

We're living at a point of instability

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It's always curious when two writers you like pick a common theme at very similar moments. Larry Elliott and Fintan O'Toole have done so this week. Both have chosen to comment on the consequential failures of globalisation.

Note that I do not say that they suggest that globalisation has failed. As [Larry Elliott has it](#):

The financial crisis exposed the weaknesses of a system that was able to operate globally without adequate controls and effective supervision. The resulting slump was deep and the recovery has been long, painful and incomplete. Inevitably, countries have become more cautious.

That trend has been amplified because globalisation's fruits have been enjoyed primarily — though not exclusively — by owners of capital and the better off. Consumers have gained from lower prices, but inequality has risen in every part of the world. In democracies, there is a limit to how long people will put up with the rich getting richer while their living standards are stagnating or barely growing.

The suggestion is not that globalisation has failed as such. On the terms it set for itself it has not: the rich are richer. The trouble is that the rest of the world has noticed and that has created a global backlash. Elliott suggests we are now deglobalising. Coronavirus may hasten the process.

O'Toole makes a very similar point but he does so in the context of the Irish election result, which saw Sinn Féin do better than anyone expected. As [he puts it](#):

The anti-establishment rage that drove voters towards Sinn Féin, the Greens, the Social Democrats and almost anyone except the parties that have run the state for almost a century, is not a reaction against the failure of globalisation.

It is a reaction against the success of globalisation. Ireland has not been left behind — it is, on the contrary, at the forefront of this vast process. But what the election tells us is that, even for the winners, the existing model of "free market" globalisation is deeply

flawed: it cannot produce, even in a rich society, the public goods that citizens expect.

Deglobaliation is having a remarkable domestic impact right now in that case, and in the countries which have supposedly won the most from it.

What is the relevance of all this? I suggest three things.

The first is that we are facing - and may be are already in - a period of political transition where the direction of travel, from the global to the local, is becoming apparent. As some one who has pursued a green agenda and who wrote in 2012 about the need to [hold global corporations to account](#) locally there are elements to this that are, of course, welcome. The direction of travel is right.

At the same time, those who have won from globalisation - represented by an old elite - are fighting a rearguard action to preserve their privilege. The reality is that our current government is part of that process. Whatever it might say, it is all about retaining power for the Conservative Party and those that it represents, come what may. That is the old power elite and right now they are still heavily invested in globalisation - hence their extraordinary, even if wholly mistaken, belief in the supposed power of 'free trade'.

And finally, because those power elites are seeking to defend privilege that is heavily compromised, and are doing so by seeking to use a narrative that is false - that there are 'others' to blame for the position people find themselves in - there is a new, and marked, tendency towards fascism on the part of those who knowingly pursue this lie suggests that there is anyone to blame but themselves for the mess we are in. I could discuss this but Sean Danaher has [already done so very well on Progressive Pulse](#): I recommend reading what he has to say on the issue.

Where does this leave us? Take your pick, from a state of despair, to waiting for the storm to break, to living in hope. All are entirely reasonable responses.

What is nit possible is that things will stay the same. We are at a point of instability. What is not clear is where the pieces will land.