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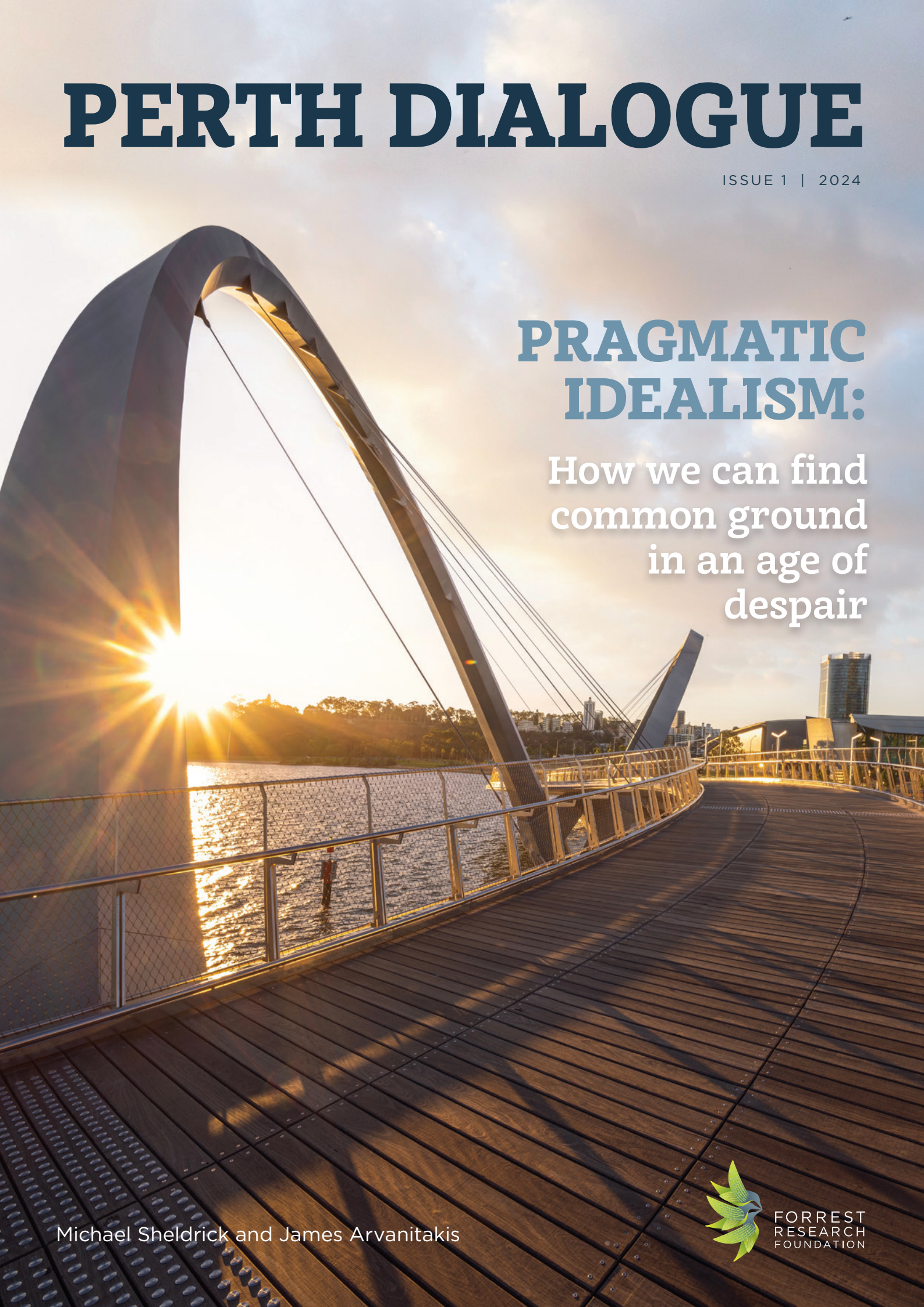


PRAGMATIC IDEALISM:

How we can find common ground in an age of despair

Michael Sheldrick and James Arvanitakis

FORREST RESEARCH FOUNDATION

Introducing Perth Dialogue

We are excited to unveil Perth Dialogue, a new think piece series designed to address the pressing questions of our time. From current events to global trends, each article will critically examine contemporary issues shaping our world today. Through insightful commentary and research-based analysis, the series seeks to challenge prevailing viewpoints, spark meaningful discussion and inspire new ways of thinking. Perth Dialogue has been developed in partnership with leading experts and the Forrest Research Foundation, to drive forward-thinking solutions during a time of unprecedented change and transformation.

