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Solving global problems

Grey matters

A report advises on how the world could be better run

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GIVEN how badly the world has fared in trying to solve many of its biggest problems, it is debatable whether the best source of advice is grizzled veterans. But the Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations, which distilled their wisdom in a report published on October 16th, has done its best.

Chaired by Pascal Lamy, who saw the limits of the system of global problem-solving all too clearly in his former job as head of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), it provides a daunting list of impending problems and lots of evidence that the current approach is too short-termist. It offers no single quick fix or big idea beyond such easily mocked platitudes as a “stronger collective vision”, with “mutual respect and adherence to a set of universal norms which have been collectively developed and agreed”.

Instead, it proposes two modest but useful reforms. The first is to make more use of “creative coalitions” (it avoids the tainted if synonymous phrase “coalitions of the willing”). What it means is ad hoc groups spanning governments, multilateral organisations, business, charities and NGOs which try to deal with a particular problem outside the gridlocked processes of global governance. A successful example is the coalition that is sharply reducing deaths from malaria. Its members include the United Nations, the World Health Organisation and ExxonMobil as well as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and assorted governments from big rich countries and small poor ones. The commission proposes a similar effort to detect and respond to cyber-security problems (to be called CyberEx), and another (to be called C20-C30-C40, it suggests) to combine 20 countries, 30 companies and 40 cities in search of a common agenda for tackling climate change.

The second idea is to bypass the need for universal agreement by creating opt-in global institutions, a bit like the WTO. To succeed, the keen members need to comprise a critical mass—enough to render outsiders irrelevant. The report suggests this could kick off with a new body to improve the reliability and availability of statistics (WorldStat), and another (more

ambitiously) to deal with abuse of tax systems.

Sceptics may scoff that the world has too many international outfits already (for example, decades after—many would say—the end of colonialism, various UN bodies dedicated to its abolition keep plugging away). But the report tries to forestall that criticism by insisting that any new publicly funded institution must include a mandatory sunset clause.

Sizzlingly adventurous? Hardly. But better than doing nothing. Ian Goldin, head of the Oxford Martin School, which played host to the commission, notes that with so much experience, “we could just have thrown up our hands in despair.”

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