

## **WHY INTERDEPENDENCE? (Understanding Interdependence Day)**

### **Benjamin R. Barber, Founder (July 14, 2010)**

**People often think interdependence is an aspiration. Wouldn't it be nice if we could all live together in peace? But in truth, interdependence is a fact – a brutal reality of our times. There is almost no challenge we face that is not a challenge across borders, a global challenge for all not just for some nations.** Think of the problems we face: global warming, whole earth health pandemics, trans-national terrorism, international markets in capital and labor, world-wide crime and drugs, a world-wide web linked to global digital technology, ubiquitous weapons of mass destruction – every one of these is a problem that know no borders. HIV doesn't carry a passport; terrorists don't stop for customs inspections; global corporations carry no national identity cards. Yet if our challenges are all interdependent, think now about the parochial ways in which we address them.

**The problems are global and beyond all borders, but the responses are national and sovereign and hemmed in by borders.** The challenges are 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges without frontiers; the solutions are 18<sup>th</sup> century sovereign state solutions that stop at territorial national borders. Can anyone wonder that no progress was made at the Copenhagen Climate Summit where 184 nations earnestly explained why they could not act together to address the planet's ecological survival?

**Interdependence raises a fundamental question for democracy too: from the founding of early modern nation-states, to quite recent times, democracy has been tethered to national communities and sovereign states** in ways that lend popular government its efficacy and legitimacy. Rooted in the social contract, and producing forms of sovereignty and rule-making that are popular, democracy has permitted peoples around the world to govern themselves – if not directly, then through representatives. Ever since the American Declaration of Independence, the formula for achieving liberty and security has been sovereign independence.

**Not anymore. The new interdependence changes all of this, so that to secure liberty and security today means not declaring independence but declaring interdependence.** At the end of the Second World War, the sovereign nations of Europe abandoned their long history of sovereign unilateralism and reciprocal hostility that were products of their independence, and instead sought ways to “pool” and “submerge” those individual sovereignties in the name of cooperation and common purpose. At the same time, global trade began to steal from national parliaments their capacity to govern financial and labor markets. Since then in Europe and beyond we have been living in a new world of interdependence. This is why we have written a new “Declaration of Interdependence.”

**If World War II taught Europe that sovereignty was a slim reed on which to hang survival, in the United States, the horrendous events of September 11, 2001 offered Americans the same lesson – a brutal tutorial in the new meaning of interdependence.** The old borders can't protect us. Enemies come from within and without. Yet America responded to 9/11 by looking for a nation to blame, acting unilaterally to punish other states. The lesson is hard to learn, but the crucial modern dilemma remains the fundamental asymmetry between our challenges and our remedies: the reality that though so many of our 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges are global, too many of our democratic remedies remain national and parochial, still wedded to 18<sup>th</sup> century institutions.

**As we see everyday in our real lives, crime, drugs, prostitution, runaway markets, public health perils, weapons of mass destruction, environmental deterioration, labor migration, terrorism and war are all *global* threats rooted in an unavoidable modern interdependence.** Yet democratic responses emanate from parochial states and often fail to significantly impact the problems. This is true for hegemonic “superpowers” like the United States as well as for other less powerful nations. So many of the problems arise from “non-state actors” – new technologies like the internet, old market institutions in a new global form like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and what we might call the post-modern “malevolent NGO,” which is really what al Qaeda is.

**The United States is unquestionably the most powerful nation on earth. At the same time it is less able to control its own destiny than, once upon a time, even small and weak nations were able to do.** As a consequence, at a time when democracy is more widespread than ever before, the problems faced by humankind are less susceptible than ever to democratic regulation and control. For democracy is trapped inside of states which can no longer control their fates. Nowhere is this impotence more evident than in the two leading crises of our time, the global economic recession and the crisis of climate change.

**The effort to re-regulate financial institutions and re-float the sinking real economy turns out to be beyond national governments,** national banks and sovereign funds. International institutions comprised by nation-states (like the IMF, World Bank or G-9) lack efficacy, because they ultimately rely on the sovereignty of their member states who all too often cannot agree on a common strategy. Nations face common problems but see themselves as having distinctive national interests. Nation-states that by habit continue to focus on their own interests, their sovereign rights and the anticipated costs that common actions may exact are poor candidates for bringing climate change or terrorism or global disease or trans-national markets under control. Nature no more recognizes national frontiers than science can engage in political compromise. Ecological crisis mandates ecological cooperation, but in the absence of interdependent democratic institutions such cooperation is impossible.

**This erosion of sovereign power has been made worse by the success of neo-liberal ideology,** which in the last forty years has meant marketization and privatization – the belief that consumers are more efficient at problem-solving than citizens, that private individuals pursuing their own private interests can somehow do more for the public good than democratic institutions created in the very name of the public good. Talked into privatization, the people have been talked out of their own power: if government is “part of the problem—not part of the solution,” then we are disempowered even within nations to act together. What hope is there for common action across borders?

