Ten Political Trends for the Future

In This Chapter

- Voting online
- Modernising India and China
- Replacing the dollar
- Living with global change

Former British prime minister Harold Wilson once said that ‘a week is a long time in politics’. But what about one, five, ten or even twenty years? In today’s fast-paced, interconnected, rapidly globalising world, political careers can end in a jiffy, international alliances form and then fragment in double-quick time, and the fortunes of great nations can rise and fall overnight. Plotting these changes is the work of journalists, historians and that wacky group of funsters, the political scientists, but here’s my attempt to gaze into the crystal ball and predict the future of politics.

In this chapter, and in no particular order, I look at some of the political trends that may well play a big role in future politics in Britain and around the world. Some are educated guesses, others seem nailed-on certainties; only time will tell!

Broadening Democracy: Internet Voting

Great democracies like the UK and US are suffering from low voter turnout; anything up to a half of electors are failing to cast their ballots. Some commentators put this down to a widespread disillusionment with politicians and political parties in general – you know, the man or woman down the pub saying ‘politicians are all the same’. But another reason for low voter turnout is that many people are too busy to make their way to a polling station, queue up and cast their ballot.

The logic is that if voting were made easier, more people would vote, which means turnout would be higher, helping to really validate the election process. People could vote online, simply logging into the election website, keying in a personal identification number and ticking the box by their chosen candidate. Internet voting would be cheaper to boot, with fewer staffed polling stations open on election day. Internet voting would also make it possible for voters to express their views on individual topics such as whether or not a particular piece of legislation should be passed. In effect the Internet opens up the possibility of easy-to-organise referendums.

The technology is already available and the Scottish parliament is consulting a group of voters via the Internet on particular policy matters, to get an insight into what the public think.

Some people are worried that Internet voting could lead to fraud, and wonder who’ll monitor the machines that tally up all the votes. In addition, some fear that whoever operates the Internet voting system could tell who voted for which candidate, which destroys the secret element of the ballot.

Nevertheless, in both the US and UK, a growing groundswell of opinion is in favour of Internet voting.

Rising Power: Indian Modernisation

India is the world’s biggest democracy, encompassing more than a billion people. The economy is rapidly expanding, literacy rates are rising and the country also has millions of English speakers able to deal with companies and individuals in the US and UK. India also has a three-hundred–millionstrong ‘middle class’ with generous disposable incomes. India is one of the growing forces in the world economy and may even eventually replace the US as the world’s most prosperous democracy.

In the not too distant future, India is likely to take its place at the top table of international politics. It will soon have a large enough economy to enter into the G8 group of nations and there’s talk of it having a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

Loosening the Shackles: Chinese Democracy

When the pro-democracy protestors pitched up in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989, the end of the Chinese communist regime seemed at hand. Even when the communists brutally crushed the protest and imposed martial law, it still only seemed a matter of time before democracy would come to China. Since then, though, the communist leadership has been remarkably adaptable. They’ve overseen a massive liberalisation of the economy, allowing some people to own their own property and businesses and accumulate wealth. In effect, communism has survived by ditching much of what communism actually stands for. But survived it has. The Chinese Communist Party’s position seems unassailable.

It even controls people’s access to media, and curtails the use of the Internet, not allowing access to websites deemed anti-Chinese.

Many commentators argue that, as the Chinese economy continues to expand, the Chinese will ultimately want more freedom to express themselves and elect a different government. In short, as China becomes more Western in terms of wealth, it will eventually become more Western in terms of its politics. The progress – or otherwise – of democracy in China is a key trend to watch for in the 21st century.

China has the third- or fourth-largest economy in the world and is growing annually at around 8 to 10 per cent. Compare this to the US or Europe, where economies are growing by 2 to 3 per cent. You can see why China is rapidly catching up with the Western countries in terms of economic growth.
Securing Natural Resources: Chinese Control of Africa

For hundreds of years, Western nations strived to secure the abundant natural resources of Africa, such as minerals and precious metals. But in the first decade of the 21st century the Chinese have looked to conclude trade agreements and buy up large tracts of land and industries within Africa.

China says that it’s simply securing resources for its industries, which in turn supply the West with goods. However, some observers suggest that what’s happening is different from previous ‘scrambles’ for Africa: paying local corrupt governments in order to get natural resources on the cheap, ultimately providing little or no benefit to the ordinary people of Africa.

China’s presence in Africa is an emotive subject but one that’s bound to see the country even more powerful globally and even, who knows, replace the US as the world’s biggest economy.

Out with the Old: Replacing the Dollar

Ever since the end of the Second World War the major currency around the globe has been the US dollar. In fact, nearly seven out of ten international trading transactions are done in dollars. Barrels of oil and ounces of gold are priced in dollars, not pounds, euros or Japanese yen. The dollar is called the world’s reserve currency, which means many countries hold a large amount of dollars that will always be acceptable to international markets if another currency becomes untradeable because of an economic crisis.

