

# The Century Ahead - Peering into the Future

by Palden Jenkins

[www.palden.co.uk](http://www.palden.co.uk)

The 20th Century didn't really start until World War One broke out in 1914. The century was characterised by 'developed world' domination, the successor to 19th Century colonialism. We saw motor cars, planes, plastics, electronics, gizmos, radio, TV and film. There was a struggle between capitalism, fascism and socialism which fascism lost and capitalism eventually won – though it didn't look like this at first. We saw globalisation, transnational corporations, vast population growth, over-consumption by some and overwork by most. Engines, rotors, pipes, wires and transmitters went everywhere. Vast wars and crises arose, killing people in millions. Mega-cities spread like fungus.

All of these tendencies developed from the 1880s onwards, but it took until the Great War for people to see what was happening. The Great War represented an enormous failure to accept the future: aristocratic ruling classes strove to hold power in the face of a rising tide of socialism, populism, mass culture, democracy and the new upstarts, America and Russia. The old order lost. Its time was done. A new, industrialised, totalitarian world replaced it, driven by a *nomenklatura* of bosses, politicians, shareholders, executives and experts, all dressed in suits.

Why this lecture in recent history? Well, we're at it again. Some historians call the period 1914-1989 'the Short 20th Century', recognising that a new agenda was starting in the 1990s. One historian even prematurely named 1989 'the end of history', but he got it wrong. This was partially ideological and partially because, when standing on the edge of a threshold, it is difficult to visualise what comes next. Here we are, entering 2008 – in the Western dating system, at least – yet we haven't entered the 21st Century. *Really* entered it, we're still looking at life in past terms. If truth be known, we're scared to look squarely at the future. It's big.

We're aware something else is kicking in, and we all know most of the issues, but we haven't put them together into a Big Picture – what we could call a 21st Century Agenda. A century ago, we had a new Big Idea on the table, called socialism. But that was an ideology, conceived by a small number of individuals. Today, there are bazillions of ideas flying around, but the Big Picture hasn't crystallised. But it is now revealing itself, thanks mainly to pretty tough 'facts on the ground'. What the world is faced with today is not a Big Idea but a Big Dilemma.

Here we are, living out our lives, running a movie based in the past, as if rapid economic growth of the current kind had no consequences. The West is trying, at all costs, to maintain the *status quo* and keep its own best interests at the top of the world agenda. Enforced either by 'shock and awe', background manoeuvring or incentive, the rest of the world has tended thus far to fall into line, but this is disintegrating and we're entering new territory.

The idea, created by 'developed' nations, of a 'developing world' implies that development means following in the footsteps of 'developed' countries. Yes, buy our chainsaws, jeeps, tanks and burgers, and you too can be developed – and fat and unhappy, just like us! Few mention that, for one person to get rich, a hundred have to

get poor. Besides, the idea that everyone can get rich and 'developed' is a recipe for planetary disaster.

Besides, it's not the developing world – it's the Majority World. The former third world is now increasingly setting the agenda. After colonialism and client-status, having adopted many aspects of the West's provenance, something new is brewing. It's not just a matter of copying and adoption, but one of getting to grips with issues the West cannot face, and which to a large extent, the West set in motion. The West is terribly stuck in its ways and feeling insecure.

The core difference between the majority world and the developed world is one of motivation. For the majority world the agenda is, "Things just have to get better, and we're going to make it so, whatever it takes". For the developed world it is, "Things are fine as they are (with just a few problems), and change is welcome as long as nothing actually changes". The first motivates action and progress, and the second looks backward and leads nowhere. The West has lost the plot – it is vision-less. It had an opportunity to change fundamentally in the 1960s-70s, and missed it.

