

## **With increasing distance, conscience loses its sharpness**

Presentation by former Swiss Federal Minister Moritz Leuenberger at the opening of the symposium « Human Rights, Future Generations and Crimes in the Nuclear Age » Aula, University of Basel Sept 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017 (Translation A. Nidecker)

### **The difficulty with planning**

**Planning private life:** The quality of a commander, a politician, a manager or a housekeeper is usually valued by the farsightedness of his (or her) planning. However, life is rarely as straightforward as we would like it to be. Even the simplest planning tasks, such as making personal decisions, may frequently be unreliable: we are not “straightforward”. We like to tailor our convictions and opinions, in which we strongly believe, to new circumstances. We change course because we reach new conclusions, in much the same way a yacht changes course according to the wind or the waves. Moreover, we may not only change the course, but may decide to steer towards new shores, because our free will responds to our changing moods. How many have sworn themselves never to get married yet later decided otherwise, even swearing eternal fidelity to their partners? Yet, in time things may change: More than 40,000 Swiss couples get married every year, but statistics suggest that more than 20,000 of these couples will require the services of a Swiss tribunal to facilitate their divorces in later years.... Planning with external parties i.e. “You” requires consensus, a state more difficult to reach than when planning for the individual.

**Political Planning:** Even more difficult than any relationship between two people it is in politics. At this juncture we are required to involve parties i.e. people, that we do not even know. Additionally, we need to deal with events in nature, which we cannot even predict. Finally, the most complex element is when planning for communities. The ever-changing conditions within or outside of them are difficult to measure. The danger of relying on recent history or previous outcomes, which have been overshadowed by changing circumstances today or even proved to be false, shows us the difficulties associated with long-term planning.

As an example, take the current discussions on earlier investments in nuclear power plants: today with the price for electricity being very low, the bosses of electric utilities call for state support, when before they exalted the merits of independence and private enterprise. They make us believe, that they have never chosen a wrong strategy, but rather “the development was different and not in line with their original strategic planning. Indeed, a rather incredible argument!

**Scientific and technological predictions:** Neither is science able to have a clearer view of the future: Take the history of predictions for population growth: It is full of erroneous statements, which should make us a bit more cautious with the predictions of today: Montesquieu was of the opinion that the earth’s population in antiquity was ten times as great as in his presence. From this he concluded that the development in the next two centuries would turn the earth into a desert: „Voilà, mon cher Usbeck, la plus terrible catastrophe qui soit jamais arrivée dans le monde!“. - Another example: The Swiss Federal Statistical Office concluded 75 years ago that the population of Switzerland would grow to a maximum of 4.2 million and then decline slowly. And in one study for Europe a population of 421 million was given as a maximum for 1960 and from that time onwards it would gradually diminish, when indeed in 2015 the European population was 743 million.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was predicted, that the rapid growth of traffic would lead to a situation, where cities would be clogged by horse manure. Thanks to the invention of railways and trams in cities, this crisis has luckily been averted. Following this, a serious discussion followed on the health-effects of trains, which would run at a “very unnatural speed” of more than 35 kms/h... And who remembers today, that there were plans for a subterranean nuclear power plant in the heart of Berne, right under the parliament square.

Or the plans for a nuclear powered car, a “nucleo-mobile” « proudly » made in Switzerland!

Humans will remain largely unaware of the benefits of future discoveries in technology that they will later live to rely on. Take the use of DDT or x-rays as examples. Luckily, we now know much more about the different elements of this substance, compared to the euphoria when DDT was first synthesized. Today we do not use it any longer. Or take Asbestos: had we known more on this dangerous mineral decades ago, a majority of industrial and business decision makers would not have believed blindly in such a substance and invested in its technology. Today we also know very little on Nano-technology, or on non-ionizing radiations and on some poisons contained in our nutrition.

The same is true for nuclear energy and ionizing radiation. In spite of their discovery by the astute William Conrad Röntgen and the benefit of x-rays for diagnostic work in medicine, we now know more about them including their risks and hence use them very carefully. However, some do not readily understand this, as a personal experience of the former Swiss Minister for Energy Adolf Ogi illustrates. When he in a meeting expressed to French President Francois Mitterrand his concerns on Nuclear Power Plants close to the Swiss borders, the latter answered: “Do you doubt the French technology?” which quickly ended the discussion.

