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## CURMUDGEON'S COMMENTARY

### A STATE OF FLUX

Alexis de Tocqueville, an 19th - century French political philosopher and historian, was of the view that "In every democracy, the people get the government they deserve". What does that tell us, I wonder, about the current enormous political and economic upheavals which we are now having to endure? Having spent my youth in Africa I am intensely aware of how quickly the flower of democracy can wilt and constitutions crumble. It does seem to herald a return to the beginning of the last century, to a time when great powers collided with one another, vying for dominance - either political or economic, or both. Today the contest is mainly between America, China and to a lesser extent, Russia. The difference between them, however, goes far beyond just language, with America seen as the flagship of Western values for the last 80 years whereas both China and Russia continue along the road of authoritarian powers.

But it is Western values that have changed, in some cases radically, since the Second World War, and it is America that has made the key changes that matter, fracturing relationships along the way, even with allies, and often reminding one of Henry Kissinger's apparent view that whilst it may be dangerous to be America's enemy, to be America's friend is fatal. Kissinger was a German-born American political scientist and former U.S. Secretary of State, and therefore thoroughly marinated in American politics. It is for the reader to decide whether the view has resonance.

But what is certain is that this change of course, mainly by America, has clear signs of profound and distinct global consequences equal to the impact that the crypto currency industry and Artificial Intelligence will have on global economies and for which, in both cases, the road ahead is hazardous; however, whilst the latter is useful, always understanding that it is a good servant but a poor master, it is the crypto currency that has the potential of creating financial chaos -especially if it is not properly regulated (seemingly more unlikely as regulatory controls in general are increasingly being weakened). Ashley Alder, the veteran regulator who chairs the United Kingdom's Financial Conduct Authority, says that there seems to be "successive cycles of regulatory tightening - usually in response to a financial crisis which were then followed by periods of relaxation as memories fade and economic priorities change... until the next crisis".

### DELUSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

As I often do, especially when considering human frailties, I am drawn to memories of the 17th-century's Tulip Mania in Holland and the following century's Mississippi and South Sea bubbles. Although it appears to be more fashionable to bury heads in the sand, rather



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than in books, especially historical tomes, I would recommend (for the uninitiated) Charles Mackay's 1841 book, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* because its relevance today goes beyond crypto. He writes, "Is it a dull or uninformative picture to see a whole people shaking suddenly off the trammels of reason, and running wild after a golden vision, refusing obstinately to believe that it is not real, like a deluded hind running wild after an *ignis fatuus* [misleading illusion], they are plunged into a quagmire?" What was fact 185 years ago remains so now, albeit delivered in antiquated English.

My New Year resolutions were overshadowed by New Year Conclusions after a tempestuous 2025, with ruptures in geopolitics, regional conflict, economic earthquakes, and shifting alliances. There is a parallel with Italy in the 16th century, at that time a collection of powerful city-states with intense political rivalry and struggles for regional dominance. In 2026 not just great powers, but middle powers are doing the same with a new world framework coming into focus. The corollary to this is the rise of nationalism and populism in the West with characters who seem to be from the pages of *The Prince*, a 16th-century work by Niccolò Machiavelli about Italy's city-state intrigues, and which proffers centuries-old advice on acquiring and maintaining power, by fair means or foul, using cunning, force, and if necessary, ruthlessness. The importance of a leader choosing his close advisers wisely is emphasised. People should be reading it in the current febrile climate of realpolitik.

Reading Hannah Arendt would not go amiss either. She was the German political philosopher who fled the Nazis in 1941 and who, in her book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, said that "Totalitarianism in power invariably replaces all first-rate talents, regardless of their sympathies, with those crack-pots and fools whose lack of intelligence and creativity is still the best guarantee of their loyalty". One of America's Founding Fathers, Alexander Hamilton, born in the West Indies and whose father was Scottish, was of a similar view (Federalist No. 76, 1st April, 1788) when he cautioned any president of the folly of nominating people "who had no other merit than... being in some way or other personally allied to him, or of possessing the necessary insignificance and pliancy to render them the obsequious instruments of his pleasure." Machiavelli would have readily agreed.

## THE BOY FROM BULAWAYO

What remains important is the significance of culture which has taken a back seat in recent times and which contributed considerably to the present woes. I acknowledge that I am certainly no Ferdinand Magellan, the Portuguese explorer who circumnavigated the globe, but I have lived in 5 distinctly different cultures and my experiences reinforce the



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Rudyard Kipling's quote from his poem, The English Flag, which asks, "And what should they know who only England know?". This question can be asked of anyone who has never travelled abroad and who can be blinkered by insularity and parochialism. On the other hand, whether you travel beyond your borders or not, it is important to listen to opposing views and not just follow those which reflect your own. The dangers of groupthink are real.

Where do we go from here? I would perhaps invoke the words from the 1939 British propaganda poster that appeared at the beginning of the Second World War: Keep Calm and Carry On. 87 years on, it would still seem to be good advice. This boy from Bulawayo certainly found it to be so during the troubled times he lived through in the former British colony of Rhodesia.

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