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The Party's Over?: Rebuilding Political Parties, Reclaiming Democracy

Keynote Address

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Good afternoon!

I have been asked to share my reflections with you about what “political parties can do in both their internal and external relations and processes to better enable them to fulfill their role in a democracy”. In the program, this subject was premised on the concern with “popular disenchantment with political parties all over the world” leading to claims that these institutions are headed towards an “inexorable process of decay, decline and decomposition”.

While I agree that internal and external relations and processes are important, I believe that more fundamental problems confront political parties that put into serious question the need for them and their ability to fulfill their role in a democracy.

Role of Political Parties in a Democracy

I will argue that, in any democracy, political parties are most suited to unify large portions of the electorate, articulate their disparate interests and viewpoint and transform their preferences into public policies. They are able to do this by forming themselves into organizations with distinct philosophical or ideological orientation and biases, agree upon and operate within a set of rules and norms and help conduct orderly and peaceful electoral competition for power and the right to govern society. The more diverse the options are, the better for the citizenry. This is the essence of democracy.

For those that fail to secure the mandate to govern, their role doesn't end there. Democracies recognize the critical function of those in the opposition to monitor those in power and hold them accountable.

Because of the critical function they perform in society and with the constant turn over of political leaders, political parties also provide a crucial role as recruitment and training ground for future government functionaries and political leaders.

While those functions remain valid and important, more and more citizens around the world, unfortunately, no longer see political parties—as we know them—able to play that role. Worse, disdain for politicians and political parties has been growing: It is intense,

widespread and global. This rejection has reached a point where it has become a popular instinct today, even to the point of absurdity, like the election of clowns and comedians in Italy who present themselves as such or a predisposition to embrace undemocratic alternatives, as the rise of nativist, anti-immigration and neo-Nazi fringe parties in Europe or the continuing popularity back home of an unabashed mysogonist and an unrepentant human rights violator or the big leader of the most powerful country in the world who has been fact-checked to have lied more than 5,000 times (and further multiplying as we speak) since he took office two years ago.

The Political Consequences of Unrestrained Globalization and Rapid Technological Change: Impoverishment and Worsening Inequality

How did we come to this? Many explanations abound but a growing point of convergence is the political backlash emanating from the alienation, disempowerment and dislocation of significant segments of the population and communities around the world today, in both rich and poor countries, arising from the relentless pursuit of globalization and rapid technological changes and the economic policies and priorities that flow from these—deregulation of banks, trickle-down economics, scorn for equality and preference for markets, downsized government, minimal regulation, unimpeded migration, tolerance for corporate evasion.

It cannot be denied that the benefits from the free movement of goods, services and capital across the globe and the development of new technologies have led to profound changes that are re-shaping the ecosystems of work, learning, geo-politics, ethics and community. Openness and globalism have brought prosperity to many parts of the world and lifting hundreds of millions, if not, billions of people out of poverty.

But there can also be no denying that these global developments have resulted to deepening the problem of inequality, the principal driving force of political discontent in many jurisdictions adding another exogenous layer to unresolved age-old historical and structural imbalances in power and wealth.

The Political Backlash on Political Parties

The world over, this economic worldview is being challenged by angry populations empowered by social media and other new technologies. They are deeply frustrated with and resentful of their politicians and governments. The middle and lower classes, in particular, resent the fact that politicians and governments have placed the welfare of the wealthy and powerful above theirs; the interest of the global economy ahead of domestic needs. Our situation requires wholly new ways of thinking about and doing politics and governance. But sadly the traditional and dominant political parties are not doing that. Worse, they may not even fully appreciate the profound changes that is driving new realities in the social, economic and political spheres of our life.

