

Global Parliament of Mayors

Power to the cities

Occurrences at a market in China can lead to deaths in Mannheim: The problems of our times are global – cities, however, are taking a pragmatic approach to finding the solution. For this reason, a group of mayors is pursuing one idea.

An interview by Janne Kieselbach
12.07.2020, 19.46 h, Spiegel Online

Whether it be climate change, financial crises or, most recently, the corona crisis: in a globalised world, political challenges are increasingly reaching beyond previous borders. Occurrences at a market in the Chinese city of Wuhan can lead to deaths in Mannheim; developments in the Brazilian jungle can affect the climate in Chemnitz. As no one state can stop global warming or halt a pandemic, increasing cooperation is needed. At least in theory.

But, as ever, negotiations on environmental protection, economic policy or disease control are dominated primarily by national interests. The nation states continue to insist on their sovereignty, and it is evident that the continued existence of even established supranational units such as the EU is endangered. The drama surrounding Brexit impressively demonstrated how national desire for self-determination can lead to new global realities being ignored.

Political scientists developed spectacular ideas back in the 90s: It was argued that a world government could be formed, perhaps even a cosmopolitan democracy devised, to solve global problems. Two decades later, the trend is heading directly in the opposite direction: although it long seemed obsolete, the nation state is once again gaining in significance.

One thinker who argued from an early stage that, if it were to succeed at all, global government could only thrive if it also considered the individual's feeling of belonging to a certain local or regional community was the US political theorist, Benjamin Barber, who died three years ago. He advocated anchoring democracy in cities, i.e. where people are closest to one another, and at the same time founding a global parliament of mayors to achieve a networked approach to solving cross-border issues. He once said to SPIEGEL:

"Urban systems stand for pragmatic problem solving; they don't get bogged down in ideological discussions: public transport has to work, the garbage has to be collected and we need schools and sewage systems. A wealth of institutional, social and technological expertise can be found in major cities. I advocate multiplying this expertise."

Benjamin Barber (1939-2017)

Rarely does a concept from the realm of political science become a real project as quickly as it has in this case: The "Global Parliament of Mayors" does now exist, even if it still involves only a good 50 mayors. They come from Amsterdam, Dakar, Kandahar or Atlanta. Their chairman is the German Peter Kurz.

Personal profile

Dr. Peter Kurz, born 1962, has been Mayor of the City of Mannheim since 2007. In addition to his function as President of the Baden-Württemberg association of towns and cities, he also chairs the Global Parliament of Mayors initiated by Benjamin Barber. Prior to his political career, Peter Kurz held the position of judge at the Administrative Court in Karlsruhe.

SPIEGEL: Dr. Kurz, what was your experience of Benjamin Barber up to his death? What kind of person was he?

Kurz: He was an inspiring and persuasive personality, driven by the idea of bringing people together and strengthening social cohesion at local level. He held the strong political conviction that it is the local government level which can address everyday life and the global unifying issues and must play a decisive role there. And he is not alone with this theory. But he conveyed his opinion with punchy, positive, American-style political rhetoric.

SPIEGEL: Mannheim - and you personally - was involved right from the establishment of the Global Parliament of Mayors. How did that come about?

Kurz: Back then, Barber addressed his personal network of mayors, encouraging them to become involved in this joint initiative. This is how most of those came together at the start of the initiative in 2016. The fact that this initial impulse has grown into much more is due to a decisive extent to The Hague, which made a secretariat available to the Global Parliament and organised the inaugural conference.

In his book, "If Mayors Ruled the World", Barber wrote about the dilemma of democracy in its national state form: Problems such as migration, terrorism or pandemics, he said, transcend borders; at the same time, politics operate as a state-based model which, in part, is 400 years old. "We are trying to solve the problems of the 21st century with a concept from the 17th. That is asymmetrical", Barber told SPIEGEL.

SPIEGEL: For Barber, in times of globalisation, the nation state is not longer the right scale level for solving political problems. Why then should this be more successful at city level?

Kurz: Even if he inspired all of us and we followed his key ideas, we often engaged in robust discussion with Barber and of course did not share all his theories. I don't believe that we can simply transcend and replace the nation state; rather I am convinced that we need to supplement it. And incidentally, I don't suffer from the delusion that mayors are, by definition, better people (laughs). But, in terms of the structures, we have other experience and, of necessity, develop a different style. And Barber is right there. I believe that the really telling fact is that the nation state, with its claim to independence, to an extent fails to fully consider a world full of mutual dependencies.

SPIEGEL: Therefore the fundamental principle of national sovereignty has become obsolete?

Kurz: Certainly, and we experience this every day, it is obsolete to an extent. The concept of nation states also includes the presumption of being able to arrange matters for oneself. But in many areas this is no longer possible today; we are obliged to engage in global and regional cooperation. And the cities can play a major role here because the willingness to cooperate is anchored in our DNA to a much greater extent than in nation states.

For Benjamin Barber it was clear that globally-linked cities could be the saving of democracy. Rising numbers of people reside in cities where the practical issues of living in close proximity are particularly acute and lend themselves particularly to civic participation: Topics such as rent levels, transport, education or power supply mobilise people, arouse democratic passion and demand pragmatic solutions. Municipal politicians are close to the citizens; they have to perform: when the garbage is stinking, the heat is becoming a problem, people cannot find homes, the underground transport system is overcrowded. At the same time, these skills could be bundled worldwide to find solutions for climate change, combat global real estate speculation or to improve childcare.

SPIEGEL: What does your plan for a world with politically-strengthened cities look like?

Kurz: Our basis idea is to augment the system of nation state-based organisation and the international agreements with a movement at communal level. One idea which is very important to me, and which is already more broadly accepted in Germany than in other parts of the world, is that sustainable development cannot be reasonably achieved without cities capable of independent action. We need local self-government. It contributes to a positive development of wealth. What we wish for, therefore, is something we describe as a "City Rights Movement".

SPIEGEL: To date, only 50 mayors are participating in the initiative. That doesn't exactly sound like a Global Parliament, even if the ladies and gentlemen come from all around the globe.

Kurz: Of course endeavours are underway to extend the Parliament. At the moment, lack of funding is the main obstacle because we are largely self-financed. But our network is already much more extensive than the 50 members. Last year, 75 mayors attended our Annual General Meeting, which is a high number for international conferences, where the top-level of municipal politics is generally not represented. For our conference in Palermo we anticipate significantly more than 100 mayors. Among experts and scientists too, our political objective of creating a formal representative body for our concept and achieving a supplement to the UN system is being very well received.

Source: SPIEGEL Online 17.07.2020

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