Unlocking innovation
Joanna Choukeir introduces the RSA's new approach to creating impact

Theo Papaioannou delves into the possibilities of the entrepreneurial state

Ella Al-Shamahi takes a look at the enduring power of the handshake

RSA

Matthew Taylor

"Leadership is about fostering mutual respect and creating problem-solving processes"

As I approach the end of my time as chief executive of the RSA, I occasionally ponder the lessons I might have learnt and whether those lessons might be of any use to me or anyone else. Like the talking therapies described in this issue of RSA Journal by Adrian Hosford FRSA, reflecting on my experience helps me deal with the slight disorientation I have felt since announcing my departure.

The RSA has become something of a change agency, for example, encouraging and supporting organisations to use the experience of the Covid-19 crisis as an opportunity to do things differently. My colleagues Joanna Choukeir and Ian Burbidge write about different aspects of this in their pieces. Change being our watchword, one realisation about my own experience has crept up on me as quite a surprise: most of my mistakes came from trying to do things too quickly.

My loud frustration with what I found when I arrived at the RSA led to needless hurt and anxiety; omelettes require eggs to be cracked, not jumped up and down upon. By trying to change the governance of the Society while I still faced a hard core of Fellows who wanted us to be primarily a members' club, I gave my opponents the chance to portray me as arrogant and undemocratic. The episode ended in a grisly AGM where I came close to being turfed out. Other aspects of the RSA today, such as our commitment to Fellow engagement and to being more programmatic in our research, have involved a lot of trial and error, and even now are still work in progress.

One conclusion is that good leadership is as much about realising what you cannot do as doing what you can. Over the past year we have suffered the consequences of being ruled by a prime minister who seems to think having an aspiration is half-way to delivering an outcome. In his article, Theo Papaioannou encourages us to be realistic about how entrepreneurial different kinds of states can really be, while I cannot help feeling we would all benefit from more ministers displaying the pragmatism of Tees Valley Mayor Ben Houchen.

The phrase "everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler" is generally attributed to Einstein. I have a similar formulation for the unique combination of assets that makes up the RSA: the Society should be as ambitious as it can be, but not more so. This is obvious, but we should, for example, recognise that our necessary attempt to be more corporate and business-friendly must not lead us to sacrifice our commitment to develop and promote big, challenging ideas, nor to shun the diverse enthusiasms of our Fellows.

A second lesson for me has been the need to acknowledge and live with organisational tensions. It is estimated that two-thirds of change strategies turn out to be expensive failures. This may in part be because they often promise something unattainable: that organisational gaps and frictions can be overcome. But, for example, researchers will always want to do the research that most interests them while fundraisers press for proposals that engage partners. Getting noticed by the media and opinion formers involves being distinctive and fresh, whereas the imperatives of marketing and brand are predictability and consistency. In a multifaceted social purpose organisation like the RSA, leadership is about fostering mutual respect and creating problem-solving processes, not about trying to impose a single logic on a whole organisation with its diverse aims and skills.

There have been many ups and downs in my time at the RSA, and even a few dramas, although none, I suspect, would make the kind of TV script material discussed in Rob Williams's fascinating piece. Patience, balance, humility – even a little resignation – these are some of the things I have come to see as the greatest leadership virtues. Or maybe I'm just getting old! ∎

Matthew Taylor is Chief Executive of the RSA

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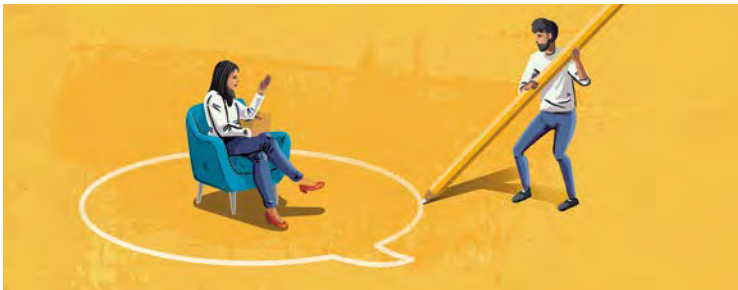
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1 In 1964, designer Ken Garland published *First Things First*, a manifesto affirming that designers have the responsibility to prioritise work that delivers humanistic outcomes (page 14).

2 The 2009–10 swine flu outbreak was caused by an H1N1 virus, as was the Spanish flu of 1918–20 (page 17).

3 Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden has said that Netflix should add a disclaimer to *The Crown*, to alert viewers that the show is fiction, not fact (page 20).

4 COP26, the 2021 UN Climate Change Conference, will be held in Glasgow in November (page 25).

5 In 2019, a fifth of the UK population lived in poverty (page 26).

6 In Q3 2020, the Chinese economy grew by 4.9%. Draconian pandemic control measures were tempered by state entrepreneurialism (page 34).

7 In November last year, Chancellor Rishi Sunak announced a £4 billion Levelling Up Fund to invest in local infrastructure (page 38).

8 The handshake is at least 7 million years old (page 40).

9 Some 75% of people with mental health problems may not get access to the treatment they need (page 42).

10 'Maverick' has its origins with Samuel A Maverick, a Texan lawyer, politician and land baron who hit upon a cunning way to increase his stock of calves (page 44).

RSA

Matthew Taylor steps down

The RSA's Chief Executive will leave in June

In December, Matthew Taylor announced that he was stepping down as Chief Executive of the RSA after 15 years in the role.

Tim Eyles, RSA Chair, said: "We are all incredibly grateful to Matthew for his 15 years of extraordinary service to the RSA. He leaves having transformed the organisation, with the Society currently enjoying its highest profile and level of influence since its founding in 1754. I have personally thoroughly enjoyed working with Matthew and pay tribute to his many achievements on the RSA's behalf."

Matthew's tenure as Chief Executive will end in June; after a short break he will continue on at the organisation in an advisory role, as well as focusing on wider projects.

"Matthew leaves huge shoes to fill, but his departure also comes at an exciting time for the RSA, with a clear and more focused, longer-term programmatic working having been launched with the aim of increasing our impact in the world," added Tim. "We are now actively searching for a new leader who can take forward the organisation and help deliver the plans trustees, staff and Fellows agreed on as part of our recent Strategic Review – to harness all our assets together as one RSA including even closer engagement with our Fellows, being more global, increasing our visibility and impact, and deepening our commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion."

■ *To find out more, visit thersa.org/blog/matthew-taylor/2020/12/change-leading-rsa*

Politics

Innovation in politics

Last year, the RSA partnered with the Innovation in Politics Institute as the UK representative of its awards, in which a 1,000-person citizen jury honours the most courageous and innovative political projects across Europe.

In December, six projects based in the UK were named as finalists in the 2020 Innovation in Politics Awards, including two winners. ProxyAddress, a project founded by Chris Hildrey FRSA, won in the Human Rights category. The other UK winner was the Oldham Social Prescribing Innovation Partnership, which provides non-medical treatment to improve people's wellbeing.

ProxyAddress, which has previously received an RSA Catalyst Award Seed Grant, helps those without a fixed address to continue to access vital services. It 'borrows' the address details of an existing property by creating a duplicate that follows a person around no matter how many times they move, providing a crucial source of stability in difficult times.

Anthony Painter, Chief Research and Impact Officer at the RSA, said: "In the midst of difficult times for many, our local communities have not stood still. At a time when local services are extremely stretched, it is great to see an organisation use new technology to tackle one of the oldest social issues. ProxyAddress has taken an entrepreneurial approach to tackling systemic issues and has been one of the real success stories from our Catalyst grants."

■ *To find out more, visit thersa. org/blog/2021/01/proxy-address-homelessness*

RSA insights

Voice magazine

Voice, an online culture magazine for young people, was established in 2017 by Emrys Green, Tom Inniss and Diana Walton FRSAs to support more young people to engage with the arts and create opportunities for aspiring arts journalists. Covid-19 brought challenges and opportunities for the young editorial team, who made it their mission to replace the live experiences Voice readers were missing. As well as producing podcasts and videos, they set out to create innovative live experiences, running weekly 'Instaviews' with young artists; a programme of artist-led workshops on Zoom; and regular 'Hangout with Voice' sessions, where young people viewed and discussed artworks on Google Meet.

■ *To find out more, visit voicemag.uk/culture-at-home*

68%

According to a new RSA/Populus poll, 68% of the UK public want to see the country hit its climate change targets, with only 5% of respondents saying they disagreed. The polling also showed support for diversity and greater equality, suggesting that even in our polarised times we have much in common.

■ *To find out more, visit thersa.org/blog/2020/12/what-have-we-learned-about-ourselves-in-2020*

4

This is the number of 'mega-regions' England should be divided into in order to tackle regional inequalities, according to a new report by the RSA and the One Powerhouse Consortium. These mega-regions – North, Midlands, South East and South West – should be bottom-up collaborations between local leaders rather than top-down Whitehall bodies, and each should have a regional minister.

■ *To find out more, download the report at thersa.org/reports/one-powerhouse*
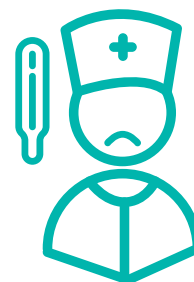
RSA programme research into the lives of frontline workers during the pandemic found that 29% of care staff in England said they would struggle to take time off in the event of illness. Social care workers are twice as likely as other key workers to rely on Statutory Sick Pay (£95 per week), twice as likely to be unpaid when isolating and half as likely to receive fully paid leave.

■ *To find out more, visit thersa.org/reports/frontline-fatigue-keyworkers-lockdown*

Agenda

Our approach to change

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown the necessity of social change in order to create a more resilient future. Yet, as changemakers, we know that the status quo is all too often resistant to lasting transformation. That is why the RSA has developed its Living Change Approach, which aims to put into practice the Society's commitment to thinking systemically about the changes needed and being creative and entrepreneurial in developing practical solutions. The approach has already been adopted and endorsed by a number of diverse organisations, from NHS Lothian to the Ministry of Justice and the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth.

Throughout March and early April, underpinned by our Living Change Approach, the RSA is celebrating the people, organisations and networks that are making positive change happen. Through a series of events and workshops, as well as reports, blogs and articles, we are shining a light on those working to secure a better future, highlighting the work of Fellows and Catalyst award winners, project sponsors and leading social entrepreneurs. Each week focuses on a different aspect of our work, from education to local communities, economic innovation to design thinking, with weekly Fellowship engagement to explore change in action.

The programme rounds off on 14 April with an open public event, where we will celebrate stories of change and award the RSA's Albert Medal. This year, we will recognise the work of one of the leading changemakers of the Covid-19 pandemic.

■ Find out how you can apply our approach to change in your organisation, connect with leading changemakers and help us to realise lasting change at thersa.org/approach. Sign up to our programme of events at thersa.org/events

Fellowship

New Fellows

In 2018, **Gerald Keogh** founded Unlock Unemployment, a community employment agency that empowers the most disadvantaged in society to find work. Offering a space for people to search for jobs and develop their CVs, as well as providing interview coaching and support, the company has helped many into employment over the past few years. In recognition of his activities during the Covid-19 lockdowns, Gerald was awarded a British Empire Medal.

Kamiqua Pearce is founder and CEO of Coldr, a strategic communications, PR and inclusive business consultancy that helps businesses to develop purpose-led PR campaigns and use the power of communications to become more inclusive employers. She also established the UK Black Comms Network, which aims to increase the number and seniority of Black talent in the UK PR industry.

Make the most of your Fellowship by connecting online and sharing your skills. Search the Fellowship at *thersa.org/fellowship*. While you're there, don't forget to update your own profile: *thersa.org/my-rsa*.

■ Follow us on Twitter @theRSAorg Our Instagram is www.instagram.com/thersaorg Join the Fellows' LinkedIn group www.linkedin.com/groups/3391

Where possible, Fellowship events have moved online; to find out more and connect with Fellows in our global community visit *thersa.org/events/fellowship*

Grow your idea through RSA Catalyst, which offers grants for Fellow-led and new or early-stage projects with a social goal.

■ To find out more, visit our online Project Support page thersa.org/fellowship/project-support

Catch up online

At a time of global crisis, RSA Events is hosting a new series of online conversations with leading public thinkers. Our speakers explore what this emergency reveals about our economies, our societies, ourselves – and how we might shape new ways of learning, working and caring for each other, creating more secure, sustainable lives and livelihoods for all.

▪ *Subscribe to our YouTube channel and 'like' us on Facebook to catch up on the latest content*

▶ *youtube.com/thersaorg*
🅵 *facebook.com/rsaeventsofficial*

Bridges to the future

How can we build back better? The RSA's Chief Executive, **Matthew Taylor**, puts a range of experts and thinkers on the spot in this podcast series. From **Noam Chomsky** to journalist **Chloe Hadjimatheou** and author **Rutger Bregman**, listen as they help us make sense of our new reality.

▪ *Listen now: thersa.org/podcasts*

Available on Simplecast, Spotify and Apple Podcasts

2021: new year, new hope

What are the everyday values and practices that we need to rediscover, honour, create and share so that everyone, in every place, can thrive? **Hilary Cottam** and **Marc Stears** explore the new ways of thinking, working and organising that we need to embrace in order to face the challenges ahead united.

▪ *Watch now: youtu.be/WdvagjKjxpc&t*
#RSAFutures

Creativity matters

Young creatives and leaders from education, cultural learning and the creative industries reflect on the life of educationalist and scholar **Sir Ken Robinson** who died in 2020, discussing his legacy and sharing ideas for how we can continue to support and defend his commitment to creativity for all.

▪ *Watch now: youtu.be/-Oit0lt-jl8&t*
#CreativityMatters

When the doughnut meets the city

As we navigate a series of urgent global crises, how might cities and communities be empowered to respond in ways that are ecologically safe and socially just? In her RSA President's Lecture, economist **Kate Raworth** proposes a set of core principles for creating economies that are regenerative and distributive by design.

