**The best and worst of times**

[Atle Hetland](https://www.nation.com.pk/columnist/atle-hetland)

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We live in a time with small and big problems in the wide world and at community and individual levels. There are wars and conflicts, indeed the terrible recent conflict between Israel and Palestine in Gaza, to such an extent that the media gives less attention to the Russian attack on Ukraine, where as many as a thousand Russian soldiers are injured or killed daily, in addition to many Ukrainian soldiers, but we don’t know how many since figures are not released. But we know that civilians are also affected and that many million have become internally displaced or refugees abroad. In all countries in the world, inflation and price increases affect ordinary people more severely than in many years, and we blame it to a major extent on the wars and conflicts, especially the new ones but also on old and protracted ones,
In the title of my article today, I have borrowed words from the cherished English novelist and social critic Charles Dickens (1812-1870). In his novel ‘A Tale of Two Cities’, published in 1859, he wrote about the time before and during the French Revolution (from 1789) in Paris and London. He was known for sharp, satirical analysis, which I cannot match, also because I try to be more soft-mannered and issues are rarely black or white. I have chosen a famous quote from Charles Dickens, which is even relevant today: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the of hope, it was the winter of despair.” In many ways, the world has never been as good as it is today, for an ever larger proportion of the people. Alas, there are also huge groups, often growing number, who live below the poverty line in cities, towns and rural areas, some affected by climate change, floods, drought, and environmental overexploitation. However, the late Swedish medical doctor, statistician and specialist on Third World development, Hans Rosling (1948-1917), drew attention to the many positive improvements in recent, focusing on demography, health, education, and jobs, stressing the fact that when people move up the social and economic ladder they make better choices, including having smaller families and plan better for the future.
It is easier to be doomsday prophets and talk about all that is wrong, well, that is important to do, too. But we must not get stuck in that analysis; we must also discuss what we can do about and who it is that can move us upwards. Without a positive mindset we will go nowhere, even relapse into the misery that we had conquered. Hans Rosling managed to do teach about these things, becoming a pop-star statistician and public speaker, with inspiring lectures, available on internet in English.
It would have been interesting to have listened to Hans Rosling’s take on the major issues at the current time, notably climate change and environmental issues, war, peace, inequality, and so on. What we know, however, is that he would have stressed that we can solve the issues if we get on with it. He would have continued encouraging people in the private and government sectors to do more to solve them. In all fields, he would have said that we must not wait for others to solve our problems, but do what we ordinary people can do, in our homes and communities, and in way of telling politicians and leaders in the private sectors what they can do. In the fields Rosling focused on in his life, progress happened because ordinary people pushed for results.
And then, what would Charles Dickens have told us if he had been around with his wit, satire, and sharp analysis, often targeting the more or less foolish people at the top in the world, be they rich, educated, sitting in high posts in the private or government sectors, or just being any of us. Today, I believe the UN would have been in for quite a bit of his sarcasm since they show so limited results in spite of smug reports and big conference, big land cruisers and air-conditioned houses, and so on. Let us hope there will be some wisdom coming from the UN’s COP28 meeting on climate change, starting in Dubai this week. Greta Thunberg has earlier spoken to power, reminding leaders to stick to truth and action.
Charles Dickens would certainly have challenged us all to do better, not just wait for the youth and the poor to shoulder the tasks, and they don’t always do the right things either, and not being supported by those of us who are getting on in age, but see the problems. Dickens saw there is not only foolishness, but also wisdom; there is incredulity, light, and springs of hope. Today, more than 150 years since Charles Dickens’ time, there are enormous amounts of knowledge, competence, skills, modern technology, and so on. We have few excuses for not solving the small and big problems around us – and I believe we all, indeed the youth and the poor, have the will to analyse issues and draw up a roadmap with all-inclusive goals. Let us get on with it!