Should we be surprised then at our people's growing disenchantment with politicians and political parties when we continue to behave like politics-as-usual in the midst of this

political turmoil? I think it is time for politicians come to terms with this crisis and wean themselves away from looking at problems as just left-right bipartite choices—capital vs labor, the balance between state and market, acceptable and prohibited social norms (like abortion or gay marriage), the national outlook of openness or country first. We have to accept that the social, economic and political environment, which defines the structures, relations and processes of political institutions like parties, have drastically changed. What needs to be done then?

The Way Forward: Emerging Alternatives

I do not have a coherent comprehensive answer. But this I am certain: for politicians and political parties to survive, they must be willing to overhaul their mindsets, methods and structures to adapt to a new world. We do need to bring the renewal of political parties to the foreground in any discussion of contemporary politics.

Harvard economist Dr Dani Rodrik presents an interesting perspective calling up political parties to renew their ties to local communities. Let me quote him: “We need to revisit our economic world view and put the health of our local communities front and center: stable families, good jobs, strong schools, abundant and safe public places and pride in local cultures and history— the essential elements of prosperous societies.”

Rodrik adds: “Neither global markets nor the nation-states can adequately supply them, sometimes the market and the state even undermine them. For this reason, the community, according to Rodrik, must be seen as the third pillar of prosperity as important as the other two pillars—the state and the market.”

Rodrik rues the fact that policymakers and bureaucrats have listened more to the corporate sector in putting “too much emphasis on hyper-globalization and gave insufficient attention to the costs to communities. He said: “Our economic worldview that narrowly focuses on consumption and the possibilities created by giving firms the freedom (and if I may add, the incentives) they need to take advantage of new technologies, the division of labor, economies of scale and mobility has led to economic and social division that has provided a broad backlash resulting to political turmoil. This suggests economic priorities may not have been entirely appropriate.”

An interesting upcoming book, “The Once and Future Worker: A Vision for the Renewal of Work in America” by Oren Cass, a moderate Republican, explores the same theme: “The reality, which economic models miss, is that consumption is all well and good... but it’s not the basis for a healthy society. Our ability to be productive is much more important to our life satisfaction and to our ability to form and support strong families and communities. And those families and communities are key to raising the next generation.”

Cass cites the example of a local factory that closes down due to outsourcing. “What is lost”, he says, “are not just jobs but also reduced public spending on goods and

services, local government tax revenues fail, so educational and social services take a hit. Then, anomie, family breakdown, opioid addiction and other social ills follow.

In that situation, the logic of prevailing economic viewpoint that requires the dislocated to deal with their predicament by moving out and transferring to more prosperous places will not work. Cass explains why. “Moving away is hard: it requires strong family and social network, confidence, skill, resources”—endowments that poor areas have no access to. He points to this as “a quintessential example” of burdening those left behind with another layer of problem by asking them to sacrifice some more, while those already doing great don’t even have to make any. Why can’t our economic formula be so oriented that it supports prosperity in all kinds of places?

The revulsion with these economic policies—to which parties of the right, center and left have bought into—is what is driving political discontent among those left behind and pushing them to embrace populist, nativist, anti-immigration and authoritarian propaganda.

The results of the recent midterm elections in the US—the election of more women legislators, a more diverse House of Representatives, the huge turnout among the young, the strengthening of checks and balance—augur well for representative democracy in the US.

I’m not too sure about the prospects back home in our part of the world. I would imagine that the impact of such dislocating and inequity-enhancing policies is even more problematic in our region where the reign of autocratic rulers severely constrains access to social media and precludes any meaningful dialogue through which popular revulsion may find expression. Where is then the channel for that?

Even in severely flawed democracies such as ours in the Philippines where dynastic and patronage-driven clans masquerade as political parties and corporate titans have taken over mainstream political parties mainly to protect and further their business interests, the challenge is as daunting. How do we even begin to start the conversation? The dilemma is that those in power and ascendant over the mainstream parties may have little appetite for such conversation, while those who appreciate our current global, regional and national predicament and want to take action—social and political movements, enlightened businessmen and CSOs—are in the margins of the political arena.