This isn't a simple transfer of power and wealth from one part of the world to another, or a re-balancing of global inequities. We stand at a juncture much bigger than this. Globalisation is digging deeper, and the Big Dilemma the world faces is global in extent. This changes sovereign states into interdependent world provinces, whether we like it or legislate for it, or not. The big issue is the international community, planetary ecosystems and climate, global intercultural relations, the living conditions of the world's people, and a host of other related issues we all know of by now.

Resolving our planetary dilemma isn't just a matter of tweaking, funding, regulating, developing and rearranging existing things, or even wind-farms and solar panels. It involves a completely new world-view anchored in the future. We need to visualise the far future and count back from there. Arguably, one hidden meaning of today's major events is that the future is asserting an increasing influence on the present. We're dealing with the consequences of the past, and the damage done to nature and humanity, but it concerns our future survival. If we don't face this, life everywhere will become ever more unpleasant and intolerable in coming decades. Everyone is involved, without exception – *especially* the rich.

This planetary situation is very complex, and each country has its own version of it, with its own versions of the internal tensions and crises it brings up. The nub of the matter is global and can be resolved only through effective international decisions, action and mobilisation. All nations now have a more dramatic need for change than they acknowledge. No nation wishes to change first, and all nations must do it together. This is at least talked about but still not done – the recent Bali conference on climate change was woefully inadequate in outcome when compared with the scale of the problem and the lateness of the day.

Economic growth and activity as we do it today is incompatible with eco-sustainability, human welfare and survival. This hasn't been accepted yet, but it's coming. There are no Big Ideas to which all the world can agree, to sort us out. Even the dominant superpower and creative leader of the last fifty years, America, is itself lost, foundering, floundering and devoid of truly valuable strategies. We're left with

two main possibilities: the international community, such as it is, and the world's people.

The international community is going through an anxious community-building process. This involves facing uncomfortable issues and dealing with new situations, while constrained by old institutions and mechanisms. Driven by necessity, the community-building process is approaching a critical point in which all nations must give up some of their independence. It's not just a matter of shouting at America and the West, or them shouting back. It's a matter of joining together to resolve differences and problems in utterly new ways. It requires entirely new thinking: not so much a new Big Idea as a new method for facing facts and resolving crises.

Scientists can crunch vast quantities of data to create climate models, but simple farmers in Uzbekistan and Bolivia understand a lot too. They see what is happening in some respects more clearly, especially when it washes away a village and kills a family. One of the world's big problems is that its governments and institutions have lost touch with real life quite significantly, and their legitimacy is in question. One of the big problems for ordinary people is that we are not practised in mass action without due leadership. But our leaderships are not really up to the task: when the USSR went through *perestroika*, the leaderships had created the problem and were part of it, not of the solution. Governments come to power to protect countries and their elites, pump economies and keep people's narrower aims satisfied, not to save the planet or give power to foreigners.

What is shaping up is an enormous getting-real process. Globally, in a hundred years, we need to have resolved the 21st Century's agenda points. We have to. What is this agenda? It is not an end in itself, but a means by which a new kind of planetary civilisation might come about. Sounds like sci-fi, this, but stay with it, for this is the way we are going. Here's the agenda, roughly speaking, as far as I can describe it.

- By the end of the century our societies need to be significantly happier, safer, friendlier, more supportive and inclusive.
- We need to have created ecologically sustainable societies which not only avoid harming and depleting nature, but also engage in its enhancement and the building up of the world's natural capital and resources.
- World ecosystems and climate need to achieve a new equilibrium under a proportioned human management which works on the basis of humans as guests, not owners.
- The world's cultures, social and ethnic groups need to appreciate and enhance their distinctions while acting on a basis of partnership and commonality – we're all in the same boat.
- The global economy needs to be sufficiently equitable and sustainable, regarding both human conditions and natural resources, to eliminate dire need, excesses of poverty and wealth and to give all people a fair chance.
- Our civilisation – our cities, technologies and life-means – needs much rebuilding,

to accommodate and reflect the other priorities outlined here.