▪ *Watch now: youtu.be/GJqhmr0K-4M&t*
#RSAEconomy

THE LIVING CHANGE APPROACH

The RSA has developed a new framework to ensure its research and innovation have greater impact

by Joanna Choukeir

🐦 @JoannaChoukeir

W e design at our best in times of uncertainty, urgency and crisis. As the American architect and educator Ann M Pendleton-Jullian puts it: "Design for emergence is designing for change in a context or system already in motion." An unprecedented pandemic. The worst global economic recession since the Great Depression. Systemic racism, long at untenable levels, coming to another historical boiling point. Growing polarisation and conflict. An alarming increase in wildfires across five continents. An unprecedented violent assault on the world's oldest democracy. Two decades ago, innovators, futurists and visionaries looked ahead to the 2020s as a suitably distant and futuristic-sounding decade on which to project ideas about what 'good' might look like and what we might aspire to achieve. Ironically, as that decade drew closer, it grew more apocalyptic than aspirational.

The crises of the 2020s certainly did not begin with the start of the decade. Our current situation brings to mind for me the image of an iceberg. The challenges and conditions that led to our current crises are the layers of the iceberg deep below the surface: hidden, but able to be ignored while the visible structure above the water is stable. But all the while, the temperature has been rising, putting pressure on the entire edifice, which has become weakened and more susceptible

to a sudden outside event; in this case, the Covid-19 pandemic. This shock has revealed the deep structural challenges below the surface. I envisage that layers will continue to be exposed over the next decade, triggering more crises along the way. Unless, that is, we take radical action to find a balanced way of living where people and planet can thrive in harmony.

A time for change

Last year gave us all the signals we need to know that now is the time to actively question whether the old normal – designed through habits, values and systems for living, working, making and trading, and how these all intersect with one another – is healthy and sustainable for the long term.

Over the past year, we have seen communities and organisations come together to embrace the uncertainty of this time as an opportunity for innovation, experimentation and renewal towards a better future. The value of social capital came to life overnight as neighbourhoods all over the UK formed mutual aid groups to care for the most vulnerable. Within a week of the first UK lockdown, my own local group for our estate had identified champions, designed a support service, created an open toolkit of resources and information using free collaboration platform Trello, and leafleted all 2,000 houses ▶

Joanna Choukeir is Director of Design and Innovation at the RSA

"We need to approach change in a way that allows us to experiment entrepreneurially"

offering and asking for support. Nearly a year later, the relationships formed through these groups are already delivering value to community members and are here to stay through the pandemic and beyond, strengthening community resilience.

Meanwhile, parts of the public sector that could deliver their services remotely shifted their operations to digital first as soon as they were able to. GP practices are tapping into a national network of GPs beyond the capacity of their local practice in order to be more responsive when offering callback appointments. They are also using WhatsApp for visual diagnosis of symptoms, making healthcare more convenient for patients and practitioners alike by enabling them to bypass the need to download another health app. For many public services, such as primary healthcare, digital first had been an ambition for many years in order to increase accessibility, reduce cost and maximise the capacity of the workforce, with the pandemic finally creating the urgency needed to make this shift within days.

Catering and food production services pivoted their business models with little notice, from business-to-business to business-to-consumer in response to lockdown. Food sourcing company Natoora is only one of many examples, shifting from supplying food to chefs to re-imagining food supply across the entire

system: from farming to retail and consumers, and towards food waste elimination. Opening up to wider markets has diversified these businesses' revenue streams, enabling them to be more responsive in the long term as new challenges and crises emerge.

As my colleague at the RSA Ian Burbidge reflected recently: "These communities saw the needs presenting in front of them and they did something. And as those needs have changed, so has their work. They didn't standardise, they absorbed variety. They reacted to emergence, they didn't excessively plan and follow fixed delivery models. As opportunities presented themselves, so they responded. They were able to see what works and what doesn't, and amplify the former and move on from the latter."

These communities were Living Change.

The Living Change Approach

This is what we mean at the RSA when we talk about Living Change. We need to see more communities of change recognising that the challenges we are facing are simply too complex and intractable for a single discipline or organisation in the system to address in isolation. With the Living Change Approach, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Living Change is being applied to all of the RSA's programme work in order to have a positive impact

on individuals, communities, society and the planet. The approach challenges us to *think like a system* as we strive to understand and define the challenges we are experiencing (the 'what is'), and to *act like an entrepreneur* as we innovate and experiment with interventions that shape inclusive, equitable and sustainable futures (the 'what if'). We need to see the whole system as a complex web of interconnected social events, trends, structures, models and players.

For example, the pandemic has hit minority ethnic groups the hardest because many of them are low-paid key workers risking their lives on the frontline, and because these groups have higher rates of underlying health conditions. Both of these factors are driven by an inequitable social, economic and political system that hinders the ability of these groups to access and negotiate better-paid work and to achieve the living and working conditions that are essential for good physical and mental health. Thinking like a system about these root causes and interdependencies is the first step in achieving a real understanding of what is driving the challenges we face today and where there might be energy for change.

We also need to approach change in a way that allows us to experiment entrepreneurially with multiple interventions that alter different nodes and relationships in the system, to learn quickly, to adjust our approach when things do not work and to accelerate when they do. We might, for example, bring together at-risk communities with local authorities, governmental bodies and civil society leaders to design interventions that improve their living and working conditions, while advocating for equal health, work and pay opportunities and, at the same time, designing temporary protective factors around these groups until long-term interventions start to take effect.

We have been applying, iterating and improving the Living Change Approach across a range of systemic challenges. With Cities of Learning, we are using the approach to disrupt the future of learning in cities through digital innovation, movement building and place-based models. This widens access to learning opportunities – based on core life skills – for all ages.

In our Make Fashion Circular project, we sought to understand the systemic challenges standing in the way of circular practices in the fashion industry and to identify an opportunity for tapping into the energy, and developing the capabilities, of creators and innovators across the system to accelerate the transition to a circular future for fashion. This has led to the recent launch of our Rethink Fashion learning journey, a collaboration between the RSA and the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, with support from the People's Postcode Lottery Dream Fund. A hosting team and 12 creatives are participating in this journey, bringing together various perspectives and experiences from across the fashion system. In 2020 Crises and Change, we are gathering and amplifying stories and aspirations from communities in the UK about response, recovery and renewal during and beyond recent crises, with the aim of inspiring communities around the world to re-imagine their future for the long term.

Design for social innovation is at the core of the Living Change Approach, but it cannot act alone. The Approach draws on a diverse range of other established and emergent disciplines such as critical thinking, social research, systems thinking, entrepreneurship, and futures and foresight. The Living Change Approach is not new; what is new is how it brings these disciplines together in a collaborative way to design and deliver effective interventions.

But why design for social innovation?

We are all designers
"All that we do, almost all the time, is design, for design is basic to all human activity. The planning and patterning of any act toward a desired, foreseeable end constitutes the design process. Any attempt to separate design, to make it a thing-by-itself, works counter to the fact that design is the primary underlying matrix of life." These are just some of the words written by the Austrian-American designer and educator, Victor Papanek, that I tend to turn to in my work. Although working in the mid to late 20th century, Papanek was one of the earliest thinkers to realise the inclusive nature of design as an everyday practice basic to all human activity. There is power in this realisation when all of us – as everyday designers – consciously apply this practice in order to intentionally improve the world we live in.

Design is all around us, and most of us have had an active role in it even if we may not recognise that. Wherever we are, we all design norms and habits in the way we choose to live and work and how that influences those around us. Whatever industry we work in, we all design practices, products and services that shape our current and future society, economy and ecology in some way; negatively or positively, intentionally or not. Whomever we advocate for, we all design power dynamics that may give more influence and opportunity to some over others.

It is human nature to design for need, to design for better, to design for change. Our designer mindset – whether we identify as designers or not – sees challenge as opportunity not obstacle; learns through imagining, making, testing and iterating, not predicting; embraces ►
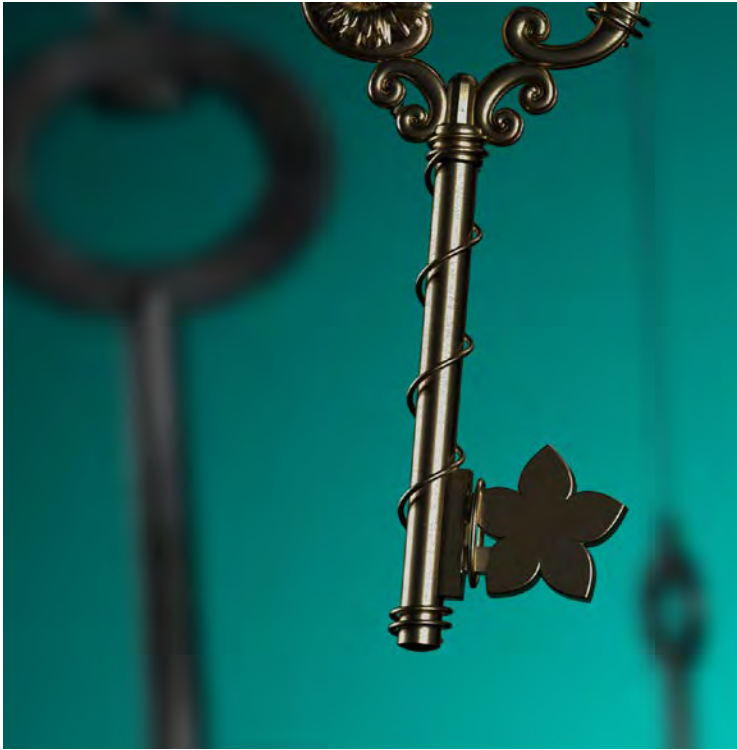
ambiguity as space for creativity not anxiety; approaches novelty with curiosity not fear; and explores diversity with empathy not judgement.

Developing conscientious design

However, despite some of its virtues, design – as a professional practice – has been far from a hero. For the past century, when 'design' as a mindset started finding its voice, language and industry as a discipline, it has failed to recognise its power and impact, and therefore its responsibility. It has contributed to a lot of the social challenges in our world leading up to this decade. Design has been more biased than equitable, focusing on serving and servicing communities of privilege who have the resources to invest in it as a professional practice. Design has sided with short-termism over long-termism, offering us all the quick fixes and gadgets we need to solve our day-to-day problems, with little accountability or thought for long-term consequence. Design has focused on individualism over collectivism, putting consumer spending before community wellbeing. Design has put people over planet, assuming infinite socioeconomic growth while exploiting the earth's finite resources.

More optimistically, however, it is evident that conscientious design movements, such as design activism, social design and sustainable design, are on the rise. In 1964, designer Ken Garland published the *First Things First* manifesto, with backing from over 400 designers, affirming that design is not a neutral and value-free process, and that designers have responsibility and accountability of choice to prioritise work that delivers humanistic outcomes before consumerist outcomes. Since 1989, *Adbusters* has been leading an activist movement of designers, artists and other creatives speaking up against activities that benefit corporate interests to the detriment of public and environmental interests.

In 2008, the UK government issued a Code of Practice on Consultation, requiring all government bodies to consult with members of the public and stakeholders likely to be affected prior to any changes to policy. The code created an opportunity space in which human-centred designers could explore different approaches aimed at engaging and involving the public and stakeholders in co-designing the future of public services. The UK Government's Policy Lab is an example of a team of designers working closely with policymakers to develop new tools that place people and data at the heart of new policies.

In 2013, the Public Services (Social Value) Act came into force in the UK, requiring public service commissioners to think about wider social, economic and environmental benefits and the consequences of their commissioned services. This provided an incentive for all private and third sector organisations working with public sector commissioners to deeply explore how they can better deliver social impact through the services they are designing and delivering. Finally, we have seen an increasing number of higher education bodies design and accredit courses that aim to help designers and innovators to develop their skills in a way that centres social and environmental impact at every step. Although highly encouraging, some of the movements and seismic shifts listed here have certainly been the margin, not the mainstream.

Design for social innovation

Cue in social innovation and the value this practice, as pioneered by British sociologist Michael Young, has on developing effective solutions to challenging systemic social and environmental issues. Social innovation at its best recognises that its work often requires active collaboration across different sectors and levels of the system to effect meaningful social change.

Alongside systemic collaboration, the power of social innovation lies in its ability to bring together four different paradigms – society, technology, economy and ecology – to identify opportunities and

to create or amplify interventions that are either new, or new to a particular context, in order to tackle complex challenges.

The society paradigm is about understanding the needs and strengths of our collective society, now and in the future. The technology paradigm is about recognising the art of the possible when 21st-century tools, ways of working and organising are put to use to address our social and environmental challenges. The economy paradigm is about exploring, interrogating and disrupting the ways in which materials, goods and services are produced, traded, managed, used and valued. The ecological paradigm is about striking balance and harmony between our society's need for resources to thrive and our ecosystem's need for regeneration so it can thrive with us.

The four social innovation paradigms, brought together with a designer's mindset, create an exciting opportunity for design for social innovation: a practice that is open, optimistic, pioneering and rigorous, and provides the support that enables us to both imagine and create a better future.

We know all too well, though, that design for social innovation is not the saviour here. It is simply one part of the puzzle.

Living Change for all

Historically, design for social innovation was seen as the work of professionals from the creativity, social change and policy spheres. Thinking and writing on the subject have always been loaded with jargon, as if jargon elevated the practice and as if the learning of the jargon offered a rite of passage into the profession. But Living Change needs to be everyone's business if we are truly going to shift the needle on today's intractable social challenges. The Living Change Approach is for everyone who is passionate about making social change happen. The professional, the citizen, the activist, the civil servant, the leader, the employee, the student. Regardless of role, we know we can have better impact when more of us come together around change.

Designing for Living Change goes beyond the jargon and the tools to encourage and enable a particular mindset for change: an openness to sharing, learning and collaborating; an optimism that looks out for positive opportunities amidst challenging times; a pioneering vantage point with bravery to explore and experiment with the new and unfamiliar; a rigorous outlook and willingness to do the work to understand the why behind the what; and an enabling ethos championing and supporting others on a change journey. Now, more than ever, we need people who can think systemically and act entrepreneurially.

"Living Change needs to be everyone's business if we are truly going to shift the needle"

As I write this, I am 100 days into my role as Director of Design and Innovation at the RSA. It certainly feels as if I have been here for longer; or rather, as if I have always been here. The pace of change, within the RSA and out there in the world, is fast, and there are also many opportunities to influence this change. I have joined this impact organisation during these uncertain times determined to create, enable and amplify movements of change that enable everyone to use design for social innovation in their change work. More specifically, I am eager to see what we can achieve through the RSA's Living Change Approach as we unite people and ideas to address the most pressing challenges of our time.

