

The role of cities and mayors in empowering rights holders

Connect.Reflect.Act Talk by Benjamin R. Barber, Political theorist and founder of the Global Parliament for Mayors Project

Abstract

Talking about human rights means talking about cities. There is a connection between democracy and rights; democracy does not create rights, but rather rights create democracy. He argued that, today, rights are in trouble because democracy is in trouble. In his view, democracies are facing problems because the nation state has outlived its usefulness in our interdependent world, where all problems facing states are global in nature. He suggests that the time has come to move our faith from the not so democratic state defaulting on sovereignty to the cities as the guarantor of human rights. To do this, Barber asserts cities need to work together transnationally in a truly global network. Cities need adequate funding and resources. He asserts that turning to cities is both a practical and constructive solution for the troubles facing democracies, and if we want to rescue rights and rescue ourselves, then we need to turn to cities and make sure they have the resources and global muscle to sustain us: "Talking about rights means talking about cities."

Troubles for democracy and rights:

Mr Barber began by highlighting the connection between democracy and rights, noting that democracy doesn't create rights, rights create democracy. For 400 years, as rights around the world have grown and expanded, they been secured by democratic government. The premise of rights is self-government. He suggested that rights are in trouble, and that rights are in trouble because democracy is in trouble. Europe started out as a remarkable experiment in transnational democracy, but today we know that Europe is in trouble because very few European citizens think Europe has anything to do with their rights.

He pointed to examples of Brexit in the UK, a far-right candidate nearly elected to the presidency in Austria, the candidacy of Trump in the US, and governmental crises in Brazil and Belgium as evidence. The reason for this trouble is rooted in the very concept of the nation state. Every challenge we face - from climate change to terrorism - is global and interdependent in nature and goes beyond states. In his words, "We live in a common world" and if we don't address these problems together, "we will lose our democracy and we will lose our rights." In his view, the nation state has outlived its usefulness, increasingly failing to meet its obligations and defaulting on its responsibilities.

'The city' as a solution

Mr Barber argued that there is a need to create a genuine platform for global human rights, a need for democracy without borders, and he turned to cities as a potential solution, noting that cities are the original human community and reflect diversity in our world. Cities are also closer to people than national governments, and people trust them much more than national governments on average. He suggests that the time has come to move our faith from the not so democratic state defaulting on sovereignty to the cities. In this case, it is up to cities to take on responsibilities of democracies, including human rights.

In his view, cities need to again become the guarantor of human rights as they were in the past before the nation state. In order for cities to fill this role, they have to work together across borders in cooperation through global networks, to find a unified voice and platform to secure rights. He pointed to the need for adequate funding for cities, arguing if cities are to sustain rights then they have the right to demand the resources they have generated.

He wants to see a Europe not of failed nations but a Europe of cities. According to him, if you want a practical and constructive solution, then let's turn to our cities. If we want to rescue rights and rescue ourselves, then we need to turn to cities and make sure they have the resources and global muscle to sustain us.