

10 The Tenets

“No one would have believed in the last years of the nineteenth century that this world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man’s and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinized and studied. /.../ With infinite complacency men went to and fro over this globe about their little affairs, serene in their assurance of their empire over matter. /.../ Yet across the gulf of space, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this Earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us. And early in the twentieth century came the great disillusionment.”

– Wells (quoted in *War of the Worlds*)

“Most people don’t believe something can happen until it already has. That’s not stupidity or weakness, it’s just human nature. /.../ In the ‘30s, Jews refused to believe they could be sent to concentration camps. In ’72, we refused to fathom we’d be massacred in the Olympics. In the month before October 1973, we saw Arab troop movements, and we unanimously agreed that they didn’t pose a threat. Well, a month later, the Arab attack almost drove us into the sea. So, we decided to make a change. /.../ The tenth man. If nine of us with the same information arrived at the exact same conclusion, it’s duty of the tenth man to disagree. No matter how improbable it may seem, the tenth man has to start thinking with the assumption that other nine were wrong.”

– Warmbrunn (quoted in *World War Z*)

No one would have believed in the last years of the twentieth century that this world could be ravaged so deeply and badly by organisms tinier than human and yet as mortal as their own. With infinite complacency humans went to and fro over this globe about their little affairs, serene in their assurance of their empire over matter. And despite the plagues of the past, such as the Plague of Justinian in ancient times, the Black Death in the Middle Ages, and the Spanish flu a century ago, they paid no attention to scientists’ warnings about another lethal outbreak of pandemic scale. And early in the twenty-first century came the great disillusionment.

Despite our technological might and progress, despite our vast intellects, we were caught unprepared and paralyzed by the Covid-19 pandemic long forecasted by scientists. Many suffered. Many died. Many economies were ruined. Many businesses went bankrupt. We were not ready.

Just as we were not ready so many times throughout our history. The Appeasement, the attack on Pearl Harbour, 9/11, and the Covid-19 pandemic are only some recent examples demonstrating our collective inability to imagine (and prepare for) new kinds of threats until it is already too late. One cannot wonder at this; after all, we are still only humans.

In the case of this pandemic and some other events mentioned above, our leaders can perhaps be pardoned because they encountered these events for the first and only time in their lives or because they had no expert forecasts. In other cases, long-term ills cannot be pardoned.

But since history judges those who allowed the aforementioned historic events to happen (without advance knowledge) as sharply as it does, how should history judge our current leaders who have been repeatedly told – for decades – and warned by groups of experts and alliances of scientists about the many threats we now face, and yet have done basically nothing about them?

Where they tried to do something, they have mostly implemented surface-level and/or bureaucratic solutions with no lasting effect. Or they worried over particulars and minor things, but ignored or dismissed the main problem.

One clear example is human overpopulation. A plethora of scientific literature directly or indirectly links its particular challenges (deforestation, desertification, environmental degradation, pollution, increase in municipal waste, water scarcity, food insecurity... one could go on) to the size of humanity.

Inspired by the great philosophical tradition, we should be – in general – seeking the fundamental cause of ills. And if so many scientific papers, studies and warnings, indicate that the vastness of humanity fits this particular bill, we should be targeting this fundamental cause both as the parent of all the other ills and as the particular one we are interested in. Because truly to solve the particular problems, we must solve what causes them in the first place.

For instance, climate change, another symptom of overpopulation (as well as overconsumption) cannot be solved only by curbing emissions. If humanity is to overcome the existential challenge of climate change, we must curb emissions, but we must also curb fertility. Both are necessary. Just as to stop deforestation, we must not only plant new trees, we must also reduce the number of humans for whose needs or indulgences the trees are being cut down in the first place.

Another strong parallel lies in preventive medicine. The goal of preventive medicine consists in prophylaxis; that is, prevention of new problems and diseases. Preventive medicine has long held that it is better to prevent diseases from emerging than to cure them. Preventive medicine is a key part of staying ahead of diseases rather than running miles after them, offering expensive diagnostics and treatment. For that reason, it is more effective and cost-effective than treatment. It is also superior ethically in that you prevent humans from suffering disease in the first place.