We are now, for the first time, consolidating our legacy of Living Change insights, thought and practice from across our programmes into a playbook and a learning journey promoting this mindset, which will be made available to our Fellowship. We will share more on this soon. We know we cannot have all the answers, but we will continue to test and learn, openly sharing our experiences and inviting you to work with us to apply the Living Change Approach to the challenges of our time. ∎

Thank you to Ian Burbidge, Rebecca Ford, Robbie Bates, Shirin Maani and Josie Warden for your contributions to the thinking shared in this piece.

"This is the moment in which we can rethink the concept of health"

Matthew Taylor talks with virologist Ilaria Capua about the lessons we should learn from Covid-19

Matthew Taylor: How has the Covid-19 crisis changed your thinking as a scientist, a former politician and an academic?

Ilaria Capua: One of the things I would have never expected, and which is probably one of the main drivers of this dramatic situation, is denial.

I spent most of my life working in a laboratory setting to generate evidence on how to prepare for, manage and contain the spread of epidemic diseases and pandemic threats. I contributed to pandemic preparedness documents which implied that all governments and recipients would comply with WHO and international guidelines. Remember the discourse at the start of Covid-19? Many believed that it was not going to spread further than China. And when the virus arrived in Italy, the feeling in some areas of Europe was that this was only going to be an Italian problem. Driven by political considerations and electoral apathy, among other issues, our pandemic preparedness was what it was. But as far as I know, in no existing pandemic preparedness plan were there any instructions on how to achieve general consensus, encourage appropriate reactions and execute the required actions in a coordinated way.

Taylor: It's a direct consequence of polarisation, populism and fake news, and you yourself have been subject to a fake news attack. One of the lessons is that a world where people politicise facts is a vulnerable world. Do you think that's the major reason why we didn't respond in the way that we should?

Capua: We didn't have a plan to start getting the right information out there in the face of leaders and governments who were often transmitting conflicting messages. It doesn't matter whether it was deliberate or not, the point is that scientists knew that this was going to happen, but nobody believed us.

There was a lot of work around pandemic preparedness plans in relation to bird flu in the mid-2000s. I pushed for sequence sharing of viruses at a time when that was not being done, and that's what led to some of the trouble I experienced. I was accused of being a virus trafficker and of wanting to make money out of a business that didn't exist just because I was trying to promote sharing virus sequences.

H5N1 bird flu did not become a pandemic. We had a vaccine, we had diagnostics, we had surveillance systems. But because it did not become a pandemic, it was perceived by the general public as a hoax.

This brings us to 2009, when there was a flu pandemic caused by a swine-origin virus. It turned out to be a 'mild' pandemic, due to multiple drivers. The first is that it was caused by an H1N1 virus, and although none of our generation or our kids had antibodies to that particular type of virus, older people who had been exposed to the viruses of the tail of the Spanish flu pandemic – which went all the way to the late 1950s – were protected. Therefore, the vulnerable population had antibodies and often didn't get seriously ill. Second, we rapidly developed vaccines, and then we had treatment options. We got a bit lucky because it was mild, rather milder than predicted. But do you know what this caused? A false belief, leading ▶

"Populism is neither bad nor good, it's a grassroots pressure that affects humanity"

us to think that we were well equipped for a pandemic response. So replenishing preparedness stockpiles and updating existing plans was de-prioritised.

Taylor: Many of the older democracies have coped very badly with Covid-19. Is that partly because, in a democracy, making the case for long-term investment in something that might not happen is simply beyond the scope of our politicians?

Capua: There are two certainties: first, that another pandemic is going to happen; second, that we can't manage it in the way we did this time because we will not be able to take another hit of this magnitude. My perception is that we are seeing a light at the end of the tunnel, but it's still quite far away. Covid-19 will be around for years and it'll be worse in some places and milder in others. Vaccination may work better in some situations than others, but we are living an experiment. Thankfully, pandemic preparedness is now going to be on the global political agenda.

Taylor: Are you concerned that we could learn the wrong lessons because we'll focus on the narrow rather than the systemic causes?

Capua: Since the year 2000 we have had approximately 10 major spillover events – meaning the jump of a pathogen from animals to humans –

that we know about: Ebola (and there has been more than one outbreak of Ebola), Zika, SARS, MERS, and avian and swine influenza. Of these, only one – swine flu – has become a pandemic. Spillover events from animals to humans happen all the time, far more than we can imagine. What fortunately doesn't happen all the time is the perfect storm where the person who is infected gets sick and spreads the disease to someone else, who spreads it further.

From the virus's point of view, we are just a machine behind another receptor, a link in the transmission system. The virus connects through the cell receptor and is interested in the cell and its machinery. Subsequently our brains, our bodies – but also potentially the rest of our societal and human experience – are influenced by whether you have the right receptor. This is one of the problems that some of us cannot come to terms with, and is probably the basis of some of the denial.

We have an opportunity right now. People are interested in science because science has suddenly become one of the things that could directly solve their problems. Now is the time to act through people and the awareness that people can impose on decision-makers. Health has everyone's attention, and we know that economic growth – which is what many people in the world are interested in – is linked to health and wellbeing. We have generated the evidence now that if you cannot guarantee wellbeing there are severe limitations to economic growth.

This is the moment in which we can rethink the concept of health and look at it in a different way. The benefits may not be realised immediately for older generations, but will be priority number one for generations to come because they will have so much more computing power and much better, more refined and open data. However, our generation should not miss this opportunity to pave the way.

Taylor: Tell us a bit about circular health, which you have argued is the way forward.

Capua: I published *Circular Health* before the pandemic, and it has gained great traction recently. In the post-pandemic environment we have a window of opportunity to push a new way of thinking. We should find pathways within governance, research and everyday life that point towards the advancement of health as a system. The realisation of our interconnectivity is perhaps the greatest learning of the pandemic. We should not consider the health of human beings as separate from the health of animals, plants and the environment. This brings us back to the vision the Greek philosophers had of health: an equilibrium between earth, air, water and fire.

Here at the One Health Center of Excellence we have developed a research network which is carrying out interdisciplinary research in a unique convergence effort. The main drive forward comes from an ever-expanding open access environment that allows diverse disciplines to become more accessible to others, meaning we can rethink how we can become truly interdisciplinary. Covid-19 is the most measured event in human history, and we have an ever-expanding computing capacity and dataset; now we just need to roll up our sleeves and see what we can do.

The Circular Health Initiative is busy in several cities in Europe with a network of women (weTree.it) who are promoting replanting and refurbishing green areas. We are also working with New York beekeepers to test their honey and see if there are changes in the quality of contaminants in the honey before and after lockdown. We have a project with the Italian Heritage Foundation, where we are looking at how the ecosystem is resilient in the post-lockdown environment. CERN is one of our partners, and all the data that we generate will end up in its open access portal, Zenodo, so it will be available for future generations.

Taylor: I'm imagining that for you it's absolutely essential that sustainability is about biodiversity, species protection and ecology protection now as much as it is about the kind of big things you might want to do to reduce carbon emissions.

Capua: Biodiversity is the elasticity and flexibility of the planet. For example, one of the most potent painkillers we have comes from marine creatures. But we are killing jellyfish and coral because the oceans are getting hotter! What will we do when we lose this resource? Reducing the genetic pool of any species is a great impoverishment for the whole biosphere.

The pandemic has basically done the experiment that nobody wanted to do, which is to stop the world and see what happens. Well, we have seen that nature is back and is alive and kicking. If we make less noise, if we pollute less, if we behave more respectfully, the resilience of nature is not 500 years down the line; if we just stop for a few months then things start coming back. We should take advantage of the things that were impossible before the pandemic but now are possible, and capitalise on those opportunities to move in the right direction.

Taylor: There are species becoming extinct this year that could be the species that might save us in a future pandemic. Let's not keep talking about the big things we need to do to save the planet, let's also do the small things that we can do now. It should be about making everyone feel involved.

Capua: We are living in the era of populism and post truth. Let's try for a moment to dissolve the negativity surrounding populism and see if the coin has another side. The bright side of populism could be exactly what you are saying, citizen empowerment. Citizen engagement is essential to Circular Health

Taylor: You're a scientist, you're also an actor in the world of the academy trying to change the way the academy works, and you're a politician. You've been a part of all those worlds. What insight has that given you?

Capua: I'm done with being a politician, but the fact that I have had experience of the political system allows me to understand the dynamics of the political environment. I was a victim of populist thinking, so I have looked into that and I have tried to come to terms with what the populist movement means and where it's coming from. As academics, we tend to dismiss populism as though it were only bad. It's neither bad nor good; it's a strength that comes from the feelings of people; it's a grassroots pressure that affects humanity. That grassroots pressure can be channelled into bad things, such as the events in Washington, DC on 6 January, and good things, such as the empowerment of the population to contribute to bigger change. ∎

DRAMA DISCLAIMERS

Do we really need to be warned that the TV and films we are watching might not be entirely factual?

by Rob Williams

Rob Williams is a screenwriter and producer

I thoroughly enjoyed the latest instalment of *The Crown*. Not that I watched it. While I have nothing but admiration for the talents of all those behind the hit series, I could not care less about the real-life royals and refuse to invest my time in their fictional counterparts.

No, what I enjoyed about season four was the media fallout. 'It's simply not true that Diana was dressed as a tree the first time she met Prince Charles!' 'Lord Mountbatten never wrote to Charles warning him that his affair with Camilla would ruin the monarchy!' 'Margaret Thatcher never looked as sexy as Gillian Anderson, even in the dark!' And so on. So troubled were some by such inaccuracies that Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden reportedly plans to ask Netflix to add a disclaimer to each episode stating that what the audience is watching is fiction rather than fact.

This is a particularly stupid stance and not even a very interesting debate. The big giveaway about *The Crown* not being a documentary is the fact it is called drama. As the American screenwriter, director and producer Aaron Sorkin said: "People don't speak in dialogue," and drama is "a painting, not a photograph".

But the furore did interest me in other ways. Having written for television for 12 years, it seems to me that *The Crown* discussion does raise interesting questions, about what is 'real' when it comes to stories, about who has the 'right' to tell these stories and why any of it really matters.

Fact informing fiction

First, let me say that every writer I know is a magpie when it comes to finding material. We are constantly on the lookout for anything that might make a satisfying narrative, be it from our own lives or those of friends and family, as well as things we read, watch or listen to. Stealing is part of the job, as is bending the facts to suit the story. My experiences, or the experiences of others 'processed' by me, are in everything I have written, whether set in the more domestic worlds of *Casualty* and *EastEnders*, or in the heightened realms of *Killing Eve* and *The Man in the High Castle*. In the latter, which portrayed a world where the Nazis won the Second World War and attempted to turn America into a fascist dictatorship, should we have reassured viewers that this did not, in fact, happen (at least, not in the way the book's author Philip K Dick imagined it)?

I am currently writing a drama for Channel 4 that aims to ask serious questions about the state of our prison system, while hopefully making the audience laugh. I taught prisoners and have been a prison visitor for years. Will a single real person or event feature in the show? Definitely not. Will they be

present in every second? Absolutely. When we create a work of fiction, we can never truly quantify what comes from life and what is pure imagination. Does this matter? When it comes to fiction I suspect most people would say probably not. But what about when fiction meets fact?

When I created and wrote *The Victim* for BBC1, we were mindful of a potential outcry about elements of the plot's similarity to the murder of James Bulger in 1993. There are similarities to that case – as well as a host of less well-known tragedies – but the story is not 'based' on any of them. It is entirely a work of fiction. Part of why I decided to go that way – rather than dramatising a real-life crime – was the freedom this gave me to explore the wider issues I was interested in and the freedom it gave my characters to act in any way that felt true to them, rather than having to honour facts.

Not that anyone truly knows what the facts are. All anybody ever 'knows' is how they perceived events. As soon as an event is remembered, even by those present, it is already an approximation of reality; they are already creating a fiction. Their narrative may well be closer to the fabled 'truth' than we will ever get from even the most scrupulous researcher but it is still a sliding scale and nobody 'owns' it. For me the crucial question is whether people like me have a responsibility to be sensitive.

Peak TV

If a story is deserving of being told, the writer's only job is to get to the essence of it, to find the/a/ their truth. We are living in a period of 'peak TV'; a golden age if not of quality then certainly of quantity. There is a voracious demand for story, preferably ones with juicy hooks that make us pathetically unable to resist clicking 'next episode'. It is a world in which intellectual property is everything and a platform (read: existing consumers) comes a close second. This means that screen rights for even average books are selling for ludicrous sums, half-interesting articles are optioned before they have been published and just about any moment or period in human history is being pored over with an eye to its suitability for TV translation.

In this context, 'reality' is just about the best intellectual property there is. For risk-averse TV execs perennially nervous about the likes of me possessing the ability to make stuff up, it is incredibly comforting to have a history book as a story bible, and there is no better 'platform' than shared experience. And crucially, it 'works'.

The Crown is only one example. Other fact-based dramas like *Narcos*, *Mindhunter* and *Chernobyl* have also reached big audiences and won multiple awards, and 'true crime' has become a successful staple of both the BBC's, and particularly ITV's, drama schedules in recent years. And it is here that perhaps ▶

the *why* question needs to be asked most insistently. One of TV drama's many strengths is its intimacy: it takes us into the heads of other people and asks us to empathise – not in a theatre or cinema surrounded by strangers – but in our homes. So if programme-makers are going to re-enact infamous crimes, then for the sake of all those touched by it, along with the rest of us, surely there has to be a good reason. What is the point of this? Is there one? There should be something demonstrably valuable, a fresh insight or viewpoint, that it is only possible to access by dramatising traumatic events. Is that always the case? No, but then the *why* question is not being asked rigorously enough when it comes to television, fact-based or otherwise.

Turn on to switch off?

And truthfully, that is what really irked me about *The Crown* discourse. Is this truly the highest level of debate television can engender now: what was Diana wearing when she first met Charles? One of the main reasons I wanted to write for TV was its ability to create debate about things that matter to all of us. Witness the erudite anger of *Boys from the Blackstuff* or *GBH*, the relevant entertainment of *Cracker* or *Shameless*. There is arguably more to be angry about now than ever before but is that reflected by what we see on television? Or are we so tired of conflict across every other medium that has grown up in the meantime that we now look to drama only for comfort, to be in someone else's head primarily to 'switch off'?