Starting off the series, Michael Sheldrick and Professor James Arvanitakis explore how democratic and international institutions can strive to find common ground to tackle the biggest challenges of our time. In recent years, institutions have been hampered by division and gridlock, falling short in their commitments to eradicate extreme poverty and combat catastrophic climate change—commitments made by all nations under the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement. This crisis in implementation has fuelled a growing sense of global despair.

Implementing effective policies and investments can help these institutions restore faith and meet people's expectations. However, finding the necessary common ground will require a spirit of "pragmatic idealism"—an understanding that real change demands compromise and a willingness to meet others halfway. This approach is essential for turning bold, audacious ideas into tangible outcomes.

Some argue that pragmatic idealism is impossible in today's divided world, where immense pressure exists to show unwavering loyalty to one's tribe. This transpires not just on a global or national level but also on a personal level: to express an opinion risks alienation or conflict. Whilst you may respect or dislike a politician or their policies, raising this with friends and family has become prohibitory as people take up seemingly inflexible positions.

In this instalment of Perth Dialogue, we explore whether it's possible to navigate these ideological pitfalls through a lens of "pragmatic idealism".

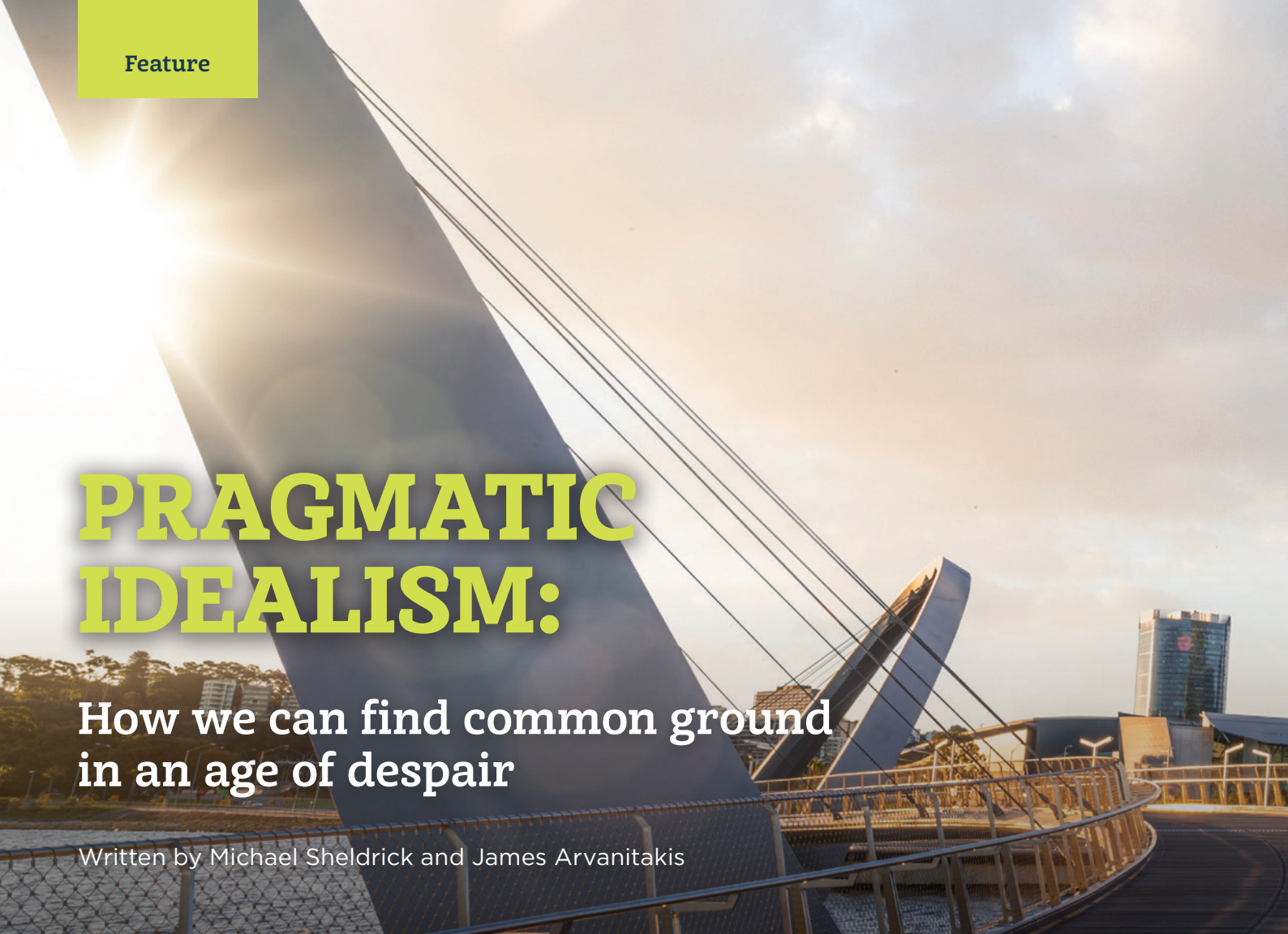
About the Authors

Professor James Arvanitakis

Professor James Arvanitakis is the Director of the Forrest Research Foundation. The Foundation brings together the five Western Australia-based universities to attract world class early career researchers to the state, build governmental and industry ties and confront the world's grand challenges. James is an award-winning educator, cultural researcher and media commentator. He is also a Fulbright alumnus, having spent twelve months at the University of Wyoming. In 2021, he was appointed the inaugural Patron of Diversity Arts Australia and founded Respectful Disagreements, a brave spaces project. He has a regular segment on ABC News24.

Michael Sheldrick

Michael Sheldrick is a policy entrepreneur and a driving force behind the efforts of Global Citizen to end extreme poverty. As a Co-Founder and Chief Policy, Impact and Government Affairs Officer, he has collaborated with international artists and world leaders to help mobilise over $40 billion for healthcare, education and climate resilience. An alumnus of UWA, Michael has co-produced some of the world's most impactful social campaigns and events, including the Global Citizen Festival in New York, the Guinness World Record-winning virtual concert One World: Together At Home and the Mandela 100 celebration. He is the author of the Amazon bestseller *From Ideas to Impact: A Playbook for Influencing and Implementing Change in a Divided World*, and has been featured in The Guardian, BBC, CNN and Sky News. Previously named one of WA's 50 Best and Brightest by *The Sunday Times*, he also serves on several boards, including the Ban Ki-moon Centre for Global Citizens.



PRAGMATIC IDEALISM:

How we can find common ground in an age of despair

Written by Michael Sheldrick and James Arvanitakis

