

Politics of the Future

Article by **Beatrice White**

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Long-term thinking is often absent from electoral cycles and policy processes designed to respond to short-term concerns. To change this, some states are endowing future generations with formal representation and legal rights. Can commitments to future citizens enhance wellbeing and representation in the present?

The major crises we have faced in recent years – the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, extreme weather events caused by climate change – all share a common aspect: a lack of preparedness on behalf of policymakers gravely undermined the effectiveness of the response. Many drew the same lesson from these divergent experiences: governments must strengthen their capacities to apprehend risks, anticipate challenges that lie ahead, and take measures in the present that will avoid or lessen the impact of future crises.

Although we cannot predict the future, we have never had more data and expertise to inform how we confront the problems we face. Responding to emergencies as they arise, rather than allocating greater resources and attention to identifying warning signs and developing prospective future scenarios, is therefore a political choice. The former is the approach that most often prevails today. The response of EU lawmakers to the recent farmers’ protests that took place across Europe was to backtrack on environmental commitments in a bid to quell the agitation rapidly.

Why is it proving so difficult to break out of this crisis mode? The diagnosis is now well known: our politics suffers from a lack of joined-up thinking; it is linear and often patchwork. Policymakers lack incentives to think beyond short-term electoral cycles given the absence of accountability mechanisms that extend beyond a few years. This has led to a growing realisation of the need for mechanisms to legally mandate policymakers to take into consideration the interests of future citizens.

A shift in this direction is already underway. Regard for future generations is implicit in concepts such as sustainable development and the precautionary principle that are now well established in policymaking. No longer merely the stuff of science fiction or symbolic declarations from international bodies like the UN, initiatives to enshrine formal rights and protections for future generations are growing around Europe and beyond.

What is behind the shift?

Legal researchers Renan Araújo and Leonie Koessler have explored the rise in constitutional provisions relating to future generations in recent decades. Whereas up until the 1960s, fewer than 10 national constitutions explicitly referenced future generations, as of 2021, 41 per cent (81 out of 196) did so. They explain that, although such provisions have been present in written constitutions since 1789, in the past, future generations were primarily referenced in symbolic terms or through abstract provisions. Over the past half-century, there has been a notable shift towards assigning constitutional rights and duties to future generations in different contexts, such as the environment and the economy. They identify this trend as part of a broader “linguistic and substantive turn” whereby constitutional language has

increasingly come to resemble that of international human rights treaties.

The countries that have introduced constitutional protections for future generations are spread throughout the world. In Europe, it is a mixed picture: France, Germany, and Portugal are among the countries that have taken this step, while other countries have not included these protections in their fundamental charters (“large-C constitutions”) but rather in their “small-c constitutions” – the broader body of constitutional rules that derives from sources such as judicial decisions, treaties, conventions, etc. The Urgenda case in the Netherlands, in which a citizens’ group brought and won a historic case against the government regarding its legal duty to prevent climate change, is a key example. This case, and many others like it, emerged from citizen-led campaigns to apply pressure on policymakers to honour their climate commitments.

Policymakers lack incentives to think beyond short-term electoral cycles.

Growing ecological consciousness among the general public and campaigning by civil society and youth movements have been instrumental in pushing for more long-term thinking in politics. Yet the drive also stems from concerns in areas such as technology, demographics, health, and the economy. As a result, there has been a proliferation of structures (academic bodies, research institutes, etc.) dedicated to understanding these risks. It was the pandemic, for instance, that provided the impetus for the Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill, introduced to the UK Parliament by Conservative MP Simon Fell.¹ The bill sought to mandate preventative spending in a range of areas, and was underpinned by primarily economic arguments. Philosopher William MacAskill, meanwhile, has highlighted the risks we face relating to technological development, including a loss of control, either to a small number of powerful corporations or to technology itself.

Beyond the human

Ideas of morality and justice are also a basis for long-term political thinking. Strong longtermism holds that the lives of future generations are inherently as valuable as those of people alive today. It follows the same logic that upholds our social contract and underpins ideas of universal human rights – that the lives of strangers are as valuable as those of our own families and immediate communities. MacAskill argues that expanding the franchise to represent future generations requires a cultural shift, in the same way as when women were given the vote.² This cultural shift seems to be underway, evidenced by the spread of currents of thought such as longtermism, effective altruism, and degrowth, and the rise of concepts such as the wellbeing economy and intergenerational justice in the political debate.

