

## **GDMUN: Future generations**

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“It is common to hear people say that the epoch of enormous economic progress which characterised the past century is over; that the rapid improvement in the standard of life is now going to slow down (...); that a decline in prosperity is more likely than an improvement in the decade (..) ahead of us. I believe that this is a wildly mistaken interpretation of what is happening to us. We are suffering, not from the rheumatics of old age, but from the growing-pains of over-rapid changes, from the painfulness of readjustment between one economic period and another.”

The words of John Maynard Keynes, written in 1930 in his book *The Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren*, ask questions that are still relevant today. Are we at a turning point in history that signals the end of two and a half centuries of economic prosperity? The millennials, of which you are part, are seen as the first generation for which incomes will not be higher than those of their parents. A combination of government debt, demographics, few and insecure jobs, rising house prices and rising sea levels is depressing the prospects of young people around the globe. As you get together to discuss the challenges facing future generations, I would like to start with a simple question. Will you be able to cope with such changes?

The answer is that it depends, it depends on whether you want to be a panda or a frog. Pandas are complicated animals – they want to live in the same place all their lives, eat virtually a single food (bamboo), and only have sex between mid-March and mid-April. As a result, coping with change is tough, and small variations in their natural environment have a massive impact on their capacity to reproduce and survive. In contrast, frogs, or amphibians more generally, are one of evolution's greatest successes. For most of us, there is something funny about them: not as efficient as a fish when they swim, not as fast as a rabbit on land, with poor hearing and mediocre sight. Yet, they can be agile on land and on water,

live in all sorts of environments, eat virtually all available food, and avoid a myriad of predators. Amphibians show a wide diversity of survival strategies which have allowed them to occupy most terrestrial and fresh-water habitats, living in every continent and in every type of climate – from Arctic ice to sandy deserts.

The thing that strikes me when I look at people in this room, is that you are amphibians. Geographical amphibians, when you have a Senegalese dad and German mum but live in France; social amphibians, those of you who come from a small village with no lycée but have spent time in Australia’s most elite school; or simply intellectual amphibians because despite the fact that you want to do mathematics for the rest of your life you have chosen to study German or English literature. It is hard to live with heterogeneous backgrounds: “Who am I?” you wonder. “If people ask me where I’m from, what do I say?” But those people who are fishes out of water are often the most vibrant ones in the room. They can thrive in radically different environments, they can think outside the box, and they will have a much needed quality when countries meet: the acceptance of pluralism.

Pluralism, remember, isn’t just living with difference, or tolerance. It’s the weaving together of different life commitments. It’s being planted here and also being planted there, but somehow forming yourself into a third thing, one coherent personality. Amphibians often do not fit perfectly anywhere. They are within the circle of the group, but at the edge, where they can most easily communicate with those on the outside. They are at the meeting-place of difference where creativity happens. And that semi-outsider mentality is essential if we want nations to listen to each other and start to act together.

It seems to me that the amphibians are best suited to solve the four big challenges of future generations. Climate change is of course number one in the list. Planet Earth is changing faster than at any other time and we need to adapt. Adapting needs creativity but also the knowledge that **we can** adapt, that it is possible to have a fulfilled life while using fewer resources. Those with a wide variety of experiences know that there are many ways in which personal satisfaction can be achieved and should share that knowledge.

A second problem is technology and the world of work. Not since the industrialization of Britain has the nature of work changed as much as in

the past two decades. Great entrepreneurs no longer make ‘things’ but simply sell ideas. Companies pop up from thin air and evaporate shortly after, and having a job for life is now a myth. You will simply not spend your entire career with a single company as virtually all your grandparents did. Most people feel dread at the idea of retraining and changing jobs. You, I hope, will see it as an opportunity to keep growing.

Intergenerational solidarity is the third key challenge and it will affect you in a way that no previous generation has experienced. On the one hand, you will be the first generation in Western Europe since the Industrial Revolution that will not be richer than their parents; on the other, you are being told again and again that your actions today will determine what is possible for those who are yet unborn. You will have to face the fact that you cannot have as much as your parents, and the knowledge that taking all that is available will be too much if you care about your children. Accepting this and making the right decisions will call for a degree of altruism that is not easy to find in our species.

Lastly, solidarity within generations will demand from you a degree of introspection that few young people have. After half a century of declining inequality, income disparities have been growing. In countries like France, the middle class is disappearing and education is no longer the pathway towards upwards social mobility that it once was. Around the world, some economies have taken off and lifted millions out of poverty, notably in Asia, but other regions have experienced negative growth rates over several decades, especially in conflict areas in Africa and the middle-East. Because of your personal histories you can, I hope, realize how thin is the line that separates the haves from the have-nots and how important **luck** is in determining on which side of that line you started your life. With this in mind, you should be able to ask yourselves how to help others to cross that line.

When I talk to young adults I see a lot of dissatisfaction with the world. Some of them just moan. Others, the amphibians, have come up with their own dreams and created self-esteem from a bunch of ill-fitting and often contradictory bricks. In doing so they have realized that if such flotsam can make a better person, the bits and pieces that make our society can also be put together in a way that allows us to build a better world. This weekend you can put those skills into practice: learn to speak but practice your capacity to listen, question what is said but above all your own words, think carefully but dare to say what you hold dear. Because you may not be

the best swimmer nor the best runner, but if you can be at ease both in the water and on land you are ready to build some of the bridges that the world needs.