I desperately hope not. But I am not arguing that every show has to have something to say; that would be exhausting and probably joyless (though it need not be), and there is room for every flavour. But we should demand more from drama: from those who make it, those who fund it and perhaps even those who watch it. With empathy in short supply in so many ways right now, any mechanism that has the ability to deliver that magic element should take that responsibility seriously, and drama has the power to put us in the shoes of other people like nothing else.

Of course, I am in favour of pretty much any debate about any show that hits the public domain. Television drama should be provocative, but preferably not because the man who broke into Buckingham Palace criticises a show for getting the layout of the Queen's bedroom wrong. In that climate, I think we've all been robbed of something. ∎

A CIVIC SOCIETY

As Scotland looks to its future, the RSA is well placed to explore new ideas and bring together diverse viewpoints

by Jamie Cooke
🐦 @JamieACooke

Jamie Cooke
is Head of
RSA Scotland

When I had my first interview to work at the RSA, nearly 11 years ago, I made a bold claim: "Scotland is the best opportunity the RSA has to change the world." Looking at where we are today as a nation, I feel confident in standing by that statement. The appetite for change and impact that exists in Scotland chimes powerfully with the call to action that motivates us at the RSA. As an organisation rooted in the philosophy of the Enlightenment (and therefore by default in the contribution that Scots made to that movement), the RSA is well positioned to continue to help shape whatever future path Scotland takes.

"Wha's like us?"

Scotland is an ambitious small country, one that wants to be seen as a leading player in critical areas such as responding to the climate emergency and exploring innovative new social and economic policies and models. There is appetite for testing new ideas, and a desire to find our place in a rapidly changing world.

Over the past few years, politics in Scotland has been in flux. Brexit has seen the concept of Scottish independence not just on the table, but consistently supported in polling; and the Covid-19 pandemic has thrust into stark relief the failings inherent in our social security systems. All of this opens up space for change; yet it also raises questions as to how that change can happen, and who can make it happen.

From my experience, change must be driven by civic society and the wider Scottish population if it is to be fair and sustainable. As we have explored at the RSA over the past year, polarisation has become a significant challenge across many countries, and Scotland is no different. The divide over the country's constitutional future has been the defining fault line in Scotland's political discourse over the past few years; more recently, debates over issues such as Brexit and the proposed reconfiguration of the Gender Recognition Act have also led to significant disagreement. The Scottish National Party has been the dominant political force in Scotland for over a decade, but it now faces significant splits between different factions. Meanwhile, opposition parties have been struggling with their own challenges, with Scottish Labour and the Scottish Conservatives having both ousted their leaders recently.

The political environment is fractured and divisive, and therefore a challenge to progress. However, the current state of affairs also offers the opportunity for Scottish civic society to respond. In order for it to do so successfully, there are several key characteristics – already existing but requiring support to grow and flourish – that are essential: active collaboration, innovation, system change and global connections. ▶
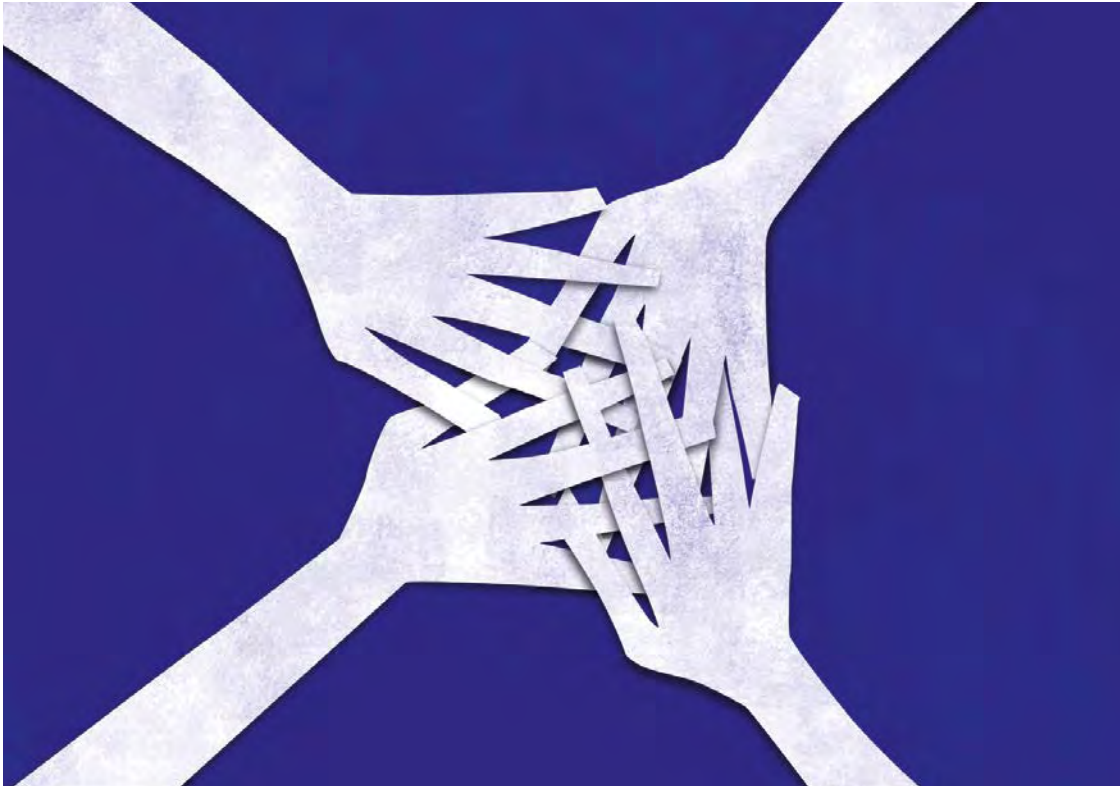
Active collaboration

It is true that the size of the nation (Scotland's population is 5.5 million), coupled with the openness of the political system, can make connecting with politicians and decision-makers easier than it would be in other countries. Collaboration within sectors tends to be strong, but there can also be silos between different parts of society, as the public, private and third sectors can operate fairly separately.

For civic society to drive forward positive change in Scotland, we have to spread our networks of collaboration beyond our own sector, finding ways to engage private enterprises and the public sector in a shared endeavour. We must root that collaboration in action; we are not short of ideas, but we must now look to deliver them. And we have to create a message that all of us in Scotland are part of the solution.

Innovation

The Scottish policy environment is open to innovation. Frustrations with the frailties and failings of the current system, the impact of Covid-19, relatively broad civic and political consensus around certain approaches, and a well-educated population have created an environment in which ideas can flourish. Scotland has become recognised as a world leader in a range of new approaches, from responses to the climate emergency, to re-imaging economic systems through the lens of wellbeing, to new social policies such as basic income. These ideas are not unique to Scotland; however, the interest in and openness to them from politicians and the wider public offers a powerful opportunity for embedding change.

It has been clear that the areas of innovative policymaking that we are involved in at the RSA, from the Future of Work to Regenerative Futures, Universal Basic Income to community banking, have had a resonance here in Scotland, opening doors to engagement and impact. There is an opportunity for organisations like ours to work closely with other civic society groups in Scotland to ensure that policy innovation is rooted in the needs and experiences of the people of this country and driven by the desire for positive change.

System change

One of the areas of RSA work that has picked up considerable interest in Scotland has been our Living Change Approach. As discussed elsewhere in this issue of *RSA Journal* by my colleague Joanna Choukeir, the approach offers a framework for systemic change that is rooted in design thinking. It is

perfectly attuned to the challenge and opportunities for Scotland and has been used by public and voluntary sector organisations to great effect. For example, NHS Lothian, which has been striving to ensure its strategic vision can rise to the numerous challenges on the horizon, has found the approach immensely helpful, and the Scottish Commission for Learning Disability has used the framework to review and refresh its priorities.

Change, even in a smaller country with many advantages to hand, can seem overwhelming. Real, lasting, positive change requires a systemic approach, iterative in nature, but with an achievable aspiration as its goal. The Living Change Approach allows us to bring that system change to the forefront in Scotland, and to collaboratively build deliverable impact.

Global connections

Brexit and evolving public opinion on the issue of Scottish independence have given further impetus to the country's drive to find a place for itself in the world. This drive transcends the constitutional debate. It instead demonstrates a non-partisan recognition that as a small country that is interlinked into the global community, and dependent upon it for much of the change we need to see, Scotland has to find a way to learn from, and influence, partners across the world.

There has been much progress in this area already. The Scottish Government has set up a network of hubs in major cities across the world, which are exploring opportunities for trade and investment. Major international opportunities such as COP26 have been secured for the country, ensuring that the eyes of the world are upon us. Policy innovation such as basic income and the wellbeing economy have garnered a global reputation for Scotland as an innovative small nation. And work from organisations such as ourselves at RSA Scotland has started to tap into the global appetite for collaboration with the country, from the burgeoning relationship between Glasgow and Pittsburgh, to the collaboration and events with Fellows in Germany, Japan and Oceania, to name but a few. These relationships, rooted in action around economic opportunity, good work, sustainability and new models of the social contract, offer examples of what real-world impact can look like.

Civic society can help drive these connections and ensure they are rooted in action. The RSA offers a positive and non-partisan space to explore and challenge new ideas, and to bring together diverse organisations and interests. Enhancing these relationships, building on the global goodwill and connection to Scotland, and developing new partnerships are essential to increasing Scotland's prosperity and success.

Building a civil society

Scotland, like many countries, faces a range of challenges and opportunities in the decades ahead. Some sit firmly within our control as a nation, some require wider examination of the structures of power in the UK, and some can only be responded to on a global level. For Scotland to create a positive future for its inhabitants it will require a greater harnessing of the different parts of society, and in particular for civic society to be seen as a central driver of change rather than an optional extra.

It is not enough, as we move out of this world-changing pandemic, to simply aim for our people to survive. Instead we must ceaselessly work to create the environment in which they can thrive to their fullest potential. RSA Scotland, our Fellows and our global network of allies are committed to being part of that solution. ∎

RSA Fellowship in action

Hackney Emergency Food Hub

When Covid-19 broke out at the start of 2020, it was clear that the community around the Woodberry Down estate in north London, where the Manor House Development Trust has been working for 14 years, would be hit hard.

The Trust, where Valy Thorsteinsdottir FRSA is deputy CEO, has run diverse projects on supporting residents in improving their social connections, wellbeing, health and skills.

The project received a £2,000 RSA Catalyst Seed Grant, which went towards funding an Emergency Aid Coordinator for several weeks and integrating new impact and evaluation software. The new post was essential in organising the project, building safe networks, and adapting and developing supplementary projects as community needs changed.

"After speaking with the community, mutual aid groups and partner organisations in the area, we decided to launch the Hackney Emergency Food Hub, focusing on feeding vulnerable individuals who were shielding, and families at risk of food poverty," said Valy.

"Empowering individuals and groups to take ownership of their future is fundamental to our approach." The team ensured residents who received support were consulted regularly about the programme and how it was working.

∎ *To find out more, contact Valy on valy.thor@mhdt.org.uk or visit mhdt.org.uk or redmondcommunitycentre.com*

BOOSTING COMMUNITY ENTERPRISE

Building strong foundations for the future requires collective effort,
with the public and private sectors both playing a part

by Ian Burbidge
🐦 @ianburbidge

Ian Burbidge is Head of Innovation and Change at the RSA

Grafton, a small New England settlement in Vermont state, had long been home to those seeking a quiet life characterised by low levels of government regulation and civic participation. It seemed like the perfect place to develop a community based on logic and free market principles, and that is exactly what a group of libertarian activists, calling themselves the Free Town Project, attempted to do. During the 2000s, these 'Free Towners' moved to the area, aggressively deregulated, slashed public services by a third and undermined the legitimacy of the local government. An expanding population and contracting tax revenue precipitated a perhaps unsurprising perfect storm.

Over the next decade, things got steadily worse and the social and environmental fabric of the town started to crumble, from potholes to rising crime. While individual freedom grew, collective resilience weakened.

Had the lessons of what happened in Grafton – recounted by the journalist Matthew Hongoltz-Hetling in his book *A Libertarian Walks Into a Bear* – been heeded, perhaps we would understand better the importance of community resilience and the mechanisms through which people come together to attend to common challenges.

Impact and resilience

We attend to these challenges in the places where they manifest: in the neighbourhoods, parks, estates and town centres where we go about our daily lives. Our ability to succeed depends on the range of collective resources and assets available. Yet, in many western countries, our responses have been fatally undermined. In the UK, Covid-19 has exposed the extent to which our society is riven by structural fault lines, exacerbated by a policy of austerity that has undermined the resilience of people, communities and institutions to effectively absorb the shock of a crisis.

We have cut support for the most vulnerable, leading to worsening living conditions. Food banks and other such Band-Aids provide much-needed help, but also normalise poverty, while investment in prevention has been significantly cut. Action for Children finds that early intervention services for children have seen spending cut by 46% in the eight years to 2018/19. In 2019, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights reported that a fifth of the UK population lives in poverty and, according to the Office for National Statistics, the difference in life expectancy between the most and least deprived areas in England widened between 2013 and 2018.