In addition, we also are unaware about which social policy developments will happen in the future: as a society we follow political trends and without noticing it, we are influenced by them. Nor are we aware, how much autonomy we are losing through this process. Even less do we know about what will motivate those who come after us, who perhaps will be the political leaders of tomorrow, or how they will think and whole societies may act. Just recall how few of us ever considered a short time ago, that a candidate like Mr. Trump would ever become president of the US!

In my resignation speech in 2010, I joked with my colleagues in the Swiss Federal Council, who were mostly supportive towards the use of nuclear energy, that as Minister for Traffic, Environment and Communications over 10 years “I had built 115 tunnels but no nuclear power plant”. One colleague in the Federal Council was indignant and objected! But nobody at the time knew, that it was she, who would become my successor and who only months later would proclaim the Swiss plan for a phase-out of nuclear energy.

**Planning in democracy:** All the aforementioned observations make political planning somewhat relative, but do not substantially question it. Every form of government, including democracy and in the case of Switzerland also, our so-called “direct democracy” must and can plan.

Contrary to my colleagues in Germany and France I strongly believe, that direct democracy is better suited to long term planning than any representative democracy. The people i.e. the voters form a more stable power, with the capacity to empower any Government in the rhythm of succeeding parliamentary elections. Without this, it likely would not have been possible to build the Gotthard Base Tunnel, opened last year, in time and on budget. Consider in this context the still unfinished tunnel from Lyon / Torino or the Potsdam / Berlin airport. Political planning beyond one governmental period is less calculable in a representative democracy as compared to a direct one. A good example may be the current “energy conversion process” in Germany, which shows how difficult it is to plan a political agenda.

This is how “Nuclear Power (NP)” figured in the coalition contracts between the political parties in Germany: In 2002 during the socialist / green Govt no plans for NP phase-out were in existence. Later a phase-out was decided upon by the socialist / conservative Govt. But the process never started. In 2009 the conservative and federal democratic parties were in power and they even prolonged the running times of the NPP! Finally, after Fukushima, the

same coalition voted for a definitive phase-out and the energy conversion process (without the socialists or the greens even being involved.)

Is it easier for dictators? Political leaders, who consider themselves like God – or one chosen by God –, plan their own kingdom for eternity. And this kingdom belongs to them and only to them. That is easy for them, as they are convinced of their own immortality. Pharaohs had themselves embalmed in the pyramids, while the mummy of the young Tutankhamun looks today as Michael Jackson did and is even very like the latter. However, their kingdoms (of a thousand years) lasted a fraction of their initially planned duration and Persepolis is in ruins today.

### **The temporal dimension of planning**

The longer the period for planning, the more difficult and uncertain the planning process undoubtedly will be. To believe that it is possible to plan for a thousand years seems somewhat absurd. Yet, regarding the topic of this meeting, highly radioactive nuclear waste should remain safe for millions of years, a period no human can relate to. Considering the completely unknown political and social conditions, recoverability of nuclear waste after such timeframes may or may not be a rational option. Notwithstanding the fact that communication with our successors is not possible. The organisation NAGRA (National Corporation for the safe storage of nuclear waste) has a whole library with dissertations dedicated to these problems. (In one dissertation on the title page one can read: the ink of this paper will be readable for approximately 200 years under optimal conditions). Will there be a Switzerland in a Thousand years? If we consider the displacement of many international borders within the last 1000 years, we should rather hope so. How short sighted it seems if today “storage of nuclear waste” is discussed from the perspective of national or even cantonal borders.

True, there were always prophets, writers, philosophers or politicians who were correct in their predictions of coming centennial events. But when considering the correct versus the many incorrect predictions, we may use the metaphor of the one seed, from which a flower grows, rather than all the seeds that are blown away in the wind... This observation should not lead to resignation, but rather to some modesty. Even though I appreciate the work of think tanks, I have only moderate trust in their abilities to predict the future over a longer period any better than those who read tealeaves or gaze into a crystal ball. I rather believe that we should consider the dimension of planning not in a quantitative way, but rather focus on its quality i.e. fill planning with content. It is not the long-term nature of our options that is important but the ethical dimension of our actions.