By the end of 2024, over 65 countries—representing about 4 billion people, or half the world's adult population—would have held national elections, earning the year the title of "year of elections." *The Economist* has called it the biggest election year in history. The list includes India (April-May), the European Union (June), South Africa (June), France (June-July), the United Kingdom (July) and the United States (November).

Discontent has translated into anti-government votes in elections already conducted this year as people everywhere grapple with impending technological upheaval, deepening political divisions, and relentless negative news. Such outcomes coincide with studies showing a continued erosion of confidence in democratic and international institutions like the UN. As studies show a surge in hopelessness and societal discontent, we see a simultaneous rise in the belief that democracy is no longer the preferred form of government. Among younger men (ages 18-32), in particular, there's an increasing belief that authoritarian or nationalist solutions might be preferable to those based on cooperation. This shift is reflected in voting patterns, with younger people increasingly supporting political forces that advocate more inward-looking policies. Such findings appear as research also shows that young people believe they will be less better off than past generations.

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But why is this happening?

Political commentator, Misha Zelinsky, summarises one answer to this question:

> When democracies prevailed in the Cold War, they did so not through superior theory, but through superior outcomes. Eastern Europeans didn't read Jefferson and give him the debating points over Marx. They tore down the Berlin Wall because free democracy was providing a better life, while Soviet oppression delivered misery. Humanity voted with its feet.

Zambia's president, Hakainde Hichilema, put it more succinctly when he wrote last year:

> You cannot eat democracy. Human rights may sustain the spirit, but not the body. Particularly in young democracies like mine, governments must deliver economically if they are to retain the people's consent....We cannot simply parrot lines about how democracy is good for citizens. It must be felt.

Hichilema was addressing Zambia's severe debt crisis and the international community's failure to reach a consensus on debt relief. His words served as a warning that without relief, Zambia's democracy could face "existential pressure from the people." In June 2024, after three and a half years of challenging negotiations and heated exchanges between the US and Chinese governments over responsibility for the delays, Zambia finally received a reprieve following an agreement being reached between international institutions and China.

So today, we must ask: Are our democratic and international institutions truly delivering? Is this why support for them is declining?

A crisis of delivery leading to declining trust?

In many ways, governments have struggled to fulfill their promises of a sustainable and prosperous future. By 2023, only 15% of the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals were on track. While we may have avoided the worst outcomes of climate change, we're still far from preventing catastrophic impacts. At the same time, emerging technologies like AI, if not managed properly, could widen inequalities even further.