We have also systematically disinvested in our communities, particularly the poorest. According to a
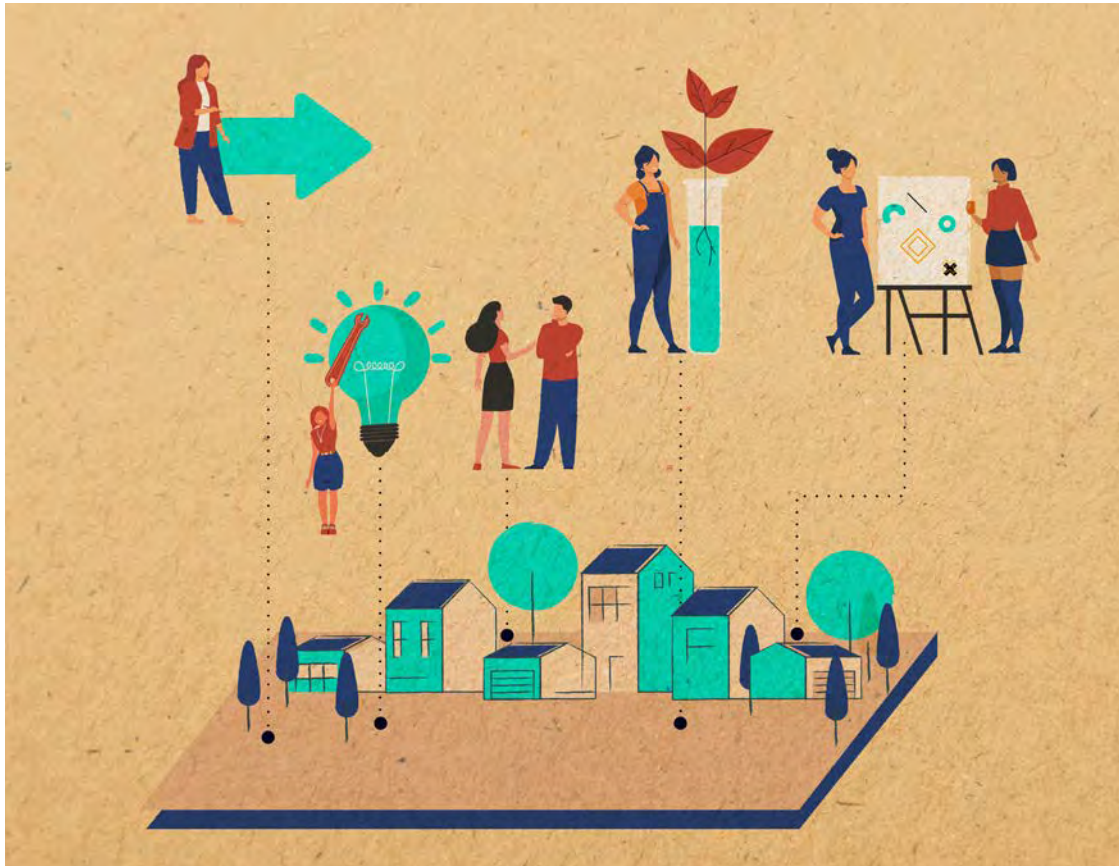
2019 report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, in the decade since 2009/10, cuts per person in the 10% most deprived council areas have averaged 31%, compared with 16% cuts in the least deprived 10%. This has resulted in the closure of valuable community assets and charities folding as grants and donations fall. The ability of our communities to weather the storm of crisis is also reliant on the amount of social capital they have and people's desire and ability to step into the spaces left by a retreating state.

Out of necessity, and against the odds, communities, the wider public sector and civil society have stepped up and worked together to respond to local needs, largely in the absence of effective direction, investment or coordination from government. Over last summer, I heard many stories from leaders of community businesses and social enterprises about how they had responded during the first few months of the pandemic. What can we learn from this endeavour if we are to put in place some firm foundations for the future?

Emerging futures

In January 2021, with funding from the National Lottery's Emerging Futures Fund, the RSA held a series of community listening events in Birmingham, Norfolk, Lothian and the North West region of England to hear about how people are taking action to tackle the myriad intersecting problems that their villages, towns and cities face. This work forms part of our exploration of how communities are coping with Covid-19 and how this may lay the foundations of the future that local citizens want.

People were supporting local community businesses and shops, more appreciative of their local neighbourhoods and keen to have more of a say in their development. As one participant said: "I'm getting more involved in local grassroots action that has been increasing over the past decade as mainstream services have been withdrawn." We heard about the stresses experienced by those running local groups and social enterprises – including high levels of uncertainty around their business models and loss of income – about rising need and adapting to changing circumstances, and of the sense of pride and reward intrinsically involved in this endeavour.

These social entrepreneurs and community leaders had the crucial feedback loop of seeing first-hand the people in their own communities benefit. They are an important part of the picture, operating alongside local government, education, health services and the wider public, private and charity sectors. Little wonder, perhaps, that the World Economic Forum COVID Response Alliance for Social Entrepreneurs called for ▶
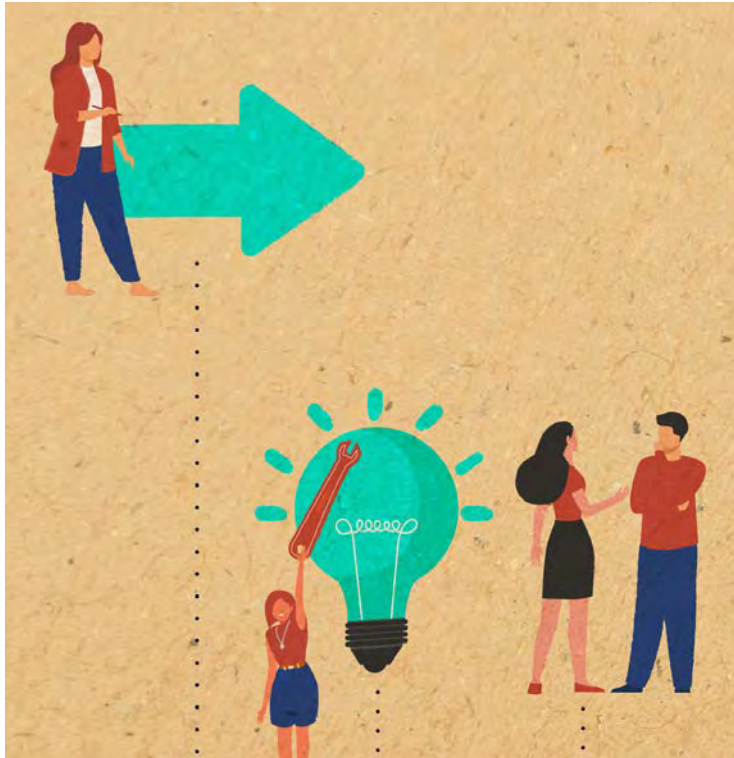
"It is time we saw community not as a noun, but as a verb"

"all actors to stand by social entrepreneurs as first responders to the Covid-19 crisis and as pioneers of a green, inclusive society and economic system".

Making social innovation a reality

According to figures from UnLtd, a foundation for social entrepreneurs, one in four people who want to start a business want to create a social enterprise. Operating in the space between the state and the private sector, social entrepreneurs are critical agents in local change processes. Their perspective, unique set of skills and competencies allow them to see new ways of responding to societal problems. Close to the ground, they have skin in the game, living in the communities in which they operate and having a deep and direct understanding of local problems. The social innovation processes that they draw upon are typically powered by community goodwill and social capital, as well as more traditional assets and resources. They are able to test new ideas, actively involving citizens throughout the innovation process to ensure they respond to needs, while creating a sense of communal ownership of new products, services and processes.

As we heard from participants in the listening sessions, we need "to encourage new entrepreneurs, young people, fostering new ideas, hope and encouragement to make the world a better place," and

"fresh ideas, so we don't try to recreate the old world or spend too much time lamenting how bad it is".

Local leaders in all sectors and organisations need to actively grow and support an ecosystem of social innovation and enterprise that empowers citizens to make the changes they want to see locally. To do this, the public sector must do much more to open its arms to the efforts of social entrepreneurs and community organisers. This will not be easy, as it involves transferring power and legitimacy to citizens and developing new ways of funding and budgeting. We must move beyond slow commissioning processes that assume we can specify all of the deliverables in a complex situation and avoid combative contractual delivery relationships that are doomed from the start. Instead, we should do more to invest in the infrastructure that enables enterprise and voluntary endeavour to flourish alongside more traditional public and private sector bodies.

These organisations will emerge and adapt; they will prototype, test and learn what works, prioritising needs over profit. New forms of partnership are needed in which budget-holder and fundee learn together and ensure value for money. Local public services have long experimented with mechanisms such as devolving budgets directly to communities and community-led commissioning. These approaches should be amplified and include more spend that is

currently controlled by central government. For government to mandate innovation is to fail to see that in complex situations it can only ever be context- and person-specific. Without decentralisation of the process of innovation, the innovation we seek gets crowded out. Perhaps, if the Social Value Act and other means of accounting for value – and the long term – were truly embedded, we might finally break down the unhealthy default of 'big contracting'.

Rather than responding to poverty through private sector delivery of food parcels – where, as we have seen, profit margins and distance from people's experience can backfire – what about leveraging local food supply chains? Greening the supply chain, supporting local jobs and stronger relationships with providers are all intangible benefits when overseen from afar but massively important locally. Subsidiarity is the idea that decisions should be taken at the closest geographical scale to the people and communities impacted. This principle should apply to commissioning and to how we spend public money.

Levelling up in this context is no political soundbite, nor is it a paternalistic, technocratic exercise in command-and-control. As one participant said: "The state system needs to be about facilitating the local, the community and the family to respond to people's needs; they should do away with the big support structure."

This requires a fundamental rethink and realignment of what it means to live in a society in which the talents of everyone are valued and liberated. We may enter an extended period of time post-Covid-19 in which new ideas and innovations flourish, driving competition between them. This is the natural order of things: those ideas that are the best fit for the changed context are most likely to survive; others are likely to fall by the wayside. Yet good ideas can be crowded out by the controlling instincts of government and those seeking to return to the status quo.

Foundations for the future

Returning to Grafton, there are lessons to be learnt. North America is home to around three-quarters of a million black bears and Grafton was attracting more than its share of particularly daring ones, prompting a very real threat to life for residents. Yet, to do anything proactive about the bears would be to undermine the libertarian experiment. Caught on the horns of this dilemma, the zero-government approach proved incapable of dealing with the problem, reinforcing the notion that any individual must eventually face an issue bigger than their own ability to resolve it. As Hongoltz-Hetling writes, "when it comes to certain kinds of problems, the response must be collective, supported by public effort, and dominated by something other than too-tidy-by-half invocations of market rationality and the maximisation of individual personal freedom".

If we are to leave anything behind in the wake of Covid-19, it must surely be the application of deterministic, command-and-control and largely short-term thinking to complex situations. Ultimately, establishing foundations for the future is not about public or private, local or national, paid or voluntary, social enterprise or philanthropy, economic growth or sustainable resource use. It cannot be reduced to an either/or dichotomy; our communities need both/and propositions, grounded in collective effort.

There are other crises at play – notably climate change – and there will be more to follow. How we learn from Covid-19 will go a long way in shaping how we respond to these challenges. If the conversations the RSA has been having are anything to go by, community has to be at the heart of this action. Perhaps that is it, in a sentence. It is time we saw community not as a noun, but as a verb. ∎

CREATIVE STATES

Is state-led risk-taking the answer to post-Covid-19 recovery?

by Theo Papaioannou
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With Covid-19 vaccines starting to be rolled out, and an end to the pandemic in sight, states around the world are beginning to look ahead to economic and social recovery. The technological innovation that led to the development of vaccines and treatments seems to have provided an exit strategy from the pandemic, but not from its dire global consequences. At the time of writing, more than 2 million people have died, economies and lives in many parts of the world have been brought to a standstill and healthcare systems have all but collapsed. Covid-19 has caused economic growth to slow, increasing unemployment, poverty and hunger.

In response, several innovation and political theorists, such as the economist Mariana Mazzucato, argue that today it is more necessary than ever to rethink the state's entrepreneurial role in society and welfare. Their argument provides justification for a strong state that is committed to investing in knowledge, institutions and infrastructure, including public health, and to taking risks for the sake of reducing uncertainty through innovation. For example, the entrepreneurial state can take on the financial risk of investing in new genetic technologies such as gene editing, artificial intelligence and machine learning for healthcare; these solutions may not result in a swift financial return but may ultimately improve health system efficiency and accelerate our understanding of diseases such as Covid-19.

Mission-led states

In the view of innovation theorists, tackling the crisis and ensuring rapid economic recovery require a missionary state – a state that focuses its policies on problem-specific challenges – with the ability and vision to coordinate, finance and direct innovation and development towards high-value activities. They argue that it is this missionary approach that put man on the moon and facilitated the creation of innovative technologies such as the internet, biotechnology and nanotechnology, among others.

Although the risk-taking argument provides a clear way forward and justifies policies of economic and social intervention for post-Covid-19 recovery, it is not underpinned by a coherent political conception of the state. Given that the authority of the democratic state is derived from the people themselves, any risk-taking for innovative enterprise and mission-oriented investment for post-Covid-19 recovery needs to be justified and – more importantly – legitimised on the grounds of principled democratic procedures. This implies that mission-led innovation itself is a value-laden political process, requiring civic participation in decision-making and standards of fairness.

"Innovation can improve inclusion or exacerbate exclusion depending on the political framework"

I would argue that other forms of the state – liberal, welfare, authoritarian – also have key obligations that might constrain or condition their strategic vision of risk-taking. To put it another way: becoming an entrepreneurial state in the post-Covid-19 era is not a straightforward process, no matter what the innovation theorists might say.

The politics of innovation

Until very recently, the notion of the state as a political institution that has a role to play in the generation of new knowledge and technologies was absent from innovation studies. More than 100 years ago, the founding father of this interdisciplinary area, Austrian political economist Joseph Schumpeter, saw clearly the interplay between politics and economics, influencing the ideas of British economist Chris Freeman, British-Venezuelan scholar Carlota Perez and others. However, for more than two decades (1990–2010), political notions such as the state almost vanished from academic and policy debates on technological change and progress. This is partly because politics and the state were attacked and increasingly dismantled during the peak of neoliberalism in western economies, and partly because of the domination of innovation studies

by liberal economists who were sceptical about the importance of politics in understanding economics. Economics has overwhelmingly focused on efficiency and growth, overlooking the distributional effects of innovation, which are, by definition, political. Innovation can improve inclusion or exacerbate exclusion depending on the political framework within which it is generated and distributed.

In the early 2010s, a number of innovation scholars and political scientists propounded that technological progress would not automatically lead to social progress, and that the state was in fact behind almost all investments in radical technological revolutions, including the internet and subsequent digital revolution. The return of the state in innovation was essentially confirmed in 2013 with the publication of Mariana Mazzucato's book *The Entrepreneurial State*. This work follows a trend of state intervention theory and reaffirms the idea of the strategic state that has been around for more than half a century. Mazzucato goes further than the theorists before her, arguing that the state is not a simple facilitator of economic growth. Rather, it should be understood as a key partner of the private sector when it comes to searching for growth and technological change.