- Governance and social decision-making systems need to reflect not vested interests but the general and planetary good.
- Country and city need to coexist without urban needs and priorities overwhelming country ways, since simpler, rural societies are the keepers of secrets and life-ways important to all of us.
- Population-growth and demographics need at least to have stabilised.
- An emotional clearing- and healing-process of historic hurts, social guilt, dissonance and degeneration needs to be in progress, addressing the spirits and psychology of society.
- A process of spiritual, creative and cultural health needs to pervade our societies anew.

This list gives an idea of what we're looking at. Before you say, "Well, fine, but I can't see it happening", just remember that, a century ago, computers, supermarkets and jumbo-jets weren't imaginable either. In those days, folk from Britain ruled India much of the Indian sub continent. Now, three generations of folk from the Indian sub continent have made Britain their home, most counting themselves as Brits and many serving in our great national institutions. Things change more than we can foresee. And necessity is the mother of invention.

Today we're faced with a Big One, and the above-stated objectives are no longer wishful thinking or ideological. They are simply the likely results of what we will have gone through during this century, by necessity, since our welfare and survival are at stake. This hits everyone, rich and poor alike, with levelling implications. There are sufficient wealth and resources in the world, but they are badly distributed, wasted, ill-utilised, exhausted and ruined.

At present, the critical factor seems to be climate change, bringing weather extremes, ecological and social changes. Other criticals hide behind this. The consequences and side-effects of our current way of life are enormous. Surmounting them is a bigger challenge than we prefer to acknowledge. It requires a social and economic mobilisation and quantum shift. In earlier times we have done this during wars. Yet such a mobilisation, this time, could render wars obsolete because, to win this battle, we need to work *with*, not against, each other. Besides, any victor in a 21st Century war is a loser anyway, because the problem is planetary.

In Britain, in 1940-42, our society and economy were transformed in just two years, from a capitalist to a command economy in which women and old people took over agriculture and production, children were shipped out of cities, men went abroad, everyone depended on each other, fairness of distribution of food and resources was paramount, people worked and played hard, and it worked. Today's Brits look back on this time as one of national breakthrough and social triumph. Precedents such as this exist for us to refer to. But it required a big national decision, made at the top and the bottom of society, to pull through together. There was resistance at first. But when

people saw the price of *not* doing it, things changed fast.

In our time, we approach a similar situation, but bigger. The price of not changing is overtaking the price of changing. It could be easier if we were faced with an alien invasion, because we're used to facing external threats. But this threat comes from inside, from *us*, and only we can address it, through a radical change of behaviour in all areas of life everywhere.

And this is a strange Gift of God. Our Big Dilemma forces changes we needed to make anyway. We have failed to do it through wisdom and choice, so we're now facing shock and awe of a kind that makes the American version look weak. Humans get activated and mobilised by crisis. We might have six billion mouths to feed, but we've got the same number of pairs of hands to do it with.

This is a taste of the 21st Century agenda. Our great-grandchildren will know the outcome, but the crunch period is in the next half-century. In a century from now, we could have a new, planet-wide civilisation of which none of us can conceive at present – though its principles are visible. To get there, we'll need to prioritise the future over the past. The gift lies in the fact that we have no alternative but to work together and to face things we have needed to face for a long time. In a manner of speaking, this is the achievement of a new kind of *umma* or human community, yet far beyond the confines of the Muslim world, and for entirely practical reasons. The biggest challenge in the 21st Century is not ecological: it is for everyone to become *friends* – and this way, we'll sort out the rest. That's a quantum shift.

-----

**Palden Jenkins is a geopolitical adviser, historian, editor and webmaster living in Glastonbury, England, and working on humanitarian and educational issues in the Middle East.**

[www.palden.co.uk](http://www.palden.co.uk)

Copyright 2007, Palden Jenkins. This material may be freely circulated and printed in single copies for personal or study use, in a spirit of fair play. Re-publication on websites or in print requires permission from the author.