the power to propose and persuade. Second, there is now no consensus that open markets benefit all. [...] Policies promoting privatisation, deregulation and liberalisation, which became popularly known as the Washington consensus, now have few supporters – even in Washington.

Most important of all, nationalism has replaced neoliberalism as the dominant ideology of the age. If, for the past 30 years, economics drove political decision-making, now politics is determining economic decisions, with country after country weaponising their trade, technology, industry and competition policies. The win-win economics of mutually beneficial commerce is being replaced by the zero-sum rivalries of “I win, you lose”, as movements such as “America first”, “China first”, “India first” and “Russia first”, “my tribe first”, threaten to descend into an us versus them geopolitics of “my country first and only”. [...]

The one hopeful sign of cooperation is Nato unity over Ukraine. But this should not blind us to the scale of global disunity, with almost all of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East standing aloof from sanctions against Russia and even condemnation of its war crimes.

Very few can ever benefit from this fragmentation, and almost everywhere inequality is on the rise.

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THE UK NEEDS A BIGGER ROLE FOR SCIENCE IN THE GOVERNMENT

Patrick Vallance, the UK government's chief scientific adviser, says that every government department needs to take science into consideration and invest much more in research and development so as to boost growth.

According to him, considerations of science, technology and engineering need to become embedded in the heart of every government department.

"Placing greater priority on science will lead to greater military security, more resilience to future threats from pandemics and climate change and will also boost the country's economy", said Vallance at New Scientist Live on Sunday.

"The current government seems to have quite a focus on growth. And if you want growth, then you need to have science, engineering and technology," he said.

"If you look around the world today, 8 out of the top 10 companies, the biggest, fastest-growing companies, are science and technology companies. And if you look at the relationship between government Research and Development spending and productivity, you see that there is a positive relationship. We definitely need a change in behaviours to beat the climate crisis", Patrick Vallance concluded.

Vallance called for all government departments to consult more experts on science, technology and engineering, and he also recommended that more graduates in these fields should be employed in the civil service.

"In every single aspect of government, science, technology and engineering have a part to play: what our healthcare looks like, every aspect of transport, how towns are designed, how green spaces are used to improve our lives and the role of technology in ensuring justice", he said. And he added that he thought "it was impossible to think of a single policy area that couldn't be impacted by science in some way."

In 2019, a science capability review ordered by Vallance found that in some British government departments, the amount of spending on scientific research had actually fallen over the past decade and was less than 1 per cent of the total budget ! – a figure which he found shocking.

This is how he summed up his opinion: "If you were a company and you said: 'I'm going to spend 0.1 per cent on Research & Development, you would effectively declare yourself to be a no-growth, no-innovation commodity. That can't possibly be what a government is supposed to be. Indeed, innovation has got to be all-important!"

The review also found that only about 1 in 10 undergraduates recruited to the civil service "fast stream" career pathway had a science degree. The aim is now to increase this to 50% of the total by 2024. "It can't be right that 10 per cent of the premier graduate intake scheme have science degrees," said Vallance.

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