Can the state be visionary?

One of Mazzucato's key arguments, and one that I think has merit, is that the current economic theory that guides public policy is not inspiring enough to encourage truly visionary state action. This is a problem in terms of regenerating post-Covid-19, when we will need original, innovative methods to recover economically and socially.

At present, state entrepreneurialism is often justified by 'market failure' arguments. For instance, during the first wave of the pandemic, in spring 2020, the UK market failed to ensure sufficient availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) and some medicines due to deindustrialisation and outsourcing of manufacturing to emerging economies. This justified state intervention for emergency repurposing of manufacturing facilities in the UK. In the post-Covid-19 era, such justifications might indeed encourage policies aimed at funding basic research and infrastructure projects in order to tackle the unwillingness or inability of private firms to invest in social and economic recovery. However, such an approach would not go far enough. The state needs to play a visionary strategic role that provides direction for innovation rather than just fixing market failures. The state needs to be entrepreneurial, engaging in risk-taking, shaping markets and creating a new vision.

The question is whether any state can become fully entrepreneurial in the long term, or whether there are moral, political, epistemological, and even contextual, constraints that prevent certain forms of the state from adopting a strategic risk-taking vision.

For example, can relatively young states in the contexts of developing countries become entrepreneurial, taking risks and engaging in co-creation activities with innovators and communities? The answer seems to be no, since there are many developing states that either institutionally lack the capacity or fail to perform certain functions, including protecting citizens against fraud and theft. States such as Somalia, Nigeria, South Sudan and Libya, which are included in the Fragile States Index (published by US thinktank The Fund for Peace), appear to be unable to control all their territories, let alone establish institutions that can foster innovation and growth.

Contemporary innovation theorists, however, put forward an abstract theory of the entrepreneurial state, having in mind the nation-state in developed countries of the western world. Even so, they neither define the state nor provide a holistic theory of the state functions and institutions. On the contrary, they consider the state to be an institutional fixity, as with government. But as Greek sociologist Nicos Poulantzas has shown, the state is neither one formal unity nor identical to government. The state is a dynamic condensation of different logics and formations. The structures and functions of the state at given historical moments in time put more constraints on some missions and fewer on others.

Innovation theorists seem to overlook or ignore such constraints of the state in a way that results in a false impression being given; one in which all forms of the state can potentially be entrepreneurial without constraints and legitimacy conditions. Thus, for innovation theorists, it is simply a matter of convincing governments around the world, no matter their liberal democratic or authoritarian profile, of the importance of mission-oriented state innovations. But this is a naïve, or even unrealistic, prospect, even in the forthcoming era of post-Covid-19 recovery.

The authoritarian state

The proposed entrepreneurial state as a way of achieving post-Covid-19 economic and social recovery, although possible, will always have constraints and conditions in place. The legitimacy requirements of each form of state – whether authoritarian, liberal, relative autonomous welfare state, neoliberal or libertarian – will shape what these constraints and conditions are.

Take first the authoritarian entrepreneurial state. Although it may seem that such a state could undertake any mission it wished, due to not having to comply with democratic norms, it in fact has constraints built in. This state earns its legitimacy through providing its citizens with social and economic security, even though it achieves this through imposing its vision on its citizens.

The authoritarian entrepreneurial state pushes forward undemocratically decided mission-oriented investments for innovations; such as, for example, disease surveillance technologies, which could maximise the social distributive benefits for citizens. But if the promised benefits, especially economic security, do not materialise from these mission-oriented investments, then an authoritarian state would no longer be permitted to function as an entrepreneurial state. As people ceased to trust state missions, civil unrest and/or disobedience would break out. States such as China and Singapore appear to have adopted this constrained form of entrepreneurial state. The authoritarian missions of these states in certain areas of industrial innovation have already delivered benefits to citizens by controlling Covid-19, strengthening public health infrastructures and increasing productive capabilities. But the Chinese state knows that public health innovation is not enough if it comes at the expense of GDP growth or ▶

standards of living: it is no accident that the Chinese economy grew 4.9% between July and September 2020. Draconian control measures aimed at limiting the spread of Covid-19 were implemented, but authoritarian state entrepreneurialism also created millions of new jobs.

The liberal capitalist state

The liberal capitalist state would prioritise individual freedom and private property – upon which its social contract is based – when negotiating its vision for post-Covid-19 recovery. This would imply formal democratic participation in the decision-making process for investments that are likely to contribute to individual freedom and protect private property institutions. For example, such investments might include research and development (R&D) for new technologies that could lead to a green post-Covid-19 recovery. However, if such contributions did not take place (or failed to deliver), a liberal capitalist state would lose its legitimacy as an entrepreneurial state. Liberal states across Europe, including France and Germany, might face legitimacy crises as entrepreneurial states if they were, for instance, to raise taxes to strengthen public health and green manufacturing, or due to their tendency to pick up industrial winners, violating the liberal principle of state neutrality towards different conceptions of good in technology and society. Reorienting the functions and priorities of liberal capitalist states towards redistribution while maintaining and respecting the principles of individual freedom and private property is a difficult balance to achieve in the 21st century.

The welfare state

The welfare state would promote risk-taking as a post-Covid-19 strategy for recovery as long as it contributes to an increase in social welfare without threatening the narrow interests of the ruling class in capital accumulation. The legitimacy of mission-oriented investments for generating post-Covid-19 innovation and growth would be conditional on maximising social welfare through the innovative outcomes of such investments and ensuring the interests of the ruling class were not compromised by new technologies. Often missions lose sight of their purpose and end up undermining social welfare. Fred Block, an American sociologist, and Mazzucato provide a number of examples of missionary innovations that began with the objective of addressing social welfare issues but ended up appropriated and privatised for the sake of individual welfare. These include biotechnology companies that received millions of dollars in R&D funds from the state intended to benefit the public good, but which resulted in the drug companies themselves profiting.

The neoliberal, or libertarian, state

A fourth, and most constrained, form of entrepreneurial state would be the neoliberal or libertarian state. The latter would not allow any extensive risk-taking for post-Covid-19 recovery beyond defence and police services, on the grounds that it would be epistemologically impossible and morally indefensible. Although previous forms of entrepreneurial state seem to assume unlimited knowledge that allows for market intervention, a neoliberal or libertarian state assumes strict epistemological limitations. These would prevent successful intervention in the market for the sake of mission-oriented innovation, let alone creating new fairer conditions of growth. Under such an entrepreneurial state, the focus of public policy would be on growth by means of competition between technology-based firms under free market capitalism. A neoliberal or libertarian state would be incompatible with any redistributive policies based on the returns of successful innovations.

This raises the question of the relevance of the entrepreneurial state argument for some parts of the western capitalist world. A number of capitalist states, including the US and the UK, have adopted a neoliberal state ideology. This is the reason why the US budget for disease control and prevention has been alarmingly reduced in recent years and why austerity cuts in the UK have led to millions of pounds being slashed from the NHS. Although the Covid-19 crisis has forced some neoliberal states, including the UK, to retreat from austerity policies and instead strengthen their health systems and protect labour through direct redistribution schemes (such as the UK's furlough scheme), these states cannot envisage any long-term entrepreneurial activity on their part taking place outside the market realm. In the context of neoliberalism, public policy tends to be technical and depoliticised, given the state's withdrawal from interventionary macroeconomic policy. Often state initiatives for macroeconomic intervention are branded as illiberal or are criticised on epistemological grounds.

If there was such an entity as a non-constrained or full entrepreneurial state, this would be a state able to pursue whatever missions and technological opportunities it wished without having to consider the political costs of its choices (it is likely that only the economic cost would matter). However, such a state would not survive in practice. The state as such is a political institution not an economic one.

Entrepreneurialism after Covid-19

I believe that the state in the post-Covid-19 era can be as entrepreneurial as its form allows it to be. This implies two things. First, some states (authoritarian, socialist, welfare) might possess the legitimacy to openly become more entrepreneurial than others (liberal, neoliberal, libertarian) in order to successfully deal with the problem of post-Covid-19 recovery. Second, the entrepreneurial interventions of some states (especially neoliberal or libertarian states) might not be sustained long term. They are bound to be short-term 'institutional entrepreneurs' due to the lack of legitimacy that arises owing to their inevitable failure to maintain neutrality towards particular innovations and/or firms, or as a result of their failure to control the impact of these innovations on fundamental freedoms and individual rights (for example, digital surveillance). To put it another way, the more entrepreneurial neoliberal or libertarian states become, the more they contradict their own principles and foundations. The result is a legitimation crisis.

All missions have something in common. Whether neoliberal or welfarist, authoritarian or democratic, they tend to require centralised organisation. In the post-Covid-19 era, what we should expect is centralisation of public policy and governance systems in order to address rising unemployment, poverty and inequality. Evidence-based central planning will be essential. What we should not expect is any radical reconstruction of society and economy under the entrepreneurial state. Capitalism cannot be remade.

In theory, what the entrepreneurial state could do is mitigate the consequences of unfettered capitalism and improve some social inequalities; for instance, reducing unequal private property relations through taxation for funding missions and through redistribution of the benefits of innovation. Thus, its role would be to respond to citizens' claims for minimum social justice requirements in the process of post-Covid-19 recovery. In order for the public policy of a legitimate entrepreneurial state to promote such a recovery, the active support of communities of innovators and members of the public would be required.

But although the post-Covid-19 era presents an opportunity for radical reconstruction, the constrained forms of entrepreneurial state can only reproduce capitalist economy and society. They have not the ambition to change the fundamental social relations of capitalism; until then, the entrepreneurial state can only achieve so much.

The entrepreneurial state could work in practice so long as it takes into account its constraints. Whether authoritarian, liberal, neoliberal or welfarist, these constraints will provide the basis for ethical-political contestation and legitimation of missions. Clearly, for the entrepreneurial state to be democratic it would need to engage the public in the decision-making process. Perhaps the best possible form of democratic entrepreneurial state we can hope for, in order to achieve an even minimally socially just post-Covid-19 era, is the welfare state form that decides missions through public deliberation. ∎

"What people want is constancy"

Matthew Taylor talks with Ben Houchen, the Mayor of Tees Valley, about the levelling up agenda, devolution and what people want from their politicians

Matthew Taylor: The last year has been tough for everyone. How was 2020 for you?

Ben Houchen: I had concerns at the beginning of the year that things would be put on hold and we'd see huge delays in trying to achieve the plans we've set out for the next five years and beyond. But we've been very fortunate that, given the nature of the projects, we haven't lost any time. Teesside Airport has probably been a net beneficiary of Covid-19 because it's created a level playing field in the aviation market. Some of the regional airports have really struggled as a result of the pandemic whereas we haven't. The announcement that Ryanair was returning to Teesside Airport after more than 10 years was because of Covid-19. And elsewhere, come March we'll have 14 million sq ft approved planning on a 4,500-acre site and a new quay ready to be built starting in August.

The other side of that story though is the immediate impact of Covid-19 on businesses that have had to close. Since the start of lockdown we've seen the loss of just over 12,000 jobs, which takes us back to December 2016 employment levels. It's been difficult because you're dealing with the economic fallout, and obviously then all the health issues as well.

Taylor: What will be critical to sustaining a strong Conservative presence in the north?

Houchen: It's levelling up. Levelling up is the thing and it needs to be tangible before the election. People

want to be right. They want to think their vote was the right thing to do, so if the government can stand here before the next general election and point at new railways, new buses, new stations, new roads – the big things that are very visual and tangible to people round here – and the kind of investment we haven't seen for decades, I'm confident that people will vote for them. But if they haven't delivered tangibles then it'll go back to the same old ways; "oh yeah, I voted Conservative, but I wish I hadn't." We'll go back 20 years. If they get this right you could see the solidification of votes in areas like Teesside for a long time. The government has that opportunity and it'll be interesting to see whether they take it or not.

Taylor: Would you say that you have already seen the beginnings of the levelling up agenda that the prime minister promised in the election and subsequently?

Houchen: The levelling up agenda really started under George Osborne and David Cameron, with the advent of the Northern Powerhouse and the idea that we needed to rebalance the economy. In all honesty I'm sat here fortunate enough in the job that I am because of the levelling up agenda and you can see we've made positive strides forward in the Tees Valley with the Northern Powerhouse partnership. Some of the work that I've done – and I'm sure that other mayors across the north of England would tell you similar things – is only possible because there is a recognition from central government that the levelling up agenda is important.

Ben Houchen was elected as the first Mayor of Tees Valley in 2017

> "Levelling up for me is not really a north-south thing so much as a cities-everywhere else thing"

But it is fair to say – and I don't think the government would disagree – that the agenda hasn't gone as far as they would have liked because of Covid-19. Hopefully the real starting point will be the budget in March, which should disproportionately benefit the north of England. A large part of phase one will need to be about major infrastructure: roads, rail and freeports. I still warn the government that if they get it wrong then they're going to be in trouble at the next general election.

There's been significant under-investment in places like Teesside for decades – and you can point to governments of all colours over the last 30, 40, 50 years that haven't invested in Teesside – and for us to get to where, in broad terms, large parts of the south are, the capital projects are more important to us. If you look at everything I've done over the past three and a half years, a lot of it is capital intensive, a lot of it is big infrastructure, because if we wanted to bring more sustainable businesses in, or to do more as the public sector, the infrastructure doesn't allow it, even right the way through to good-quality broadband.

Levelling up in the north of England is very different to levelling up in the south of England. Levelling up to me is not really a north-south thing so much as a cities-everywhere else thing, and you can see that with the £4 billion Levelling Up Fund that the government announced. It's not technically just for the north of England and the government

recognises that places like Cornwall have equal levels of deprivation in parts to Teesside. There are very much haves and have-nots in this country, and it tends to centre around the metropolitan city areas having and everyone else not having. When it comes to levelling up the picture is much more complicated.

Phase one of levelling up in the north of England is large capital investment, then in five years' time, once that capital is spent, the next stage is brilliant. You've now got the building blocks in place and you can start to tackle the more complex issues.