Today, various surveys and experts, including Misha Zelinsky himself, consider support for democratic and international institutions to be in retreat across the globe. Other experts have described the growing popular disillusionment with democracy as a consequence of economic stagnation. Author Joshua Kurlantzick, for example, argues that the Global Financial Crisis combined with a lack of economic growth and the hollowing out of the middle class have all played an important role. It seems the economic prosperity that resulted in people once embracing democracy following the Cold War is dissipating before our very eyes. As a case in point, in 2013, 8 out of 10 Latin Americans believed that, despite its flaws, democracy was the best system of government. By 2020, that number had dropped to just 6 out of 10. Former UN Deputy Secretary-General, Lord Mark Malloch Brown, concludes that "it would not be unreasonable to extrapolate [such] findings onto democracy's sibling: multilateralism."

And then there is political gridlock fuelled by self-righteousness...

While the challenges of delivery noted above are significant, they are not insurmountable. They have become insurmountable, however, in the current political climate that is increasingly divided at local, national and global levels. This has created what James A. Thurber and Antoine Yoshinaka describe as decision-making "gridlock."

In their important book, *American Gridlock: The Sources, Character, and Impact of Political Polarization*, James A. Thurber and Antoine Yoshinaka examine the causes and consequences of the intense political polarisation that has gripped the U.S. Congress in recent decades. The authors argue that this bitter partisan divide has made it extremely difficult in many, though not all, cases to enact major legislation. This has hampered the government's ability to sufficiently address pressing national and even international problems: from failing to pass annual budgets leading to shutdowns, to inaction on major policy issues like immigration reform and climate change, through to an inability to raise the debt ceiling. While the reasons are varied and include the increasing homogeneity of the two parties, the result of this intense polarisation is legislative gridlock wherein the two major parties are often unable to compromise.

Supporters on both sides opt for simplistic, ideologically pure solutions, rejecting practical but imperfect ideas in the face of complex problems. Diehard ideologues prefer to feel "right, righteous, certain and safe" rather than seek common ground. This self-righteousness undermines efforts to find shared solutions. For example, coal workers may care about climate change but also worry about their families' livelihoods. Feeling demonised by the environmental movement, they see climate action as a threat to their interests. As Pope Francis lamented during the 2023 UN climate talks in Dubai, society is "sadly divided into 'fan bases,' between prophets of doom and indifferent bystanders, radical environmentalists and climate change deniers." While the U.S. may lead in political polarisation, this trend is becoming endemic in democracies worldwide.

Global institutions are also feeling the strain of division. The past year has seen a decline in international cooperation, as evidenced by the failure of the Pandemic Treaty negotiations. The UN Security Council has witnessed the highest number of vetoes since the Berlin Wall fell in 1989.

China's rise and the perceived inconsistencies in U.S. global leadership, particularly after the disastrous interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, have exacerbated global divisions. Although the U.S. took a strong leadership role in funding the war effort following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, deep political divides between Republicans and Democrats now threaten that position. Meanwhile, a reluctant, veto-wielding Russia continues to block UN progress in other areas.

Perceptions of Western hypocrisy in the Global South, coupled with bitter memories of past interventions, have further polarised our world. Western nations face accusations of double standards on issues ranging from climate action and trade to human rights accountability. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, wealthy Western nations were criticised for voicing support for

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global solidarity while, in reality, prioritising vaccine nationalism over genuine global partnership. Rightly or wrongly, such actions are seen by many in the Global South as examples of false righteousness. Wiryono Sastrohandoyo, who previously served as Indonesia's ambassador to Australia, said once that Western nations "like to sit on a high pedestal, pontificating to others, acting both as judge and jury to the rest of the world."

Overall, the prospect of finding common ground nationally and globally seems more distant than ever.

However, hope remains...

Even as society teeters on the edge, there's a remarkable resilience in people's belief that we shouldn't give up on working together to find the common ground needed to tackle our shared challenges. The 2023 Global Solidarity Report shows that majorities worldwide still believe in cooperation as the way forward. As long as individuals are eager to collaborate on solutions, we haven't reached the point of no return.

Recent electoral results—from South Africa to India to France—suggest that people are growing weary of binary thinking. South Africa's new Government of National Unity, the first coalition government in 30 years, is a prime example. The electorate has delivered a result that demands parties come together to creatively address challenges, implement effective policies and ensure competent service delivery. This will require trade-offs, clear communication, radical transparency, mutual respect and careful stewardship of expectations.

Yet, the opportunity to make a positive impact is within reach if stakeholders of all types can harness the spirit of pragmatic idealism.

