Democracy in flux?
**Joseph Nye** discusses what's next for democracy post-Covid-19

Salim Abdool Karim urges an end to vaccine nationalism

Emmanuelle Avril looks at party political funding and asks how it can be improved

RSA

Anthony Painter

"Transparency, complexity and honesty will help us build back stronger"

There has been a prevailing narrative for some time that democracy is on the decline. Donald Trump's loss in the 2020 US presidential election has been hailed as a turning away from the past four years of rising authoritarianism and populism, yet the factors that led to this declining faith in democracy have not gone away, and the Covid-19 pandemic has been a major further stress on all societies. This edition of *RSA Journal* focuses on the threats to and future of democracy.

In his article, Hugo Drochon delves into conspiracy theories and their relationship to people's faith in democratic processes and formal politics. In liberal democracy, repression can never be the answer, he writes. The solution instead is to tackle the causes at the root of belief in conspiracy theories, including trust.

Of course, social media plays a huge part in spreading conspiracies. Nanjala Nyabola looks at political speech on social media platforms, and the difficulties in regulating what is said across different jurisdictions worldwide. Social media companies have taken more action of late, but it is clear we are only at the start of a long journey on this issue.

There are – argues Emmanuelle Avril – quicker changes that could help to address some of the fractures in the relationship between citizens and their political leaders. She examines the system of political party funding in the UK and elsewhere, noting that party financing, while necessary, can seem opaque to voters and create distrust. Legislation, although hard to implement, is one part of the answer, but, ultimately – again – developing trust in political parties is essential.

While in the UK it may feel like we can see the light at the end of the Covid-19 tunnel, this is not the case for some countries, including India, the world's largest democracy. In his article, Salim Abdool Karim points out that until we have fair and equitable vaccine distribution worldwide, none of us will be safe from the spectre of Covid-19. Countries should be encouraged to turn away from vaccine nationalism.

The pandemic has been a tough time for many, especially for those who have suffered with Covid-19 or have lost a loved one to the disease. Nazir Afzal sets out how he thinks a public inquiry into the government's handling of Covid-19 should be run and the role that bereaved families and the public should play. He argues that this needs to happen now and that – as we examine what the government did right and where it could have done better – transparency, complexity and honesty will help us learn from this terrible time and build back stronger.

And in his interview, Joseph Nye takes a longer view of democracy and populism, sounding a positive note about where we find ourselves today. In the short term, the challenge of rebuilding trust in democracy requires that we adapt our democratic systems so that they are representative of all. By working together, whether through promoting the idea of 'inclusive voice', as Alexa Clay and Riley Thorold write, or by developing new forms of deliberative democracy, we can create new systems more suited to handle the challenges of our world today. As Ruth Hannan argues in her piece on wellbeing, the RSA's Living Change Approach aims to embrace complexity while encouraging and inspiring communities of change to work together to take up this task.

In this edition of the journal we also say goodbye to Matthew Taylor, who is moving on to pastures new. Matthew's accomplishments at the helm of the RSA are far too numerous to list here and he has been an important voice in this journal. We wish him all the best in his new position as Chief Executive of the NHS Confederation and we extend our welcome to Andy Haldane, the RSA's new Chief Executive, who will be taking over the role in September. We look forward to this new chapter in the RSA's story and to seeing what more we can achieve over the next few years. ∎

Anthony Painter is Chief Research and Impact Officer at the RSA

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Short read

Periscope

RSA

RSA appoints new Chief Executive

Andy Haldane will take up the post in September

Andy Haldane, the Chief Economist at the Bank of England since 2014, has been appointed as the RSA's new Chief Executive. He will take over the role in September 2021.

Andy joined the Bank of England in 1989 and is a member of the Monetary Policy Committee. His previous roles at the Bank include Executive Director of Financial Stability, and he was also Chair of the government's Industrial Strategy Council.

"In our view, Andy's accomplishments in his 30 years at the Bank of England, in economic policy and academia, in his commitment to people leadership and diversity, equity and inclusion, and in building bridges between experts and citizens, government and business all make him the ideal person to lead the RSA at this critical time," said RSA Chair Tim Eyles.

In 2009, Andy co-founded Pro Bono Economics, an independent charity chaired by former Cabinet Secretary Lord Gus O'Donnell, with a mission to use economics to empower the social sector and to increase wellbeing for all in the UK. In 2014, *Time* magazine named him as one of the world's 100 most influential people.

He has worked closely with the RSA in the past on projects including the Citizens' Economic Council, which looked to rebuild bridges between experts and citizens on economic issues following the Brexit vote.