Taylor: Often inequalities and gaps in productivity, economic activity and employment are as big within regions as they are between regions. What's your spatial vision for Teesside in terms of the relationship between the conurbations and the towns?

Houchen: The Tees Valley didn't exist before 2017; we were just part of the north-east and we massively lost out as a result. We've had devolution now for three years and civil servants now talk as if the Tees Valley is its own economic entity and has its own economic ecosystem; it hasn't really changed in the last three years, it's just how we're perceived. People see the Tees Valley as if we're five municipal towns with villages around them and we're miles from each other, but that's not really how it works and having devolution helps you connect that up.

You're absolutely right about inter-area disparities. If you look at Stockton Council for instance, even within that you've got the biggest disparity in life expectancy in places just a few miles apart: Yarm, which is south of Stockton, and the town centre. The difference in life expectancy in these two areas is about 18 years.

Taylor: For those parts of the economy that depend upon capital investment there seems to be a lot going on, but the immediate demand over the next year or so is a revenue challenge.

Houchen: There's a lot of money in the capital markets at the moment, money is very cheap and lots of private money is trying to find a home. The biggest problem for the capital side of it that I see – and this is one of the reasons we're probably more successful than most at the minute – is that there aren't many oven-ready projects across the country, especially on the infrastructure side, which indicates a gaping hole in wider planning both at local and national government level, and in the private sector to some extent. The revenue part is much more challenging, especially post-Covid-19, but I take a more strategic view on this.

Taylor: Why is it so difficult to actually turn capital budgets into shovels in the ground and real projects?

Houchen: Fundamentally, local government and the public sector are not geared up to manage capital projects well at all. The whole idea of not being incentivised to save money; it sounds like a very Tory thing to say, but when you see that rubber hit the road you realise that actually they would rather not make a decision on an oven-ready project, they'd rather kick it into the long grass for 12 months. If something doesn't happen nobody gets blamed because it was never going to happen, but if they do pull the trigger and they now have to build this road or upgrade this station and it goes wrong they get the blame for it. Then local government always say they haven't got the money, they haven't got the capacity, they haven't got the people skills. You realise there's always a reason they can't do it because, again, they don't want to make a mistake. They'll say, well it's up to the central government, but the central government isn't geared up to manage large projects itself.

There needs to be a level of devolution to allow some regions to prioritise their own infrastructure and big capital projects. That way the prioritisation of projects becomes more effective, meaning you get a better spread of money and more return for your money.

Taylor: Is the green agenda an important part of what you're doing and is it an opportunity to accelerate investment?

Houchen: The green agenda is absolutely central to what we do. We've got things like Net Zero Teesside which is, or will be when it's built, a world-first industrial-scale carbon capture, utilisation and storage scheme. It's going to be a £3.5bn–£4bn capital project that will see 10 million tonnes of carbon taken out of the atmosphere every single year, equivalent to the energy used by 3 million homes. It'll completely decarbonise the chemical and processing industry in the Tees Valley. In addition, a lot of the technology and research done in hydrogen will be done in the Tees Valley. We already produce 50% of all the hydrogen produced in the UK.

Taylor: When you sit in a room with Conservative Westminster ministers on the one hand or in a room of largely Labour fellow mayors on the other, which room do you feel more at home in?

Houchen: Neither particularly! I've said this before, but one of the reasons I'm a Conservative, having grown up in a Labour heartland for decades, is because I am a bit of a contrarian. Given my age, my first memory of politics was the 1997 Labour landslide victory. In the 2010s, when I was in my early 20s, I looked around my area and thought, well hang on. Labour have been in government now for 13 years and run the councils for the last 50 years but I still see the area getting worse. There must be a different way.

When you come from a place like Teesside you think very practically. It's why I say neither. I nationalised an airport, which everyone thought was an odd thing for a Conservative to do. At the same time, I also came up with the most pro-market policy that this government is running, which is freeports. I'm a politician who just wants to see things happen.

I really don't believe that the public care at all about left and right. I don't think they care that much about Labour and Tory in general. What people want is constancy and they want to know they've got a politician that if they say they're going to do x, they do x. Politics should be much more executive than political. You can never get rid of capital P politics but we've got to be much more practical and the government has got to be able to connect with people like me, otherwise it's not going to get re-elected. ∎

CAN WE SHAKE ON IT?

With social distancing the norm, it seems like the handshake might be under threat

by Ella Al-Shamahi
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Ella Al-Shamahi is an explorer, palaeo-anthropologist, evolutionary biologist and stand-up comedian. Her book, *The Handshake: A Gripping History*, is out this month

When folks heard that I, a palaeo-anthropologist and evolutionary biologist, was writing a book about the handshake they assumed I would be writing its obituary. I would be doing no such thing.

In the 21st century we find ourselves living amongst the ruins of an enormously diverse range of greeting cultures. Among my favourite now-extinct greetings are urine washing ceremonies and buttock 'presentation' – bending over to present one's rear end or simply exposing one's buttocks or sexual organs – a tradition thought to have been present from Europe to Japan to the Fulani people of Africa. We are familiar with the concept of linguistic extinction, but until recently, few of us considered greeting culture extinction.

A firm grip

Pre-Covid-19 we knew the main greeting gestures that had survived through to the modern day: the hug, the kiss (what the French call *la bise*), the namaste, the bow, the nose rub and, of course, the handshake. But, up until March 2020, it was only the handshake that appeared to be going from strength to strength. Why?

It is probably no coincidence that the egalitarian handshake – with a choreography based in symmetry, so equalising the participants – rose in prominence alongside democracy and feminism. Contrast this with the hierarchical greeting gestures of the European Middle Ages, where one would bow or place one's hands together between the palms of someone higher in the hierarchy, known as *immixtio manuum*.

But that cannot be the full story of the handshake's rise. See, what many do not realise is that the Covid-19 era is by no means the first epidemic or pandemic to cause the handshake to fall out of favour. The history books are littered with references to the handshake's demise as an infectious disease spread; but it was always temporary. Can that be by chance? In my book I argue that it is not, because contrary to popular belief the handshake is biological, not just cultural, with a clear functional biological purpose. In fact, I argue that the handshake is probably embedded in our DNA and is at least 7 million years old. That is the reason that death rarely becomes the handshake.

Let's shake on it

There are different kinds of handshake cultures. The 'handshake lite' – the one most practised in the west, the precise choreography of grasp, shake and release – is the scaffolding on which something much more elaborate can be built. In many African countries and regions, including Liberia, Kenya and Ghana, there is a handshake that culminates in a finger snap or click, and Nigeria has one that involves clasping and snapping just the thumbs, the louder the snap the better.

Many of the handshake variants have a performative element that make the British version look more like someone's first day in a hot yoga class than a Cirque du Soleil extravaganza. However, it is specifically the handshake used in the west that has had meteoric success, that is exported most and that is used in business, politics and even sports. The reason for this is the age-old story of cultural dominance. We can be sure that 10,000 years ago there were many more languages, cultures and greeting behaviours. But then agriculture was invented, and aside from revolutionising food security, it allowed humans to come together in larger groups than could be supported by the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, thus encouraging homogeneity in greeting cultures. Later on, colonialism caused further greeting culture extinctions, and globalisation and the interconnectedness afforded by modern travel have, I am sure, been the final nail in the coffin of some of the more unusual greetings.

Whose greeting comes out on top when two cultures meet? Life is not an HSBC ad – my own life is a testament to this. Until the age of 26, I followed strict Muslim law, in which the majority of Muslim jurists believed men and women should not shake hands. My Muslim background, it seems, was the dry run for Covid-19-era social distancing. It is strange to see my life reduced to anthropological trends (although why not – I do it to others), but is it really any surprise that

the child of immigrants would eventually succumb to the dominant culture's style of salutation? More often than not, the less powerful culture bows to the more powerful one. Sometimes this even goes further, and legal and political pressure is brought to bear to 'regularise' greeting behaviour, as in the case of an Algerian woman who was denied French citizenship in 2016 because she refused to shake hands with two male officers at the relevant ceremony.

This is cultural assimilation with a stick, sadly something that has all too often been the case. Christian missionary activity often included a push to get communities to abandon traditions that were seen as not innately 'Christian' (aka western). The anthropologist Monica C LaBriola writes that when the British came into contact with the *ri-aelōñ-kein* (Marshall Islanders), they set about changing the locals' traditional practices, labour and dress: "Even the *mejenma* – the *ri-aelōñ-kein* embrace by touching noses – was replaced with the less intimate handshake."

The handshake's origins might lie deep in our DNA, but the *kind* of handshake most prevalent today reflects patterns of power and dominance. There's much about the handshake that smacks of egalitarianism; but until we see Liberian finger-snapping in the corridors of Whitehall or Washington, DC, we should remember that it often tells a story about cultural power, imperialism and conquest. ∎

THE TALKING REVOLUTION

How the mental health crisis, technology and the pandemic are driving real change

by Adrian Hosford
🐦 @adrianhosford

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According to the *Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey* commissioned by NHS Digital, even in the more 'normal' times of 2014, one in six people in England had a common mental disorder in the week that they were interviewed for the study. According to a Public Health England national *Covid-19 surveillance report*, the pandemic has increased this by a third. Demand for mental health services outstrips supply, with the Department of Health and Social Care estimating that 75% of people with mental health problems may not get access to the treatment they need.

What is interesting is how this crisis is creating a talking revolution driven by social entrepreneurs working in the community. This quiet revolution is largely being pioneered by citizen-led initiatives that are delivering measurable results outside the formal mental health system. Combined, they are filling some of the gaps, responding to real human needs.

Community-led innovation

Talk for Health was part of the RSA's Connected Communities project, which in the 2010s focused on the role of social capital in community resilience, including in relation to mental health. Talk for Health provides therapy without therapists by training key members of the community as lay counsellors, giving them the confidence and knowledge to take the therapists' skills of empathy, non-judgemental listening and conversational support out of the doctor's surgery and into the hands of the community.

An evaluation of the project in 2019 found that lay counsellors have proved as effective as trained therapists. Independently verified evidence shows that this form of fast access to therapeutic talk is long-lasting and empowering. Results among 687 participants show a large rise in wellbeing after taking part in the programme; this also reduced depression over the long term. Two-thirds of the participants were clinically distressed at intake, with a range of diagnoses, from depression to schizophrenia.

Talk for Health is based on three powerful evidence-based principles. First, that simply having the skills and opportunities to share inner feelings and experiences with supportive others improves mental health and prevents mental illness. Second, that effective therapeutic talk does not rely on professionals; and third, that it is good for mental wellbeing to give as well as receive support.

When the pandemic struck, a massive effort was made to quickly adapt to an online and phone format. Since then, the number of people asking for help has doubled; many were in dire distress. The online version has proved equally successful.

Another example is an online service called Moodscope. Invented by a creative patient determined to solve his own depression, Moodscope is unique in that it enables people to accurately measure and record daily mood scores, which are automatically tracked on a graph and – with the individual's agreement – emailed to one or more trusted friends who have previously agreed to keep an eye on the user.

The quick and easy daily test is adapted from the proven scientific PANAS (Positive and Negative Affect Schedule) test developed in the US in the 1980s and involves flipping and twisting mood cards until they reflect how people feel. The score is added to a graph where people can add a daily comment. A reminder to take the test, written by users sharing their experience, is sent out each day. There is also an empathetic community where Moodscopers inform and support each other by sharing experiences and insights.

When people are more aware of their mood, and can see how it changes day by day, they become more sensitised to what drives their moods. Consciously and unconsciously they adjust their behaviour so that their mood score improves over time. Independently verified research on frequent users shows a 36% uplift in mood over 90 days. People who do not do the test regularly still seem to get support from the daily email and the knowledge that they can resume the test if needed. Many seem to get solace from having access to an honest, sharing community.

The 30,000-strong Moodscope community responded positively to lockdown by supporting each other even more; the average mood score of users held up well, and even slightly improved, as the pandemic spread.

A skilled helper

Gerard Egan, Emeritus Professor at Loyola University of Chicago, is author of one of the world's most influential text books on counselling psychology, *The Skilled Helper*, and has more than 50 years' experience as a counsellor, educator, trainer and researcher. Recognising the huge gap in mental health services exacerbated by the pandemic, and with the help of his co-writer and communications expert, Andrew Bailey, Egan set about making his proven methodology available to lay people through a new format.

The result is *The Helping Conversation – Common-sense Counselling Skills for Everyone*, which boils down proven wisdom and expertise to its essential essence, introducing an everyday, conversational approach to helping others with their mental health. It makes the basics of counselling accessible to anyone with a rational mind, some life experience and the right communication skills. The helping process becomes a sequence of nine conversations, each focusing on a different critical step of the journey from problem to life-enhancing outcome. Again, measurement is built in by capturing user responses online.

How will the system respond to these innovations? Creating a joined-up mental health services system has been an aspiration for decades, but is government capable of involving and accelerating solutions like these? Given the high level of unmet need, policymakers should market test a comprehensive and integrated mental health service involving the community and roll this out when it is proven to work. ■

■ *For more information about these projects, please visit talkforhealth.co.uk, moodscope.com and thehelpingconversation.com*

THE MAVERICK MINDSET

Organisations need to do more to understand the value of disruptors and the conditions that drive innovation

by Billie Carn
 @maverickwisdom

Billie Carn
formerly worked as a children's nurse and lecturer. She is the Founder/Chief Maverick at Maverick Wisdom. Her forthcoming book is *Maverick Wisdom*

Who are mavericks? They are the weird kids in the playground. The ones that stand out simply because they are not like everyone else around them. They are not concerned with trying to fit in, but they still want to play with the other children. And when they grow up, these very same mavericks work in organisations and businesses around the world, probably including yours.

The term maverick originates from Samuel A Maverick, a Texan lawyer, politician and land baron who refused to brand his calves, his theory being that if all the other cattle owners were branding theirs, then those without a brand belonged to him. Funnily enough, his gambit worked and his stock kept increasing because any unbranded calf was assumed to be his. He challenged the status quo and did good business, just not in the way it was usually done. The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of a maverick includes "an unbranded calf or yearling", as well as "an unorthodox or independent-minded person".