### **The ethical dimension of planning**

Regarding content, which long-term criteria are relevant for planning? My observation is this: our conscience loses its sharpness, its “edge” the further away we are from the effects of our actions. **With increasing distance we lose responsibility.** This is true in a spatial sense in the movie “the third man”: **Orson Wells** alias Harry Lime is committing a war crime during peace, in that he is dealing with diluted penicillin. He explains to his friend on top of the Ferris wheel in the Viennese Prater, where the two can see their fellow humans on the ground only as tiny dots: “Would you really feel pity, if one of those dots stopped moving – stop for ever? And if I would offer you 20,000 pounds for one dot that stopped moving: would you say without hesitation that I should keep my money? Would you not rather calculate, how many dots you could stop? And this without taxes, my dear?” **Charles Chaplin** said once: “if you see two people fighting each other in full view, it may even be funny. However, seeing them close-up, you start feeling pity for them”. Regarding Syria, the pity we feel in relation to the people there or the refugees in the camps of Turkey or Lebanon that we only read about, but which we don’t see, is a lot less than the pity we feel for a father, who is holding his dead son in his arms, in a photograph which has travelled around the world. Our conscience may also be weakening regarding people in other countries and on other continents. This was illustrated by the recent fact that the US

left the Paris climate treaty on the basis of Mr. Trump's new philosophy of "America first". It is also seen in policy measures with refugees, when barbed wire and walls are being proposed as solutions.

Our compassion is also decreasing with increasing temporal distance: **Einstein** experienced the problem of closeness and distance as a personal moral dilemma. As a confirmed pacifist, he signed a letter to Roosevelt, promoting in it the creation of a nuclear bomb, as he was afraid, that Hitler at the time could be the first to build one himself. He felt compelled to think strategically, yet he distanced himself from the outcome, how this bomb would kill humans. Later he regretted this letter and confessed in a Japanese newspaper the following: "Killing in war, according to my understanding, is not any better than conventional murder".

"After us the deluge" is only the most extreme exaggeration of a purely natural weakening of the imagination beyond unimaginable periods of time. Who in Europe or the rest of the world remembers the cruel nuclear tests done by the Americans in the Pacific, just some 60 to 70 years ago? Not only geographically far away and in the last century... but much less than an eternity! We plan for our children and grandchildren, whom we know and cherish. However, people living in a distant place, or people which will live centuries from now we do not relate to and many of us do not feel any responsibility to them ... Out of carelessness or ignorance we continue to change the world in a way, that the consequences of our actions today are beyond our comprehension. Consider in this context the cutting of forests in Istria and Dalmatia by the Romans or the drying out of the Aral Lake by the Soviets, damage that can never be repaired...

### **Leaving behind debts**

Paying for the debts of our generation will be an obligation for future generations and it will seriously limit their freedom. This is in contradiction to investments for future generations, such as the aforementioned tunnel through St. Gotthard, even though 25% of it was financed through future debts, which seems legitimate, as the tunnel is also benefiting them too. Not legitimate however are accumulated debts by our generation, in order to pay for our lifestyle today, which we are incapable of paying for fully. Making debts on behalf of the next generations is unjustified enrichment and it is analogous to parasitic behaviour.

In this regard the resistance against pension reforms in France and in Switzerland i.e. that pensions of older generations today are being paid by debt financing equates to a violation of solidarity with future generations. Democracy is well capable of planning, however, it is also prone to egotistical decision-making.

At the moment these interferences cannot be reversed, for example the loss of biodiversity, this by nature should be prohibited. We do not have the right to create and leave problems behind us, which we consider unmanageable or unacceptable to us. In this regard, we cannot leave the earth to others as a mere nuclear waste repository. Our generation has to take care of waste disposal and should we not be able to do it, we have no right to accumulate waste. Furthermore, it is in my opinion ethically unacceptable, to bestow a risk to future generations, if we are not ready to accept the same risk for ourselves. Future generations should need to accept, what we would only accept for ourselves.

### **Solidarity among Generations**

The quality of political planning thus does not only exist when planning for the future. It should rather be characterized by some degree of modesty and humility as far as our own temporal and mental horizons are concerned. The quality is derived from the ethical and not the temporal dimension. Cicero, statesman and philosopher wrote in "De finibus bonorum et malorum" the following: "It is inhumane, even criminal to say, that after our death the *worldfire* may burn all countries". Out of this recognition it follows vice versa the obligation that we need to provide and care also for the future generations. Humans form a community

for generations and each is responsible for the next. We should thank our ancestors for our lives. Compared with the millions of years of the history of the earth, our short life is pure privilege. We have a responsibility to future generations and must leave them the earth in such a state, that they can lead their own lives in liberty, just the way many have for centuries.