For any enquiries, please contact us on fellowship@rsa.org.uk

Albert Medal

Sarah Gilbert honoured

Professor Sarah Gilbert, co-creator of the Oxford vaccine, has been awarded the RSA's 2021 Albert Medal for services to collaborative innovation for the global common good.

Accepting the award in this year's online ceremony, Professor Gilbert paid tribute to her colleagues and clinical trial volunteers: "No significant advances are ever made possible solely by one person and in accepting the Medal, I do so on behalf of the very large team of people who worked so hard for over a year to bring the vaccine development to this point."

The Oxford vaccine was developed in partnership with AstraZeneca, with a commitment to equitable global distribution underpinning the project from the outset.

The Albert Medal is awarded annually by the RSA to individuals and organisations working creatively to resolve the challenges of our time, and Professor Gilbert joins a distinguished cohort of Albert Medal innovators, from Marie Curie to Tim Berners-Lee.

■ *Watch the 2021 Albert Medal award ceremony: thersa.org/about/albert-medal*

Obituary

HRH Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, 1921–2021

It was with great sadness that we learnt about the death of HRH Prince Philip on 9 April. The Duke of Edinburgh served as President of the RSA between 1952 and 2011, before HRH The Princess Royal took over the position. His deep commitment to public service and conservation represents the very best of the RSA's values.

Prince Philip once said that the RSA, at its best, was "forward-looking and practical". We believe that this statement exemplifies his own 59-year contribution to the organisation and wider society as president. He would refer to the RSA as "my RSA", underlining a steadfast commitment to the Society and its endeavours. Among his many achievements as RSA President was supporting and developing the growing conservation movement in the UK and beyond by instigating a series of conservation conferences at the Society at a time when conservation and environmentalism were not as well known as they are now. In later years, he also asked the RSA to devote attention to design in support of the elderly.

We are indebted to the energy Prince Philip devoted to the RSA, measurably improving its ability to look forward and help improve wider society in the process.

RSA insights

Pudding
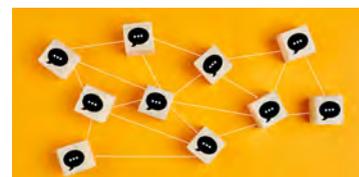
Pudding was founded by Georgia Attlesey FRSA in 2019 in response to the high proportion of first-time arts event attenders who never book again. She came up with a simple solution: Pudding, a post-event forum that's the sweet spot between organisations and their audiences. This unstuffy discussion forum enriches audience experiences of live events while delivering valuable insights to organisations. Pudding ensures organisations connect with their communities when they are most inspired, deepening engagement and demonstrating impact. The result is an arts sector that serves us all.

■ *To find out more, visit pudding.org.uk*

23%

This is the percentage of London's renting key workers who said that their rent had increased over the past year, according to a new RSA report, *Key Workers in the Capital*. The RSA is calling on the future Mayor of London to set a wider definition of 'key workers' in plans to prioritise them for affordable housing, and promise to freeze TfL fares for key workers in the capital.

■ *To download the report, visit thersa.org/reports/key-workers-london*

Images from iStock and RSA

Agenda

Innovation in Politics Awards
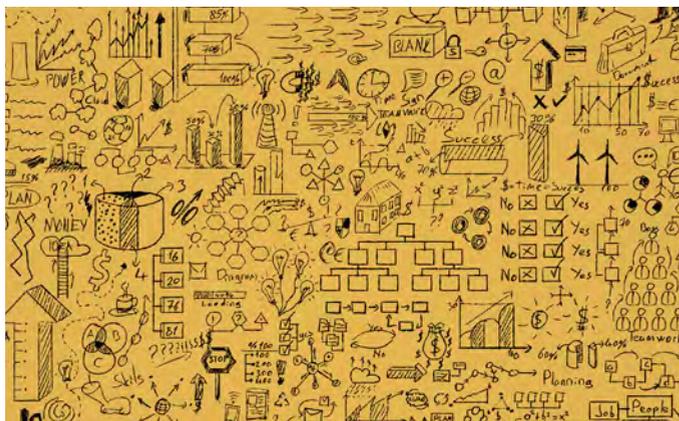
This year, the RSA is again partnering with the Innovation in Politics Awards to act as its UK representative. The awards promote policies that improve democracy in Europe, with finalists chosen by 1,000 jurors from across the continent. Individuals who have broken new ground, found creative solutions and achieved real change are all recognised. The RSA will be identifying relevant projects and giving guidance on how project leaders should submit their applications. Last year, the UK had five projects as finalists and two winners, including ProxyAddress, a Fellow-led project that had previously received Catalyst funding.