Philosopher Roman Krznaric and others have framed the campaign for greater long-term thinking as a global movement for “decolonising the future”.³ He argues that wealthy countries treat the future as a distant colonial territory where they can dump ecological and technological risk with no regard for its inhabitants. This perspective views safeguarding the future of generations to come as indissociable from protecting the environment. For this reason, the movement to formally recognise the rights of future generations is often viewed as intertwined with the movement to grant legal rights to nature and non-human beings.

These movements have also been gaining ground in recent years. Countries such as Austria, Brazil, Egypt, Germany, India, Luxembourg, Slovenia, and Switzerland have established constitutional

provisions directly protecting the interests of animals. The EU recognises animal sentience explicitly in several parts of its legislation, notably in Article 13 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).

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In 2008, Ecuador became the first country in the world to recognise the Rights of Nature in its constitution. In New Zealand and India, rivers were granted legal personhood in 2017. Around the world, many of the struggles to grant legal rights to natural entities have been led by indigenous communities or regional and local structures. These campaigns do not seek to endow natural entities with rights for their own sake, but rather to avert damage and destruction that poses an existential threat to the survival and livelihoods of human communities.

How to give representation and a political voice to animals, nature, and citizens yet to be born raises important questions for democracy. Moving beyond symbolic recognition to actions with tangible consequences will of course affect the current population. Will governments be faced with trade-offs that require them to choose between maximising social welfare in the present and protecting the future, as some fear? Or, far from being a zero-sum game, can commitments to future generations enhance the wellbeing of the current population?

Looking at how initiatives to protect future generations have affected policymaking and brought about material consequences provides useful insight into how these dilemmas play out in different contexts.

Hungary: from the vanguard to the sidelines

In Hungary, a promising start failed to translate into a mechanism that can meaningfully hold policymakers to account. In 2007, the Hungarian parliament approved the creation of an Ombudsman for Future Generations, to be elected by the parliament, with a mandate to safeguard the right to a healthy environment. Sándor Fülöp, who occupied the post between 2008 and 2012, is credited with several achievements, including preventing the privatisation of Hungarian public water utilities and halting plans for the development of a strawfired power plant in the Tokaj region, a valuable natural heritage site.

By establishing a direct link between the environment, the interests of future generations, and basic constitutional rights such as the right to a healthy environment and physical and mental health, Hungary's constitution can be viewed as pioneering in this area. However, in 2012, the position was downgraded to Deputy Ombudsperson, and subsequent reforms implemented by Viktor Orbán's conservative government have led to a severe weakening of the institutional framework protecting future generations.

Wales: making a difference

In 2015, the devolved government of Wales adopted the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, which commits national and local government, along with local health boards and other specified public bodies, to pursuing seven wellbeing goals. These goals relate to aspects such as health, equality, resilience, culture, and global responsibility. The act was accompanied by the appointment of a Future

Generations Commissioner, tasked with ensuring accountability and oversight.

Speaking in Brussels in early 2024, Sophie Howe, who occupied the position between 2016 and 2023, explained how the Act was the result of a process of national dialogue in Wales. This process invited citizens to “optimistically set goals” and “co-create a vision and solutions”. She added that it was essential to go beyond vague principles, to set goals concerning tangible metrics such as life expectancy, and to take meaningful action to reach them.

Can commitments to future generations enhance the wellbeing of the current population?

Beyond a merely symbolic step, the Act has had concrete impacts. In 2019, for instance, the Welsh government decided to scrap plans to build a motorway in the Newport area. Explaining the reasoning behind the decision, the first minister said that the environmental impact of the proposal made it incompatible with the Act.

Elsewhere in Europe

The Urgenda case in the Netherlands is not the only incidence of a state being challenged to uphold its commitments to future generations. Article 20a of Germany’s constitution commits the state to protecting the “natural foundations of life” as part of its “responsibility toward future generations.” The article had little impact until 2021, when a landmark verdict ruled parts of the Federal Climate Change Act incompatible with fundamental rights for failing to set sufficient provisions for emission cuts beyond 2030, thereby violating the constitutional freedoms of future generations. With its ruling, the Constitutional Court effectively extended the right to life and health to future generations, setting a significant precedent.

