

GLOBAL STRATEGY FORUM

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The 23rd in our series of expert comment and analysis, by Major General Sir Michael Carleton-Smith CBE DL. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.

2020: Changing World

I am now in my ninetieth year and occasionally reflect on the amazingly changed UK, let alone world, during my lifetime. Arguably even more so during my father's ninety plus years from the late Victorian era with no cars, planes, radios, telephone service or votes for women, serving in the Third Afghan War and in two World Wars, to man on the moon. He also saw many of the changes I have experienced from 1931.

Many of the current generations are truly blessed to live at better times than have ever existed before, incorporating all the many domestic, social, economic, cultural, scientific and political changes and the immense advances in the roles and status of women, improved education, health, sanitation, life expectancy and quality of life in the developed world including the benefits here of the Welfare State and the NHS.

The UK population has risen from 46.07 million to 67.8 million, of which 9.3 million (14%) were born overseas. Nevertheless sadly, millions are still suffering in many parts of the world riven

with much inequality and the world population has risen from just over two billion to well over seven billion. And there is still a needy advancing Asia, Africa and South America. There are 272 million international migrants globally, 3.5% of the population and 150 million homeless, 2% of the global population.

Vehicles on British roads have risen from just over one million to the current figure of 38.7 million with speed limits on open roads, seat belts and power steering. An increasing number of cars are now powered by electricity and a handful by a new hydrogen technology. E-scooters are shortly to be legalised.

In the post-war years there were very empty roads and many hitch-hikers. In 1949, aged 17/18, I solo hitch-hiked for two months round a tourist-free and still extensively damaged France and Italy. Down to a deserted Pompeii, a virtually empty Venice and the Free Territory of Trieste then still under Allied administration. I described Italy in my journal at the time as 'this poverty-stricken country'! The following years saw massive road and motorway, infrastructure and house building with universal domestic gas,



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electricity and WCs. Actually my first car in early 1951 was a small open-topped 1937 Ford with neither starter, heater, nor indicators and hand-operated windscreen wipers! The previous year I had ridden my pre-war motorbike to Cairo and have subsequently driven in rather more modern cars round most of Western Europe, right round the circumference of the USA, halfway round Australia and the length of New Zealand. UK annual air flights have grown from very few to 68.9 million with widespread international travel, whilst my first round trips to Port Said, Montreal and Singapore had to be by boat. My first return flights to Singapore took respectively two and five days with break downs in RAF Habbaniya near Baghdad and Colombo!

The emergence of green, technological and digital revolutions: radar, transistor radios, TV, supercomputers, internet, smart phones, satnav, data availability, artificial intelligence, drones, space travel and the development of renewable energy.

On a more personal level there have been the benefits of antibiotics, gas-free dental treatment, fresh fruit and vegetables imported year round, domestic refrigerators, washing machines, dishwashers, vacuum cleaners, central heating, microwaves, digital hearing aids, multifocal glass lenses, battery powered wrist watches, modern pens replacing pen and ink, iPads, Google, decimal coinage and credit cards.

Cultural changes include much reduced church attendance, corporal and capital punishment abolished, contraception, the wide acceptance of casual dress, beards and skin heads, much exposed female flesh, widespread obesity,

banned drugs, restricted smoking, hate crime, LGBT liberation, 'Black Lives Matter', the 'me too' movement, lessened class system, populism, identity politics, social media, Zoom meetings, gratuitous trolling and tweeting. London smog and smoke-free with the soiled faces of distinguished buildings washed clean. The prostitutes lining Piccadilly now illegal and replaced by multinational homeless beggars and Britain a multiracial society. Other global changes include wildlife and habitat loss, excessive pollution and waste.

All this against a backdrop of: the reign of three kings, an abdication and the Queen's long reign, a second World War in just 21 years with food rationing lasting for 14 years, the Holocaust, the use of nuclear weapons and nuclear power, the UN, NATO, 43 years of Cold War, Deterrence, and the loss of the British Empire. I personally served in the last three colonial campaigns. The end of the British Mandate in Palestine, communist takeover in China, collapse of the Soviet Union, wars in the Balkans, Africa, Asia and continuing turbulence in the Middle East, the assassination of an American President, the Northern Ireland troubles and the IRA. Two of my sons having served in Ulster, the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq. Cyber warfare, the influence of Putin's Russia, the emergence of a dangerously ambitious China, Globalisation, Nationalism, Zionism, the EU, the Arab Spring, Jihadism, ISIS, Terrorism, a threatening North Korea, Scottish Referendum with the potential risk of the break-up of the UK, Brexit, inflation, reduced defence expenditure and continued pandemics. COVID-19 a current major world problem with massive economic consequences but lethality hopefully not as bad as Spanish Flu, one hundred years



ago, with over fifty million global deaths. But the implications of COVID-19 global lockdown may subsequently accelerate change in employment, management, teaching, shopping and maybe other environments.

The two degree upper limit for catastrophic global warming proposed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change will be exceeded if we burn just 20 to 30 percent of the existing fossil fuel reserves (oil, gas and coal). They will anyway not last forever and estimates put the end dates in the early second half of this century. The impact of continued changes and crises at these scales and rates may make the world potentially less pleasant by the time my grandchildren are my age, let alone their offspring.

This is a massive and unique, but hopefully not insurmountable, challenge for national and world leaders, realistically, to manage the implications of climate change, fossil fuel depletion, population growth, immigration, China and the many other threats and challenges and thus preserve a vastly developing world worth living in for all its occupants for all time. Are they really grasping the magnitude of the major issues as they wrestle with other current problems?

The existence of an American President who has to ask if Britain is a nuclear power and whether Finland is part of Russia, who threatened to withdraw from NATO, who has withdrawn from the WHO, UNESCO, UNRWA, the Paris Agreement

on Climate Change, the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Russia, the Iran Nuclear Agreement, the Open Skies Treaty and the Trans Pacific Partnership are not grounds for undue optimism. Although the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change is one of the encouraging initiatives in the right direction.

But strong, intelligent, sustained, international leadership, cooperation and action is needed to preserve and profitably develop the world as we know it. We all need to be optimistic and proactive. God help us.

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Sir Michael was educated at Radley, Sandhurst and four staff colleges including RCDS. He was commissioned into the Rifle Brigade in 1951 and served in colonial campaigns in Kenya, Malaya and Borneo and in Germany, Cyprus, Hong Kong, Canada and Australia. After leaving the Army, he was Director General of Marie Curie Cancer Care and on retirement was the chairman of the Leicester Royal Infirmary and various charities.



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