■ *If you are interested in nominating a project, becoming a juror or simply finding out more, please contact James Morrison at james.morrison@rsa.org.uk*

RSA House reopens

In line with government guidance, over the next few weeks and months RSA House will be opening up again to staff, Fellows and for outside events. From 17 May, the House will be open to Fellows and visitors two days a week. A booking system will be in place to ensure social distancing guidelines are followed, and free refreshments will be available, although the Coffeehouse will remain closed. From 21 June, when it is planned that all legal limits on social contact will be lifted, RSA House will reopen five days a week and the Coffeehouse will reopen as well. These plans are subject to change in accordance with government guidance.

We look forward to welcoming our Fellows and visitors back to the House as soon as it is possible to do so safely.

■ *To find out more, visit thersa.org/reopening*

Fellowship

New Fellows

Head of Activism at the Z Zurich Foundation, **Mark Heasman**'s work focuses on helping to create societal change and enabling people to succeed whatever their circumstances. He develops programmes that find new solutions to old problems, such as working to combat domestic violence in Poland, or helping people to become more aware of the need to look after their mental health.

Lisa Jones is the co-founder of PlaceLabs, a forum and podcast series that brings together practitioners from diverse fields to share ideas about placemaking and creating cities and public spaces that will help to develop better futures. When not a touring musician, Lisa now focuses on event production, public art and placemaking strategies.

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*
f *facebook.com/rsaeventsofficial*

Digital learning after lockdown

Launching the Rethinking Education series, **Alex Beard**, from Teach for All; **Priya Lakhani** of CENTURY Tech; **Matt Hood** of Oak National Academy; **Rosemary Luckin** of UCL Knowledge Lab; and **Nic Beech** from Central RSA Academies Trust ask: one year on, as schools and colleges have adapted to remote and blended learning models, what valuable learning has emerged?

▬ *Watch now: bit.ly/3sMz9c0*
#RSAeducation

Living Change

Ruth Ibegbuna, founder of Rekindle school; **Cassie Robinson** of the National Lottery Community Fund; and **Kaisa Heino,** the Deputy Mayor of Imatra, share their stories of community collaboration, innovation and system re-design in the face of a year of crisis, challenge and change.

▬ *Watch now: bit.ly/3ncGWPm*
#RSAchange

A new social contract for our times

Baroness Minouche Shafik, director of the London School of Economics, proposes a new framework for social, economic and political recovery, with profound implications for gender equality, education, healthcare provision and the future of work.

▬ *Watch now: bit.ly/3sMz6gk*
#RSAchange

Economics for a thriving planet

Economist **Sir Partha Dasgupta**, environmental scientist **Gretchen Daily** and Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David **Jane Davidson** discuss the findings of the *Dasgupta Review of the Economics of Biodiversity,* and how to rebuild our economic system with sustainable prosperity at its heart.