Other notable examples in Europe include Finland’s Committee for the Future, established in 1993 as a parliamentary body to conduct research on the social effects of technological development. In Portugal, civil society actors collaborated with policymakers to establish a “Framework for Intergenerational Fairness” – a practical tool to evaluate public policies. In 2023, a citizens’ initiative led to the parliament of Spain’s Balearic Islands passing a law on the wellbeing of present and future generations.

The EU’s missed opportunities

Currently, the EU does not have explicit provisions in its treaties that would compel it to protect the interests of future generations. And while it has developed long-term strategies such as the European Green Deal, these do not look beyond 2050. Lawyer and founder of The Good Lobby Alberto Alemanno argues that the EU’s position gives it a particular responsibility in this regard, and that the European project, by the nature of its creation, is fundamentally a long-term response to prevent the recurrence of conflict. In addition, argues Alemanno, the EU is uniquely situated to take a long view of political questions in a way that national parliaments cannot and could therefore play a significant role to foster more long-term thinking.

The Good Lobby is among a number of European civil society organisations that united to launch the Future Generations Initiative in February 2024. The initiative identifies a number of existing building blocks in primary EU legislation that could serve as the basis for more formalised protections for future generations. For example, Article 3(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) introduces the concept of

solidarity between generations, complemented by the prohibition of discrimination based on age.

In recent years, EU leaders have emphasised the need to strengthen its “culture of preparedness and evidence-based anticipatory policy-making”. To this end, Maroš Šefčovič was nominated as the first EU Commissioner in charge of “strategic foresight” in 2019. Since 2021, Šefčovič has also overseen the launch of the EU-wide Foresight Network and convened meetings of “Ministers for the Future”. While promising, these moves have been criticised for their technocratic language and approach and for failing to make the EU’s obligations to future generations sufficiently explicit and binding.

Expanding our understanding of the political community – both in space and time – remains an ongoing process.

Civil society organisations have put forward proposals to tackle these weaknesses. The ZOE Institute for Future-fit Economies calls for a Commissioner or Executive Vice-President for Future Generations, who would be mandated to “enshrine intergenerational thinking horizontally across policy areas”.⁴ The Future Generations Initiative echoes this and also calls for an “inter-institutional Declaration signed by the three European institutions specifically identifying the rights of Future Generations”.

Alberto Alemanno sets out additional recommendations, including a European ombudsperson for future generations, the extension of the temporal dimension of the EU’s impact assessments to take future generations into account, and the establishment of a European Parliament intergroup on future generations. Meanwhile, Sophie Howe has suggested capacity-building and support to train civil servants and leaders to make intergenerationally fair decisions and the launch of an ambitious dialogue focusing on the future.

Democratic renewal

Expanding our understanding of the political community – both in space and time – and shaping fair modes of representation remains an ongoing process. While this presents democratic dilemmas, it also provides opportunities to reflect on how our political processes and institutions can be strengthened and transformed. Thinkers such as Dominique Bourg and Pierre Rosanvallon have connected efforts to represent future generations with deeper democratic renewal, setting out proposals to revitalise decision-making while adopting a longer-term perspective.

In this process of reflection, we can draw inspiration from around the globe. Indeed, far from being a novel or Western phenomenon, the concept of protecting the future of those yet to be born has long been present in various forms throughout the world and has informed processes of governing and decision-making at different levels. For example, a central principle informing decision-making for the nations of the Haudenosaunee is the Seventh Generation Principle, which holds that the decisions we make today should result in a sustainable world seven generations into the Europe-wide citizen future. A further example is the Future Design movement in Japan, a model of participatory decision-making to overcome short-term thinking, drawing on traditional culture.

For Sophie Howe, governments need to engage citizens in this process of setting a long-term vision. This collective projection into the future, she argues, can also help reconnect citizens to their values, priorities, and hopes by encouraging them to think not only of how the immediate material needs of

future generations can be assured, but also about what a life well-lived might mean for them.



Beatrice White is managing editor of the *LSE British Politics and Policy* blog. She was previously deputy editor of the *Green European Journal*.

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