**Capitalism is a remarkably productive form of economic organization,** and by far the most efficient and enduring model of economic relations. But capitalism does best in tandem with democracy: They need one another. As the market energizes individuals and personalizes freedom, while offering innovation and entrepreneurship, democratic government energizes the community and allows for public freedom, assuring equality and social justice. But when democracy and popular will crush market flexibility and innovation, liberty dies; just as when the market throws off democratic oversight, it becomes monopolistic, prone to destabilizing cycles, and indifferent to social justice.

**For these reasons, when the balance between democracy and the market is off kilter, and overblown neo-liberal and libertarian rhetoric is directed against “big government” and “welfare bureaucracy,” the victims has often been the ideals and practices of democracy itself.** For to argue that government cannot achieve public ends is to say that the people are incapable of governing themselves. This is collective self-disempowerment, which brings us full-circle to interdependence.

**At the very moment when globalization and interdependence are removing many of the most important public goods from sovereignty’s compass, the very idea of public goods is under assault *within* nation-states in ways that further cripple both citizens and parliaments.** So the idea of a “public option” is removed from the recently passed American health plan without a serious debate. Market thinking has now spread from the United States to Europe and Asia, and nations that promote the ideal of a social welfare state and of public goods are deemed wastrels. They are urged to dismantle their democratic institutions in favor of the market – even as the market fails catastrophically in the global financial industry and banking sector.

**Ironically, as cynicism about politics and distrust of government turns into cynicism about popular sovereignty and distrust of democracy itself,** the moment of democracy’s high point in terms of its spread coincides with its low point in terms of its reputation and efficacy. Democracy has never been so widespread, and never so little trusted or respected. In the first world, many young people do not even bother to vote and the word “politics” sometimes seems to have become a synonym for corruption; while in the developing world of emerging democracies we have seen many societies (e.g. Zimbabwe) moving backwards rather than forward. From time to time, a leader like Barack Obama or South Africa’s Zuma may inspire citizens, but important as it is leadership alone cannot rescue citizen democracy.

**The election of a new American President, Barack Obama, offered new hope, as often happens with new leadership.** For many Americans and others around the world, Obama is not only the first African-American president, but the first multicultural president, and a statesman promising fundamental changes in governance, civil society and trust. Calling on citizens to become engaged, and countries around the world to partner with the United States in facing up to global challenges, President Obama brought hope to dark times, and signaled a new American awareness of interdependence as the foundational reality for both domestic and foreign affairs (he uses the term in foreign policy addresses like the one in Cairo).

**Yet leadership reflects citizenship,** and some of the glow is off the Obama presidency. He inherited huge problems, and his civility agenda of outreach to the other side has sometimes obstructed his change agenda, which requires doing battle with the other side. Even in the United States, citizens again are polarized, resentful and despairing of significant political change. President Obama won the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize, but Obama’s America is still caught up in questions of walls and frontiers and still deeply ambivalent about the interdependent world it does not always want to acknowledge.

**This does not mean the issue of interdependence in any way partisan.** There are Republicans in the U.S. and Tories in England and Christian Democrats in Europe who strive to tear down walls, and Democrats, and Labourites and Social Democrats who strive to keep them up. Parochialism can be found on right and left, and in the center. The struggle for interdependence is truly trans-partisan.

**Europe too offers some reasons for hope. As a model of democratic pooled sovereignty and an example of virulent nationalisms overcome, it promises at least some of what interdependence can achieve.** Yet it too suffers from a “democratic deficit,” and critics complain that it has been more successful as an economic market entity (a currency union) than as a political or civic community (witness the fate of its would-be new constitution!). Its ideal of the citizen has been displaced by the ideal of the consumer – shopping as a surrogate for politics, and private consumer choice replacing public decision-making. Moreover, premature expansion has put even the currency zone at risk, with the global recession pushing some members of the EU to the edge of a fiscal precipice (Greece, for example) and putting EU members like Germany and France that may have to participate in a bailout at risk themselves.

**Today’s deeply depressed market economy exacerbates these issues** and is an invitation to purveyors of the politics of fear and protectionism in Europe, the United States and elsewhere, turning people against immigration, multiculturalism and the hopeful politics of an open an un-bordered society. Such ideals are not always easy to realize. It sometimes seems simpler to respond to the promise of interdependence with a xenophobic politics of nationalist resentment that compounds economic difficulties and deploys ideologies of blame and exclusion. Reactionary rage is so much easier to sustain than hope.

**These challenges to democracy require responses from citizens and their representatives** that shore up the courage of politicians willing to look outward and tell the truth about the limits of sovereignty and the necessity of cooperation. It is not enough for citizens to blame the leaders they elect for failing them. The media too, although they share blame for political polarization and fear, will insist they only give the public “what it wants.” So it is finally public consciousness that must be changed. In the end, the stamina of democracy is measured by its citizens not its leaders. Interdependence must become their responsibility

**The CivWorld Interdependence Network, which is also an Interdependence Movement** responds to these challenges with an array of democratic activities and programs aimed at broadening and deepening global understanding of the challenges of “interdependence” in popular consciousness, in the media and in political and civic leaders. The aim is to create a climate in which new democratic institutions are possible – democracy across borders and citizenship without borders. Yet taking the necessary steps is extraordinarily difficult and fraught with peril.