▬ *Watch now: bit.ly/3xklbBO*
#RSAEarthDay
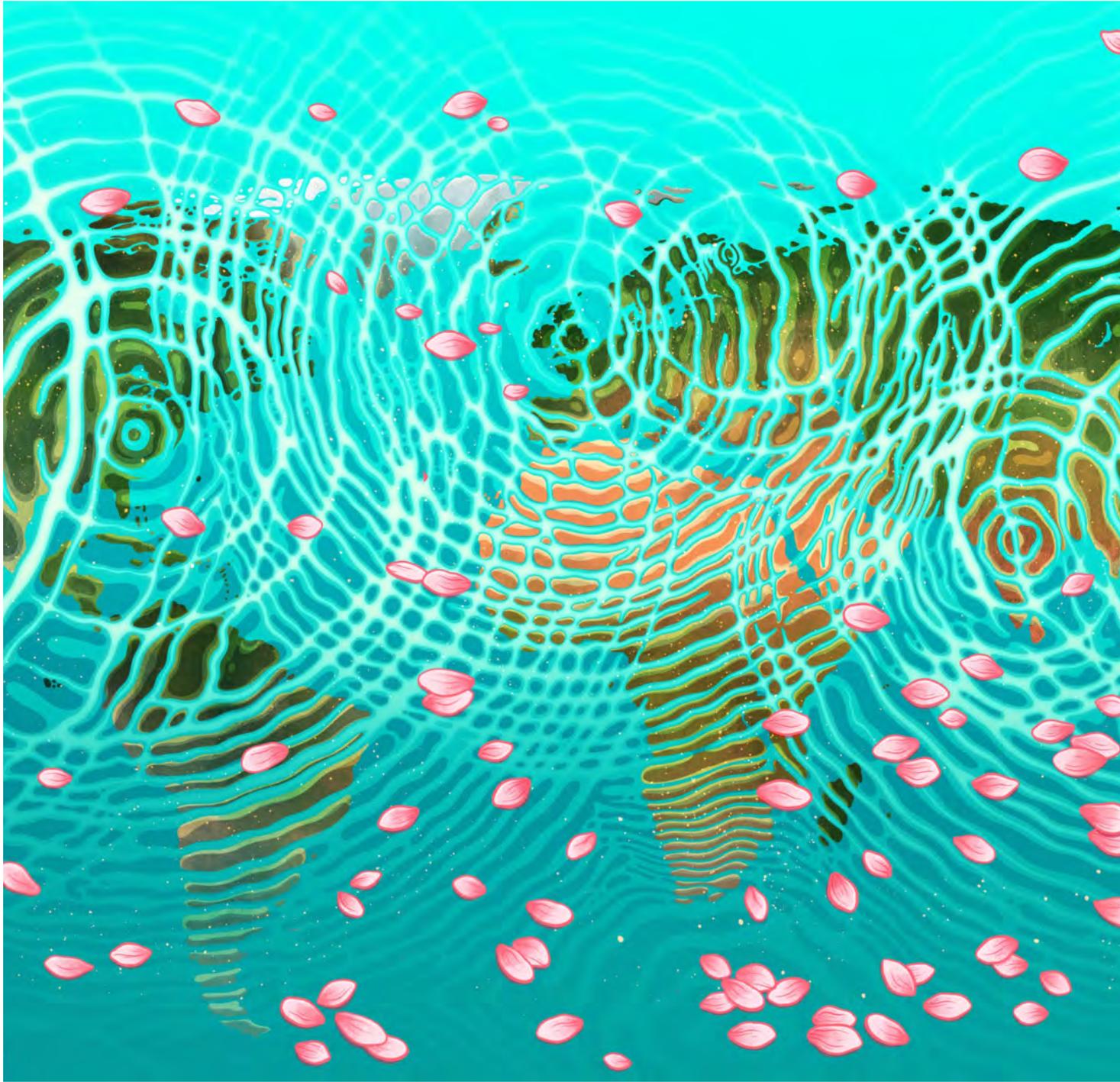
"You have to learn how to balance power over others and power with others"

Joseph Nye is interviewed by Lauren Gambino about the changing world order post-Covid-19 and the direction the US might go in next

🐦 @Joe_Nye @laurenegambino

Lauren Gambino: We have seen countries, the US included, increasingly turn towards populist forms of nationalism, but is liberal democracy actually under threat and how has the pandemic impacted that?

Joseph Nye: Well clearly there are waves of democracy globally. Samuel Huntington wrote about the third wave and we're now seeing some receding of democracy in terms of the number of countries that are regarded as democratic or fully free by organisations like Freedom House, so objectively you could say that there has been some threat to democracy.

However, one has to be careful not to see populism as necessarily the opposite of democracy. There have been periods where the US has been populist in the past – think of the 1890s and William Jennings Bryan – and these periods were associated with more democracy rather than less. We've been through a bad spell of inward-turning or nativist populism in many countries – the Trump election and Brexit vote are cases in point – but I don't think that it necessarily means the end of democracy for liberal democratic countries.

Joseph Nye is a political scientist and Distinguished Service Professor, Emeritus, at Harvard University. His latest book, *Do Morals Matter?*, is out now.
Lauren Gambino is a senior political reporter at the *Guardian US*

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If you look at a number of countries, such as Germany, France, Canada and Australia, it's hard to see these as going through an end of democracy. Probably the tide may have turned on nativist populism in some of these situations. Overall, yes there has been some retreat of democracy, which started before Covid-19 and I would say it peaked around 2016, 2017. The pandemic put pressure on the system. But if you want a counterintuitive thought, it may be that Covid-19, by getting rid of Donald Trump, may actually have helped democracy in the United States. How's that for a perverse thought? But it's accurate.

Gambino: Has the pandemic helped to strengthen international relations or has it created tension there as well?

Nye: The pandemic clearly creates strong tensions in societies but if, for example in the US case, it leads to something like the recent CARES Act, which the Biden administration passed and which may do something for child welfare allowance and to reduce inequality, that might actually be productive rather than counterproductive. Again, it takes years to know with a historical event like this what its full effect has been. When we think back to 1918 and the great flu incidence, which killed more people than Covid-19 has so far, most people feel that it had some effects which are positive, some which are negative, for democracy, but it wasn't the turning point. Economics seems to play a bigger role. It was the Great Depression in the 1930s that led to the rise of fascism and communism and it was, I would argue, the great recession of 2008–09 which led to the upsurge of this nativist-type populism that has challenged democracy, or liberal democracy, most recently.

