

of joint. Politicians have a few hours to save the world; voters have to wait decades to see the benefits. It is not clear how democracy will adapt to this challenge.

The most acute version of the conundrum relates to climate change and the threat of environmental catastrophe. The long lag before the effects of climate change will be felt make it very difficult for elected politicians to take pre-emptive action, conscious as they are that the people who pay the price won't be the people who see the benefits. Yet if we never take pre-emptive action, and if the gloomier scenarios predicted by the current science turn out to be correct, then the consequences are likely to catch us unawares. At some point, the long-term threat of environmental degradation will reveal itself as an immediate disaster: a massive flood, a calamitous harvest failure, the mass movement of peoples, another war. At that point democratic adaptability will kick in. But by then it may be too late. Autocratic regimes like China might be able to take more decisive action in the present to deal with the long-term effects of climate change. China's rulers do not have to worry about getting re-elected. So if China's technocrats decide to green a Chinese city, they can, within practical limits, make it happen. However, Chinese technocracy won't resolve climate change on its own. And when the consequences of democratic inaction reveal themselves in the future, the Chinese political system may be insufficiently adaptable to cope.

The final problem is that democratic adaptability can morph into democratic complacency. We have reached the point where there is good historical evidence that democracies eventually rise to meet the

challenges they face. The transition from Hobbes's world to our world is a story of the successful adaptation by inclusive states to whatever history could throw at them. Democracy survived the Great Depression. It saw off fascism. It outlasted communism. It eventually enfranchised almost all its citizens. Violence fell away. Prosperity spread. Democracies have not always responded to threats and injustices in a timely fashion, but they have got there in the end. It is tempting to assume that this process can continue indefinitely. We will get our act together when we need to.

In late October 2013, the US Congress shut down the Federal government as part of an intractable and poisonously partisan dispute over the funding of President Obama's healthcare reforms. It looked like a recklessly cavalier act: politicians choosing to pull the plug on government because they can't agree on an important piece of legislation. The causes of the growing partisanship and rancour in American politics are many. But one of them must be this: politicians behave so cavalierly because they think the system can survive it. They don't believe that they have really pulled the plug on government. American democracy has got through much worse in the past and survived. So it's assumed it can survive this. When the dust settles, the system will adapt. And perhaps it will. But this is brinkmanship that imagines the real brink is always some way off. You can flirt with disaster because it is only flirting. No American politician wants to renege on America's debt or stop paying the bills. They threaten to do it only because they believe it will never happen.

This is politics as a game of chicken. Games of chicken are