**We believe the concept and philosophy of interdependence offers a starting place for fresh thinking about a new global civic politics.** The Interdependence Movement aspires to foster programs and projects that impact policy and elect representative unafraid of the challenges of interdependence. The Interdependence Network hopes to spread the gospel of citizens without borders and raise consciousness of interdependence among young people in schools and workplaces around the world.

**A host of new programs are in development,** including an “Interdependence Day” in a global city, the “Declaration of Interdependence” that rewrites liberty’s formula in the language of interdependence, an interactive website that encourages active engagement, an international arts committee focused on interdependent culture, youth and civic education programs that bring interdependence to future generations, and research and scholarly seminars and meetings examining issues of global democratic governance (including the Paradigm Paper, the Global Governance Seminar and scholarly exchanges around Dēmos International Fellowships). These programs offer a way forward for politicians and citizens alike in overcoming the old challenges of nationalism and the ancient politics of fear as they meet the new

challenges of global economic injustice, ecological catastrophe and fiscal meltdown. Their success will be evidenced in the appearance of a new kind of citizens, an “interdependent.”

**An “Interdependent” will be ready to:**

- **Acknowledge the brute facts of interdependence** and globalization and seek approaches to democracy that are appropriate to collaboration. In a world where the problems are global, democrats must find a way either to globalize democracy or democratic globalization, or they are likely to find themselves facing global anarchy.
- **Understand that trust is a product of social capital and civic engagement**, and that the failure of trust and of confidence that afflicts capitalism in this period of meltdown will only be remedied by a social trust capitalism cannot produce and sometimes undermines. Build social trust and social capital through civic and cultural means and democracy can grow across borders.
- **Recognize that representative government wins its victory over scale and mass society at the price of civic engagement and responsibility.** The so-called iron law of oligarchy says that representatives will quickly lose touch with their electors and change into elites more wedded to their own culture of power than to the public good. When it is not just citizens who don't trust politicians, but politicians who don't trust citizens, democracy is at risk. Ultimately, democracy works bottom up, not top down, with elections and constitutions depending for their viability on civil society, engaged citizens and a robust system of liberal, civic and experiential education.
- **Restore the balance between free markets and democratic institutions.** Democracy and capitalism work best in tandem, when competition, entrepreneurship and inventiveness are assured by markets but justice, law and stability are guaranteed by democratic regulation and oversight. There have been times when statist and bureaucratic ambitions have stultified markets and encroached on private liberty. But in our time, market fundamentalism has stultified democracy and encroached on public liberty. The balance needs to be reset aright within nations, before those nations will be able to pursue transnational forms of democracy where the balance will have to be calibrated globally.
- **Strengthen civic education in the setting of interdependence**, where citizenship is understood to require both local participation and global responsibility – where citizenship is understood as both a local reality and a global necessity. “Glocality” is a useful neologism that captures the needs of citizens whose participation remains vibrantly local but whose responsibilities must also be global.
- **Reinforce the idea that responsibilities are twins of rights**, so that citizens' obligations start but do not end with voting. For democracy is measured less by the achievements of the leadership than the willingness of the citizenry to accept responsibility for governance. And a robust sense of rights requires a robust sense of responsibilities.
- **Utilize the new digital technologies and the world-wide-web as tools of civic engagement and civic education across borders.** Democracy is founded on effective communication, and while the world is more disparate and complex than ever, we have new tools that until now have been used primarily for commerce, but which cry out to be used for civic information and

democratic engagement. Global citizens need global modes of communication: the internet beckons.

- **Build on the cross-border and transnational civic infrastructure we already have established** in NGOs, foundations, multinational companies, universities, social movements to begin to develop a global democratic infrastructure. Democracy without borders means citizens without borders, and citizens without borders are possible only when there is civil society without borders. Global civil society can be grown from the civic resources already present within societies. Social capital and social trust are produced by engaged citizens: when social capital is globalized, transnational democracy becomes possible.
- **Look to international organizations (the U.N. system) and the International Financial Institutions (WTO, IMF, World Bank) as potential instruments of democratic globalization.** At present, these institutions tend to represent the sovereign nations that created them rather than the international ideals in whose name they were established. But they are controlled by democracies, and can be put to democratic purposes if their constituent members choose to do so. The Security Council is more important than the Secretary-General's office only because its members choose to treat it that way. The WTO serves financial and banking interests rather than the interests in social justice of the countries where the bankers operate only because their members prefer it that way.
- **Focus on the Arts as an inherently cosmopolitan and interdependent genre** capable of generating the creativity and imagination active interdependence demands, and hence an institutional starting place for efforts at animating and organizing interdependence in the civic, political and cultural arenas. Put the arts and culture at the very center of the celebration of interdependence, and use it as a model for others seeking economic, political and civic interdependence.

As always, the fate of democracy depends not on the size of the challenges facing it, but the size of the political will deployed to take on the problems. In other words, as always, it depends on us. Interdependence is, like it or not, our destiny. Knowing it cannot be avoided, we need to embrace it and make it our own – constructive, affirmative, democratic. This perfectly describes the mission of the Interdependence Network and the Civic Movement it inspires.