To prevent such societal ills – from the pandemic to the overpopulation that fuels it to the lacklustre response that worsened it – from repeating, we now need what can be called preventive politics: a practice of politics that prevents problems before they come to existence, or nips them in the bud immediately afterwards. This is to say, politics that deals with the origin of diseases, not their symptoms. Politics that pays attention to expert forecasts and scientists' warnings and acts accordingly. Politics that anticipates and eliminates such emerging threats. It is obvious that such politics requires long-term and preventive thinking.

The difference between short-sighted politics and long-term politics can be illustrated on attitudes towards the environment. Short-sighted politics is most willing to sacrifice environmental protection because it does not lose many votes. Long-term politics realizes that such cuts are only temporary wins that will cost much more in the future. Long-term politics realizes that timely interventions are far cheaper in the long run, as we avoid additional costs later on. Long-term politics realizes that environmental protection is not only cost-effective and pragmatic, but also ethical, helping meet our ongoing ethical responsibilities towards future generations and all wild species with which we share this Earth.

Long-term politics realizes that while it is easier to postpone solving problems than start acting on them, this only makes problems worse. The more we postpone their solution, the more

difficult and longer it will take to future us to solve them, if we don't lose the opportunity to solve them completely. Thus, we need to start acting now, not unfairly foist our problems onto the next generations and the biodiversity of this planet.

It would be easy to blame current leaders for their short-sightedness, but are they the ones truly to blame? Or is it the system that uses and consumes them (and sometimes recycles them) in four- to five-year terms? The problems, threats and ills discussed here cannot be solved within four- to five-year terms of 'opportunity' during which those elected ones must keep appeasing those who elected them by reducing taxes, increasing benefits and doing all the things possible not to lose their voters. Because of this need, they cannot take unpopular but necessary precautions. With the system as it is, politicians' short-term assignments and obligations to voters mean they lack the 'luxury' to see the world long-term.

Surely, we can wish for new great leaders (new Churchills if you will) with guts to solve the greatest challenges of our time, but should we not open ourselves to the possibility that a new systematic approach is necessary? Perhaps what we really need is another, long-term government following long-range visions and plans. A government with long-term perspective and strategy working on a long-term level that would be able to distance itself from trivial matters, various concerns and transient affairs short-term governments must deal with, and thus be ready to solve our truly menacing problems. Such a government would see the bigger picture and act on it, being steps ahead, thinking far beyond our own generation, our own era.

As the many threats and challenges we face (human overpopulation, climate change, environmental degradation, pollution, and others), are planetary in its scale, and actions that must be taken, are also planetary in its size and complexity, there may be the need for a planetary government designed for long-term problem solving. In a world with no single government, nations are divided and compete with each other, thus are unable or unwilling to take the measures necessary to act on problems that affect us collectively, before they become global in scale.

Is such a level of global cooperation and commitment possible? We can see so far that the United Nations, whose purpose was to unite us against common threats, has not been as effective as it needs it to be.

And here we are still talking about so-far known threats. Surely, there may even be other, more menacing threats, whether viral, extra-terrestrial, or otherwise unknown. Threats we cannot yet even fathom, such as we have read in H. G. Wells' timeless classic *The War of the Worlds*. For now, they seem like science fiction, but as we have recently experienced, things that feel like science fiction can quickly become reality without proper foresight.

Given the historical experience we have as humanity, we should take as our main tenets that ignoring unlikely and seemingly unfathomable threats is unwise and brings terrible consequences. Thus, just as we practice preventive medicine with great success, we should practice preventive philosophy and preventive politics.

Preventive philosophy with its foresight and circumspection would help us to see the bigger picture of things, to think long-term, to anticipate threats, to map possible scenarios and give recommendations for the future, and at the same time, dissuade us from voting in populists who offer simple solutions to complex problems.

Preventive politics would then act in the same spirit; that is, to prevent the next crisis, or even our own extinction – whether by natural causes (virus, climate change, asteroid) or manmade causes (nuclear war). Shifting our focus to the origin of diseases over their symptoms allows us to get ahead of them and prevent them. If we ensured we were not so many steps behind, as we have been with Covid-19 or the climate crisis, for example, we would have a greater chance of addressing the root of these problems, before they cause immense harm.