Lessons from the past: impractical idealism

We can learn a lesson from looking at the legacy of a past US president, Woodrow Wilson, and what can best be described as his "impractical idealism."

It has been a century since Wilson's passing. Until a recent historical re-examination exposed his forgotten racist views, Wilson was commonly portrayed as a visionary ahead of his time. He envisioned a new global organisation, the League of Nations, to prevent future wars like the one the world had just experienced between 1914-18.

Wilson's plans, however, faced staunch opposition from isolationist Senate Republicans.

The Senate ultimately voted against the U.S. joining the League. Hindered by the absence of U.S. support, the League failed to prevent the even more catastrophic WWII only a generation later.

Wilson, however, shares equal blame with the isolationists who never wanted the League of Nations.

The battle for USA entry into the League was more complex than a clash between Wilson and Senate Republicans. Beyond the isolationists, another more flexible group — the so-called "reservationists"— were open to negotiation. Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge, their influential leader, actively proposed support with certain accommodations, such as amending the League's automatic military intervention requirement. Had Lodge's votes aligned with Senate Democrats, America's League membership would have been secured.

Sadly, however, Wilson's ideological righteousness hindered any resolution. He rejected any amendments and insisted on an all-or-nothing approach. Even facing the demise of U.S. entry, he directed Democrats to oppose any changes. Ultimately, the final tally fell short by only seven votes.

In contrast, President Franklin D. Roosevelt embraced compromises to establish the UN in the aftermath of WWII. Collaborating with his Republican opponents, Roosevelt ensured American support. Despite its many failings, the UN has achieved numerous milestones in its 80-year history, from reducing child mortality to addressing environmental issues.

Wilson's ideological rigidity echoes in today's political debates, both in Washington and globally, notably in tackling climate change. Urgent action is imperative for halving emissions by 2030, requiring extraordinary pragmatic idealism.

Given the urgency, the optimal solution now may necessitate impure and controversial measures: a sub-optimal solution.

In his 2021 novel, "Ministry for the Future," Kim Stanley Robinson proposed compensating fossil fuel-producing countries to keep their resources underground. While this may seem unsettling, it acknowledges that climate justice is not black and white. For fossil fuel-producing nations like Iraq, fossil fuel revenues often make up 70-80 percent of their national income and are a vital source of public welfare.

In an ideal world, we would establish a new economic system to transition these countries to alternative revenue sources in an orderly, equitable way. However, time constraints and the imperative to avoid climate-induced poverty for people in many developing nations reliant on such revenues make compromised action necessary.

Robinson asserts that "weaning [petro-states] off that dependency is in everyone's interest. It must be done. And what must be done can be done." Ultimately, achieving the common good will require a level of pragmatism often missing in climate debates.

There are signs that countries, climate activists and negotiators can find common ground. At last year's climate talks in Dubai, wealthy nations and those in the Global South reached an agreement to establish a crucial loss and damage fund for countries dealing with climate impacts. The consensus prevailed despite a last-minute dispute over placing the fund in the World Bank that risked jeopardising the deal.

Although the initial $700 million injection in the fund is a fraction of the estimated $400 billion in annual climate-related losses for poorer nations, it remains a significant milestone that can form the basis for further compromises. Most recently, Brazil's President Lula da Silva secured in principle support from G20 nations to pursue a global wealth tax on billionaires, the proceeds of which could in part fund global climate action. This proposal aligns with widespread public opinion that the super wealthy should contribute more.

Conclusion: embracing pragmatic idealism – never letting the perfect be the enemy of the good

Wilson uttered his last words on 3 February 1924, reportedly stating, "Doctor, the devil is a busy man." And yet, for his noble intent, he himself had unintentionally aided the devil by refusing to negotiate. Winning the initial battle, Wilson lost the war to end all wars with the U.S's failure to join his precious League.

His story stands as a cautionary tale amid one of the worst eras of polarisation.

Pure idealism, prioritising feeling "right, righteous, certain and safe," can have catastrophic consequences. Taking what we feel may be the "moral high ground" often only makes us feel better but fails to work across political divides to find solutions. Progress demands blending idealism with pragmatism. It demands prioritising impact over self-righteousness. As we consider the necessary actions needed to avert the worst of climate change, disorderly migration and address cost of living pressures, let's be sure to heed the lesson from Woodrow Wilson.

While there's a public willingness to pursue collaboration, this window of opportunity won't remain open indefinitely. But seizing it and delivering results could help turn the page on our current age of despair and usher in a new era of hope. It is something that we must reflect on both politically, and increasingly, in our personal lives. There's zero time to waste.