

## “This Strange Eventful History...”

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**All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. But it is difficult to think of a moment in recent times when this company of players has been more divided, or when the stage has been so febrile an environment. Is this purely a question of our leading performers - strutting and fretting their hour upon the stage - not being up to the role, or does it speak to a wider malaise whereby the play itself is breaking the bounds of the script and casting its actors and audience adrift upon a sea of troubles? In short, was the current political/economic situation inevitable, or are the shortcomings of those in the limelight responsible for exacerbating it?**



To start with, it is undeniable that the world has been going through a series of successive crisis points since the millennium. The war on terror and its answering wave of worldwide atrocities, the global financial crash of 2008, growing awareness of the climate crisis, the ISIS caliphate and the consequent refugee crisis, and of course the economic & social damage done by the coronavirus pandemic. These are factors that individuals and organisations will struggle to deal with. Of particular note is the fact that businesses have little to no ability to affect any of these, and will find themselves at the mercy of circumstances beyond their control. Not only do these flashpoints, over time, directly embed themselves into the fabric of corporate life (ie, few companies are investing in Syria any more, and Covid-19 has forced practically all to re-evaluate their business models and projections), but they must be taken alongside the long-standing and ever-present threats such as corruption, fraud and so on. This is an operating environment that is fractious at best, and outrightly hostile at worst. Companies should therefore expect a strong degree of leadership to help them through these existential-level threats to survival.

It is problematic therefore that several key markets are characterised by leadership that is either weak & ineffectual, or implicitly (or explicitly) involved in corruption. The nadir was arguably reached in recent times with Donald Trump, who handily embodied the worst of both sets of virtues and for a time made America – for so long the perceived ‘policeman of the world’ – a laughing stock.

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Apart from the patent inability to act with the seriousness or gravitas required for The Most Important Job In The World, the mountain of lawsuits and criminal cases now being levelled against Trump speak to a leader who sets the poorest possible example, and this even before his role in inciting violence in the Capitol attack of 6 January. Trump's successor in this is most likely Boris Johnson – another leader with multiple failings of capability and morality who is levelling the country down to his own ceiling of incompetence. But they are not alone at the crowded table of controversial leaders: other relative newcomers would be Brazil's Bolsonaro and India's Modi, populists who claim an iron grip on their citizens' hearts and minds but who struggle to be seen as entirely credible beyond the borders, while the elder statesman of Russia's Putin and China's Xi are longstanding autocrats presiding over systems where the State has enmeshed itself in every day life to the extent that the prevalent corruption from the private sector is almost indistinguishable from that of government.

This knowing inadequacy of leadership is a problem for two reasons. Firstly a government that enacts, licences or colludes in corruption for its own account essentially legitimises it for everyone else, which is one of the worst examples to set for businesses attempting to operate legitimately in some of the most difficult markets on the planet. The hypocrisy of leaders who make grand claims about the need to quash corruption, but who are then revealed themselves to be willing and wallowing participants, does not go unnoticed and is a major barrier for corporates who simply cannot trust those at the top to help them. But more than this, weak & ineffectual leaders who are seen as objects of ridicule, or doormats to be walked over, creates both a failure of leadership at the top and a crisis of confidence in the corporate sector that *they* will be taken seriously, given that their leaders are so clearly not. There can be no doubt that Margaret Thatcher, whatever your views on her politics, was a strong hand with whom everybody knew where they stood. The vacillating blundering of Boris Johnson by comparison, casts 'Global Britain' and all British firms attempting to carry this ideal forwards as little more than another outdated ideal.

Perhaps we might look to another quote from the Bard: that our leaders on the stage are but full of sound and fury, signifying nothing...

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