But the mighty dollar isn’t as mighty as it once was, particularly after the financial crisis affecting Western banks in 2008. The crisis resulted in a massive expansion of US government debt and weakened the dollar’s hold on being the world’s reserve currency. Some experts suggest that oil or gold should be traded in euros or Chinese yuan.

No longer using the dollar as a trading currency would make it harder for the US government to persuade other countries – China in particular – to buy its debt (the fact that most world trade is carried out in dollars makes it more attractive for investors to buy bonds issued by the US Treasury). The decline of the dollar would be a key sign that the balance of the world economy was shifting from the US to China and India.

Constructing a Super-State: Expanding the European Union

The European Union (EU) is a major trading bloc; a super-state in the making. The EU currency, the euro, is used widely around the globe and with a population of 500 million people in 27 member states and an economy bigger than that of the US, the EU is increasingly invited to the top table of international events; for example, the president of the European Commission – a part of the EU ‘government’ – attends meetings of the G8 group of most powerful nations. Talks are under way to bring Iceland and the Balkan countries into the EU, and also Turkey, which has a massive population.

However, not all within the EU are happy with the idea of an EU super-state. Some powerful politicians in the UK, Ireland and east European nations are reluctant to surrender national sovereignty to EU institutions such as the Commission and the parliament. In fact, some suggest that the drift of lawmaking powers from parliaments of member states to the EU has dwindled and that the EU will stop short of becoming the super-state envisaged by many.

World Going Dry: Shortages of Water

Sat in the seemingly permanently raining UK, believing that the world could be running short of drinking water is a bit difficult. However, a massively expanding population combined with global warming and mass deforestation is turning once fertile wetlands into desert. Some parts of the world, particularly the Middle East, are already relying on technology to make seawater drinkable.

Some political scientists suggest that, in future, wars will be fought over securing vital water supplies rather than over territory or oil.

The United Nations estimates that up to 880 million people around the globe – that’s roughly one in eight of the global population – have access to barely adequate or inadequate water supply. This doesn’t just mean that people go thirsty; dirty water also leads to disease. The World Bank says 88 per cent of all deaths from disease are related to inadequate water supply.

Black Gold: Scrambling for Oil

Oil companies have drained many of the world’s big oil fields and are now trying to drill in areas of outstanding natural beauty such as Alaska and possibly one day even Antarctica.

Experts reckon that the peak of oil production was struck some five years ago and now the world is on a downward path to running out of the most precious of fossil fuels. But just as the world’s stock of oil is dwindling, demand is rising, thanks to the massive industrial growth of China and, to a lesser extent, India and Brazil. No wonder the price of oil has shot up five-fold since its lows at the start of the millennium. Many said that the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 was motivated by the need to secure oil supplies.

A world without oil is looking like a distinct possibility by the middle of the century. The doomsayers suggest this will lead to a massive fall in industrial production, people will have to give up their cars and power supplies will be under threat. But others say that oil is a dirty, polluting fuel and we’d be better off without it; technologies are available to help the world cope without oil, to enable people to drive their cars, and for industrial production to continue.

How the world learns to live without oil will be one of the great political, economic and social stories of the 21st century.
Risking Our Future: Global Warming
The world has heated up more in the past century than in the previous three thousand years. Most scientists blame human activity, saying global warming has coincided with global industrialisation and that pollution means the planet is retaining more heat from the sun. A smaller group of scientists suggest that the temperature of the planet varies over time and that increasing greenhouse gases (gases that purportedly heat up the atmosphere) are due to the natural release of carbon into the atmosphere rather than human activity. The effects of global warming could be catastrophic for humanity as sea levels rise, countries disappear, deserts expand and millions are made homeless. If human activity is to blame, then global warming can only be slowed by getting governments, individuals and industry to curtail the release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Many of the world’s leading industrial nations have agreed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2020 to help slow global warming but the economic expansion of China and other developing countries means putting these changes in jeopardy. The world’s major governments met in December 2009 in Copenhagen to discuss what to do but no one’s holding their breath for a radical solution. Some measures that may help are the development of cleaner fuels and helping developing nations adopt greener technology to reduce their dependency on fossil fuels.

Upping Sticks: Global Population Moves
Some of the problems facing governments around the globe, such as global warming and water shortages, are going to have a huge impact on the lives of ordinary people. Some scientists suggest mass population moves in Africa and Asia will occur due to parts of the globe becoming difficult to farm and live in. The majority of the world’s population lives in the countryside, working on farms and looking after livestock. If global warming makes these places uninhabitable, the people are going to have to move to neighbouring countries in richer parts of the world such as Europe or parts of Asia. Immigration is going to be a big issue in the 21st century for most nations around the globe.