Business is the second-best tool we have to change the world; because we have not yet figured out the first. Until we do, innovation in business is essential; changing the world and pushing humanity forward is dependent on new thinking. Innovation is part of the maverick DNA. One nucleotide of that DNA is a particular mindset: one that questions and challenges.

Are mavericks 'difficult'?

Mavericks challenge the rules and are comfortable questioning them: what is the purpose of this rule, why does it exist? Is it relevant to the context, situation or project? Is it obsolete, or does it need replacing with a new, more relevant one?

They challenge groupthink by not conforming to the group's dominant way of thinking if it does not make sense or resonate with them. This is not because they want to be difficult, but because they know innovation does not happen in the groupthink space, and believe that there really may be a different solution to the problem. They highlight the alternatives, which they are more likely to find because their curious and inquisitive nature means they explore different ideas from different fields. Mavericks are polymaths, hence they often come up with unique solutions.

Mavericks challenge the status quo by questioning why we have to do things the way we have always done them and because they believe there is a bigger, better, stronger, faster way. They ask 'what if' and 'why not', thinking differently and chasing audaciously big moonshot thinking goals.

Authority and status do not impress mavericks; visionaries on a mission do. Audacious goals require leaders willing to take the risks mavericks want to take, but too often the latter find that people with ▶

"Mavericks challenge
the rules and
are comfortable
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authority are risk-averse. Leaders can often be the very reason outside the box thinking is not encouraged or flourishing. Often the system wants to focus on imitation or iterative innovation, whereas mavericks like to disrupt via radical innovation.

These are some of the reasons mavericks can end up labelled as difficult, and not team players. But my research shows that mavericks highly value the team and its diversity and acknowledge that, even though they might come up with the moonshot idea, without a team with very different skills to themselves they would never actually build the rocket.

In some ways, there are similarities between how we characterise mavericks and how we label children who do not fit in, describing them as a 'problem' child, rather than recognising they have different gifts. Indeed, this attitude can prevail until such time as they have become successful, at which point the world writes books about them and aspires to be like them. Often mavericks are represented as egotistical iconoclasts on a self-serving mission. And yet, like most things in life, the truth is more complex and nuanced.

The challenges mavericks face

If we are to understand the value of mavericks in driving innovation, we need to stop focusing on the challenges they present, instead making an effort to understand the mountains they climb. The high profile of certain mavericks, such as Elon Musk and Richard Branson, obscure the reality of life for many others.

Being ahead of the curve, mavericks are early-adopter visionaries and sometimes their ideas are just too far ahead for others to see. Often they have to wait for the environment or technology to catch up. Think of Netflix, which although starting business in 1998, only became profitable six years later.

Mavericks are pioneers but they can find it difficult to monetise the connections their brains make. Think of the Wright brothers, who were bicycle makers and mechanics and whose funding for their experiments came from their cycle company. One of the reasons for this is that it is often difficult to explain ideas relating to things that do not yet exist. Imagine explaining cars to a world in which the most advanced form of transport is the horse.

The life of a maverick can be one of uncertainty; their skills and approach do not necessarily allow for a regular career path and their resumés do not tend to fit nicely into a specific job. This can mean uncertainty about income and whether an employer will see the value of their contribution to the team, or whether their idea will be positively received, funded or executed. Mavericks learn to accept these uncertainties; it is how these affect their loved ones that concerns them.

The life of the maverick can be lonely at times. Often ostracised for not conforming to groupthink and for

not being 'like' the team, they are labelled as loners. In risk-averse environments, they can find themselves isolated – simply because they are comfortable taking risks – and facing rejection because they take the road that is right for them but which happens to be the one less travelled.

The result is that while many corporations talk up innovation – and need it to drive their business models – they do not in practice value unique and new ideas and trying to restructure things, as these can be seen as a threat to the status quo. The fashion for conducting behavioural and personality assessments on staff, and the emphasis on creativity and thinking outside of the box, do not mean that corporate cultures are tolerant or accepting of maverick traits and ways of working. In most organisations, fixed hierarchies are still the norm, and mavericks are free spirits who require a different style of management to produce their best work. Meanwhile, cultures that reward people for results, rather than for creating new opportunities, do not allow mavericks to add their innovation value.

The science bit

Why does this matter? A major challenge for many businesses today is understanding the environmental and individual factors that are most conducive to innovation. Yet, with all the talk of the rapid pace of change, it may be surprising to learn that, according to an analysis by economist Ufuk Akcigit et al., published in 2017, innovation is both becoming more difficult and slowing in pace. As Covid-19 has starkly reminded us, societal shocks can sometimes drive practical innovation, impelled by a sense of urgency and the removal of the status quo. But we need to do more to create the 'steady state' environment for successful innovations that will not just support economic recovery but also help us to meet future challenges.

In their 2010 book, *The Other Side of Innovation*, strategy and innovation experts Vijay Govindarajan and Chris Trimble argue that one of the challenges to innovation is that it has become synonymous solely with ideas, which on their own do not drive economic growth. When working with a wide range of organisations, too often they found that innovation was approached as a hunt for 'the big idea'. While new ideas are necessary to drive innovation and economic growth, the authors argue that ideas alone are not sufficient. What was often overlooked was execution within the real-world context of organisations.

Much of the research in this area has identified the critical role that mavericks play in relation to innovation, with a high number of extraordinary innovations directly resulting from mavericks who could bypass their organisation's early approval processes. In her work, organisational behaviourist Ella Miron-Spektor acknowledged that, in most cases, radical innovations were tied to mavericks.

So, given their importance to innovation and their potential for disruption that leads to fiscal success, how can we better understand the role mavericks play, and how can organisations make the best use of their skills?

My Business Mavericks project posed the research questions: how and why do mavericks operate the way they do in business? We used grounded theory and semi-structured interviews, together with a validated Maverickism Scale developed by Elliroma Gardiner and Chris Jackson in 2012 at the London School of Economics, and the VIEW Creative Problem Solving Style Assessment tool developed by Ed Selby et al. in 2004. Are you born or bred a maverick? Does 'doing things differently' require certain skills, and if so, what are they? When a venture is unsuccessful, what would you consider are the main reasons for its failure? These are some of the questions we asked, alongside gathering data from 99 mavericks from diverse industries.

The Business Mavericks project found that successful mavericks are those who: have or create the freedom to try new things; effectively communicate the ideas in their head to others; can pivot when an unseen opportunity presents itself; and have the support of a key individual who backs their ideas, as well as a team of executors who turn these into reality.

Just as mavericks need to learn to work effectively with non-mavericks, the reverse is also true. Non-mavericks need to learn how to empower mavericks to execute their ideas and innovate. Doing so will require organisations to create cultures and work environments that value team diversity in all its forms, where every team member's contribution is acknowledged and valued, and where mavericks are actively recruited, nurtured and encouraged to do what they do best. This would help lift the barriers that are holding innovation back and encourage a culture of asking what needs to change for us to become organisations that mean it when we say we want to 'fail fast and fail forward'. Organisations should reward those who try new things and push the boundaries, instead of solely focusing on the short-term bottom line.

Can you imagine the wonderful things we could create in a business world that looked like that? A world where our differences were valued and where the biggest challenge facing a maverick was what crazy idea they should try next, and where the biggest challenge for non-mavericks was to figure out how to turn these crazy ideas into reality? ∎

FUNDING FOR CHANGE

Fellows have risen to the challenges of Covid-19, taking action to drive social change

by Claire Doran
 @decla1r3

Claire Doran is the RSA Catalyst Fund Programme Manager

With the pandemic stress-fracturing systems as we know them, it has been heartening to see the surge in social entrepreneurs rising to meet the new challenges we face. These individuals have been attentively listening, rapidly adapting, and learning from their own lived experiences and those of the communities they care and advocate for to create solutions.

In my recent conversations with Fellows about their Catalyst-awarded projects, I have been deeply moved by stories of understated strength and resilience. Individuals and communities continue to believe in a better future, keep their senses open to opportunities and take focused action to drive social change.

The Catalyst Awards programme privileges us with a glimpse of this limitless vision within our Fellowship. At its core, Catalyst is about investing in and supporting this potential to drive social change. We offer tangible resources to a number of Fellow-led projects each year in the form of Seed (£2,000) and Scaling (£10,000) Grants and dedicated help. Grants are awarded so Fellows can test and grow their ideas and projects, with a member of staff allocated as a point of contact for the duration of the funding, able to offer guidance and explore ways in which the project can connect with the wider RSA community.

Last year, we launched a fast-tracked Covid-19 Catalyst Award round, dedicated to funding projects that had been specifically developed to tackle a pandemic-related matter. We funded some amazing projects as a result, but many of our other Catalyst projects, which were just starting their activities at the beginning of the pandemic, have also adapted and achieved impact in their own ways. Below are just three stories of such Catalyst projects.

The Doorstep Collective

Working as a Deliveroo rider opened Rich Mason FRSA's eyes to the precarity and insecurity of many workers. He wanted to improve pay and conditions for gig economy workers and was awarded a £2,000 Catalyst Seed Award to develop the idea of an ethical, worker-owned alternative, the Doorstep Collective.

When the first wave of Covid-19 cases rose in the UK, the nascent network responded by organising riders to provide emergency deliveries for vulnerable and self-isolating households in south-east London. Within four weeks of starting, the network numbered over 100 riders delivering 150 food parcels, or one tonne of food every day, five days a week.

Now equipped with substantial learning, greater credibility and strong local relationships, Rich is returning to his focus on job security and good work for couriers. With £20,000 of funding recently confirmed by a major local authority funder, the Doorstep Collective now aims to launch in March 2021 and provide stable, employed jobs for riders on a London Living Wage.

SwopItUp

At 15 years old, Zaqiya Cajee founded SwopItUp to facilitate real teen-led environmental action, initially

focusing on helping young people establish clothing swaps in their secondary schools in the UK.

With support from her mother, Gayle Cajee FRSA, and a £10,000 Catalyst Scaling Award, at the time the first school closures began last year SwopItUp was poised to sign agreements with schools that would give it a reach of upwards of 15,000 young people.

The SwopItUp team redirected their energy towards a new programme of online activities, including a Creator Programme that presents young people with a set of Eco Briefs that prompt them to create powerful, shareable content for taking climate action during this difficult time. Through this programme, SwopItUp has achieved Duke of Edinburgh's Award Approved Activity Provider status.

With digital activities now complementing in-school activities, and modifications such as tech-based solutions to make the swaps 'virus-safe', SwopItUp will be ready to resume and scale in-school activities when schools are able to fully reopen.

FASTN

FASTN's charitable purpose is to promote healthy, dependable relationships that support families in all their forms to thrive. Long before the pandemic shifted working and schooling into our homes, Catherine Hine FRSA was considering how workplace policies have a huge impact on the sustainability of employee families.

Wanting to get employers thinking about and responding to the reality of diverse and dynamic families in the UK today, Catherine landed on the idea of reframing the wellbeing of employee families as a sustainability issue. Seeing alignment with the RSA's Future of Work research, she applied successfully for a Catalyst Seed Award to test her idea.

Project activities began just as the pandemic completely shifted the landscape and highlighted the importance of dependable and healthy relationships in building our resilience. This realisation could herald a systemic change in mindsets, and Catherine sees in this an opportunity to be more assertive in making her case with employers. She hopes FASTN will be able to spend less time selling why the wellbeing of employee families matters and more time focusing on collaborating and seeding solutions that can scale and make use of the polling evidence that was gathered through Catalyst.

Committed to hope and impact

The RSA's Catalyst community and wider Fellowship stand for something that has always been incredibly important, and is particularly so at the current moment: the power of bringing together collective visionary hope with an unwavering commitment to impact.

We hope these stories engage your sense of possibility and lend resilience and resolve to your own efforts to create change. ■

Visit MyRSA to connect with our Catalyst Awardees and offer support.

The work of scientists worldwide has created reasons to be hopeful; the end of Covid-19 is in sight

by Rohin Francis
@MedCrisis

As someone who enjoys talking about the joyous wonders of medical science, there is an irony to the fact that although the past 12 months have seen an unprecedented rise in interest in medicine among the general public, this interest has, unfortunately, been imbued with an all-pervasive sense of doom. Yet when I sat down at work today to receive my Covid-19 vaccination from a military paramedic called Omar, I felt a sense of not only tremendous good fortune, but also of hope. Of course, it is quite possible that was just Bill Gates controlling my brain via a local 5G mast, but I like to think it was more to do with what the vaccine represented. Behind the scary headlines and medical misinformation, an incredible effort has unfolded, with the long hours and hard work of scientists and medics worldwide over the past year culminating in the tiny syringe Omar held in his hand.

When the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, researchers and clinicians in disparate fields rapidly came together to cooperate. They shelved their own passions and interests in deference to a greater goal, scientific learning was shared like never before and new alliances were formed. In the UK, the national structure of the health service, a rich culture of medical research and collaboration that has attracted talent from around the world, and an established nationwide clinical trial infrastructure meant that the country led the way internationally. We have produced the most important Covid-19 drug trial to date and offered the world the first effective therapy.

The intercontinental scientific push towards solving a Problem Like Corona is also likely to have some wide-ranging benefits beyond the virus itself. Preparing for future pandemics will be a priority. Our vaccine-producing mechanisms have been beefed up and, as many now realise that the intensive animal farming needed to supply the huge amounts of meat we consume drives the conditions that create super viruses, our diets may be beefed down.

We are learning more about how all viruses can affect the body, answering questions that have never before been deemed worthy of resource allocation, such as performing studies on their long-term effects; a previously neglected area of research. And as 2020 became the first year that all of us meticulously recorded our viral wellbeing, I realised that in spite of having two fetid disease vectors at home (in the form of my young kids), my wife and I were sick only once in the whole year.

To feel hope does not imply that one must ignore the severity of the situation we are still in, but all the things we have missed are within reach, and far sooner than I thought possible. Reunited families, group dinners and hugs are no longer a far-off dream. Most predictions this time last year estimated that it would take 18–24 months for a vaccine to even be ready, and yet we have had three within a year, with several more on the way. While some seek to depict the speed at which vaccines have been developed as evidence of corners cut, the reality is that the millilitre of fluid in my left arm is the culmination of the greatest collaborative scientific achievement for half a century. ∎

Rohin Francis is a cardiologist, writer and comedian

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