Since December 2018, there has been many actions surrounding the climate in Brussels, most remarkably a sequence of Thursday strikes and demonstrations by secondary school pupils. Were you surprised?

I was amazed. With an average of three demonstrations a day, Brussels is used to public actions for a wide variety of causes. But I have no recollection of noteworthy demonstrations by teenagers, let alone on such a massive scale, week after week, and preceding university students rather than copying them. We should expect more of them in the future. The spreading of the internet and social media has made it dramatically easier and cheaper for young people to coordinate and mobilise.

In the case of many demonstrations, the underlying reasoning is simple enough. People want to protect their own material situation or reduce hardship for others, and therefore demand, for example, that the government raise wages, lower student fees or regularise migrants. But in the case of climate change, the conclusion that urgent action is needed requires a far more complex argument. Does this not make such large-scale mobilization astonishing?

There is something here that I also find puzzling. One remarkable feature of the climate movement is that it illustrates a formidable trust in the scientific community. What we can know about climate change and its negative consequences through our own empirical observation amounts to very little.

Yes, we have had, here in Brussels, an exceptionally mild February. Not exactly alarming or unpleasant. Why is it then that we worry so much that we take to the streets? Nothing but trust. The same sort of trust that explains why we now all share, contrary to the overwhelming majority of our ancestors, the strongly counter-intuitive belief that it is the earth that revolves around the sun, and not the sun that “rises” in the morning and “sets” in the evening.

Similarly, climate change and its irreversible consequences are not facts that we can observe, let alone predict, by ourselves. We believe them to be facts because we trust some people who

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trust other people who trust other people etc... who trust a relatively small number of researchers who made relevant observations, calculations and inferences. Scientists often complain that they are not listened to or that they are powerless against the spreading of fake news. This despondent view must at least be strongly qualified in view of the spectacular impact on mass mobilization of sophisticated climatological arguments.

The climate problem is a global problem. Belgium is a small country that hosts hardly more than 0.1% of the world population and can therefore do only very little to solve that problem. Moreover, it does not feature among the places in the world where the most damaging effects of climate change are felt or expected. Does this not make the current mobilization even more surprising?

It does. This is a typical illustration of the so-called “paradox of collective action”, the mechanism through which rational behaviour at the local level generates irrationality, indeed sometimes catastrophic irrationality, at the global level.

Very roughly, the paradox can be spelt out as follows: if you represent only 0.1% of the total, whether or not you do your share of what needs doing, it won’t make a noticeable difference.
Consequently, if the others do their job, the problem will be solved even if you do nothing. And if the others don’t do their job, the problem will not be solved even if you do yours.

In either case, therefore, it is in your self-interest to spare yourself the cost of doing your share. And if everyone is guided by the same reasoning, the problem will not be solved: in this case, climate change will continue and produce irreversible effects.

The sheer presence of tens of thousands of demonstrators in the streets of Brussels suggests that this is not quite what is happening. But it is puzzling. When we demonstrate, what we are asking for is that our government should take measures whose cost will be paid entirely by us, the 0.1% — and whose benefits will overwhelmingly accrue to others than ourselves — the 99.9%.

Why are there nonetheless crowds of demonstrators? Perhaps because many of them are not aware of the full cost to them of the set of measures they are asking for — higher costs for heating, driving and flying, taxation for public investments, etc. Some of them may also expect to be spared much of that cost because of their personal lifestyles.

Above all, in this occurrence of the paradox as in many others, the local action is calling for global action and for similar local action elsewhere. It is no accident that the Belgian protest was largely triggered by the Belgian government’s pathetic contribution to the international COP24 conference in Katovice in December 2018.

And the fact that the banners were mostly in English is no accident either. For national demonstrations taking place in Brussels, English has the advantage of neutrality between Dutch and French and of having become the most convenient medium of communications among young Belgians with different mother tongues. But the banners of the climate demonstration that took place in March 2019 in the Walloon university town of Louvain-la-Neuve were also in English. The choice of the global lingua franca at a local event signals that it is the whole world one is inviting to join in.

Is there not an even greater paradox? Not only do most of the beneficiaries of the painful measures to be taken here and now live elsewhere. The bulk of them are not yet born.

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That is true, and it also helps explain why governments find it so difficult to adopt such measures. Even the best electoral democracy in the world is a dictatorship of the present generation. Of course some of the people currently living will bear more of the consequences of inaction and procrastination, namely those who, being younger, have a longer life expectancy and also, because of their age, do not have the right to vote.

It is therefore understandable that young people — and indeed, quite remarkably, young girls, who can expect to live a few years longer than boys of the same age — should have been at the forefront of the demonstrations. No doubt, part of the indignation that fuelled their protest stems from the feeling that the generation currently in power is selfishly exhausting, at a mad pace, scarce fossil resources accumulated over millions of years and damaging our atmosphere in an irreversible way.

By highlighting this blatant injustices at their expense, schoolchildren are shedding light on the broader injustice perpetrated against all future generations of human beings. Older generations are not insensitive to this call for intergenerational justice. Witness the impressive and quite moving militancy in many countries, including Belgium, of “grandparent climate action groups”.
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Can’t we expect all this climate activism to recede soon, and political business as usual to resume, especially as the adoption of unavoidably painful concrete measures is likely to trigger yellow-jacket-like reactions?

I do believe that one needs to pay attention to the legitimate concerns of those who are most directly hit by the measures that need to be taken, but also that the interests of young and future generations need to be better protected than by the threat of strikes by school-children.

One can think of various institutional mechanisms that might lengthen the time horizon of our democracies. For this purpose, some propose to reduce the age of the median voter — which must now be approaching 55 or 60 in some countries — for example, by lowering the minimum voting age or by giving a proxy vote to parents for each of their minor children.

Others believe it would be more effective to constrain what the electorate can do at the expense of future generations, for example by enshrining a clause that is neither too vague nor too specific in national constitutions or in international treaties.

But our best hope probably lies in making representative democracies less subject to the self-interest of the present electorates by involving them in a deliberative process that is sensitive to the interests of the unrepresented, whether too young, foreign or not yet born. For example, in my recent book Belgium. Une utopie pour notre temps, I propose that Belgium’s Senate should henceforth be composed of randomly selected citizens tasked by the elected Chamber with the job of making proposals on specific themes of special importance for the longer term.

Not being tied by party lines or obsessed by the next elections, such deliberative assemblies, even if not authorised to take the final decision, should be able to make democratic decision-making less blind to the demands of intergenerational justice. For these various mechanisms to be created and do their job, however, many more teenagers will need to make their voices heard in the streets of Brussels and all over the world.