

Multilateralism and global challenges: “The work of the OECD is vital”

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challenges

[...] The French Senate and the French nation, in all their political bodies, are proud to host the OECD in Paris. The presence of a multilateral organisation as eminent as yours is an asset for Paris and for France, as well as a showcase for the French language, which is an official working language of your organisation. [...]

If we are here today it is not by chance.

Yesterday we commemorated the centenary of the Armistice of 11 November 1918. Many of your countries were represented. Your Secretary-General was present under the Arc de Triomphe. I am ever mindful of the tremendous upheavals wrought by the Great War, the first conflict to be called a World War, on the populations of most of your countries, on societies and mindsets, and also on geographical boundaries, especially in Europe.

Because the liberation of peoples went together with the emergence of the nation state. That is something we must never forget, before we start demonising it. [...]

In the aftermath of the First World War, Marcel Proust quoted an old proverb when he wrote that “Peace nourishes, unrest consumes”.

Peace: this is the watchword of all those who believe in the virtues of multilateralism.

[...] Multilateralism is akin to democracy: it reins in the power wielded by the mighty. Just like bicameralism at the national level, that is to say a parliamentary system in which there are two chambers—a system to which we are most attached in France—multilateralism is a form of counterweight that serves to stabilise the international environment.

By contrast, what is bilateralism? It is often another name for the imposition of the will of the mighty on the weaker. Trade negotiations provide ample examples of this.

Multilateralism is currently under threat. And professing faith in multilateralism while loudly singing its praises is not enough to keep those threats at bay.

Multilateralism is under threat from certain states, which waver between protectionist withdrawal, aggressive nationalism and hegemonic aims harking back to imperialistic ambitions. But it is also being poisoned by parallel institutions set up by this or that power which, under a cloak of co-operation, intends simply to impose its will or restore a past empire. It is being weakened by the proliferation of ad hoc fora and meetings without any particular mandate recognised by the international community.

A flimsy kind of multilateralism, built on empty words and producing uncertain results, is tending to displace structured multilateralism based on dialogue between States and capable of adopting binding decisions and standards.

Let us state it clearly: there can be no effective multilateralism unless based on international organisations that bring states together.

This is why the work that you do at the OECD is so vital. In your reports, your surveys, you reveal the extent of the progress that can be achieved through a co-operative approach within the multilateral system: in the last sixty years, almost since the organisation was created, it has led to a significant improvement in general living standards, thanks to the opening of markets and, until today, to the banishing of the spectre of trade wars, a massive reduction in extreme poverty, and improvement in health reflected by rising life expectancies and the reduction in infant mortality.

Multilateralism delivers, especially when faced with supra-national challenges.

The OECD stands for structured, effective multilateralism, [...] the kind that we need to strengthen. The kind of multilateralism that can rouse and rally states to the standards set by your organisation, even beyond its circle of membership. It is a wonderfully powerful tool. [...]

Address of the president of the French Senate, Gérard Larcher, at the meeting with the representatives of the OECD member countries and the OECD secretary-general, 12 November 2018 (originally in French, French Senate translation, OECD Observer edits).