Covid-19 has had strong effects on our society but we don't want to assume that it means the end of democracy. And there are some countries, some democracies, such as New Zealand or South Korea, which have done better than many autocracies.

Gambino: Is there evidence to suggest that maybe authoritarian regimes have had a better response and have been able to handle Covid-19 more effectively than some democracies?

Nye: Yes and no. China, with its authoritarian system, is able to enforce lockdowns and to avoid anything like a rebellion against mask wearing and so forth; on the other hand the nature of the authoritarian system in China is why we're in this trouble now. The initial results in Wuhan were censorship and denial and if instead of that you'd had a prompt response, such as we had to SARS, we wouldn't have a worldwide pandemic. Authoritarianism has had some benefits, but also some very high costs.

Gambino: People have protested against lockdown measures and Covid-19 restrictions, arguing that they have eroded our freedom and democratic values in the name of safety. What do you make of these protests?

Nye: Well again, if you take a historical perspective, we had people who were protesting against wearing masks back in 1918. You had violence that grew out of disputes about isolation and mask wearing in an earlier period. And it's true not just of the US with its strong libertarian tradition; even social democratic countries like Sweden and the Scandinavians have had some problems with masks. Again, I don't think this is really a turning point. I do think that with democratic societies there's always going to be part of the population that resists things they see as curtailing their freedoms or interfering unduly with their personal lives and this takes different forms.

Gambino: Do you think rising inequality has contributed to a loss of faith in democracy?

Nye: The numbers will support that there has been increasing inequality in the US and this does have an effect on the political polarisation we experience. It's not just economic inequality that's the cause of the current political polarisation, there's a large cultural element related to race as well. Downward mobility, which is a little different from inequality, has been a cause of populism. As some point out, white males without a college education have seen a decline in their status while women and minorities have started to do better.

The interesting issue is whether the emergency responses to Covid-19 may help change broader social and political attitudes towards dealing with inequality. The idea that the US would pass two pieces of legislation, each of which cost about US$2trn, to deal with the effects of Covid-19 is having a spillover onto some of these inequality issues which may turn out to be very important – as important as the effects on Covid-19 itself.

Gambino: You can't talk about questions of democracy without thinking about what happened on 6 January here in the US.

Nye: The rise of social media and cable television – which rest on business models that reward extremism – interacts with the other things we've mentioned

"Covid-19, by getting rid of Donald Trump, may actually have helped democracy in the US"

such as inequality and downward mobility, and that in turn provides a background for Donald Trump to provide a welcoming environment for conspiracy theories. The invasion of the Capitol on 6 January, horrible as it was, represented a very small percentage of the American public. What worries me more is the amount of people who still believe that the election was stolen, and the former president himself keeps reinforcing this myth. That reflects the polarisation, which is particularly worrying, but one of the things to notice is that polarisation in Washington and in Congress and the political system is much worse than it is at the local level.

At the same time that we had these trends, which are very worrying for democracy, you had the ability to carry out a highly decentralised election under the extraordinarily difficult conditions of the pandemic and it was by all accounts – by more than 60 court cases – a pretty fair election. What's more, it was supported and sustained by local officials who were unwilling to be suborned by a president; you had local heroes who believe more deeply in democracy than in their party loyalties.

The trends I described are worrisome but it's also worth remembering that there's stronger local support for democracy in the US than some of the heated trends and polarisation that we see in Washington. What will be interesting will be to see whether we'll be able to grow our way out of these bad trends if Biden gets the pandemic under control and the economy moving at a rapid pace.

Gambino: How will the internet affect our democracy going forward?

Nye: I still think in the long run there's more benefit in a society and polity from having the free flow of information than having a type of authoritarian control. I mentioned earlier that we saw in the early stages of the events in Wuhan that authoritarian control hurt more than it helped. The key question is: does our openness leave us vulnerable? Certainly Russia and China are eager to exploit our cyber insecurity, if not to particularly throw or switch an election in one direction or another, but to argue that our open system is chaotic and unworkable. We're going to have to do a lot more about cyber security. All round, openness is better than being closed, but being open means vulnerability and we're going to have to do a better job of starting to protect against some of those vulnerabilities.

"There's never a perfect answer when you have trade-offs between different values and security and freedom"
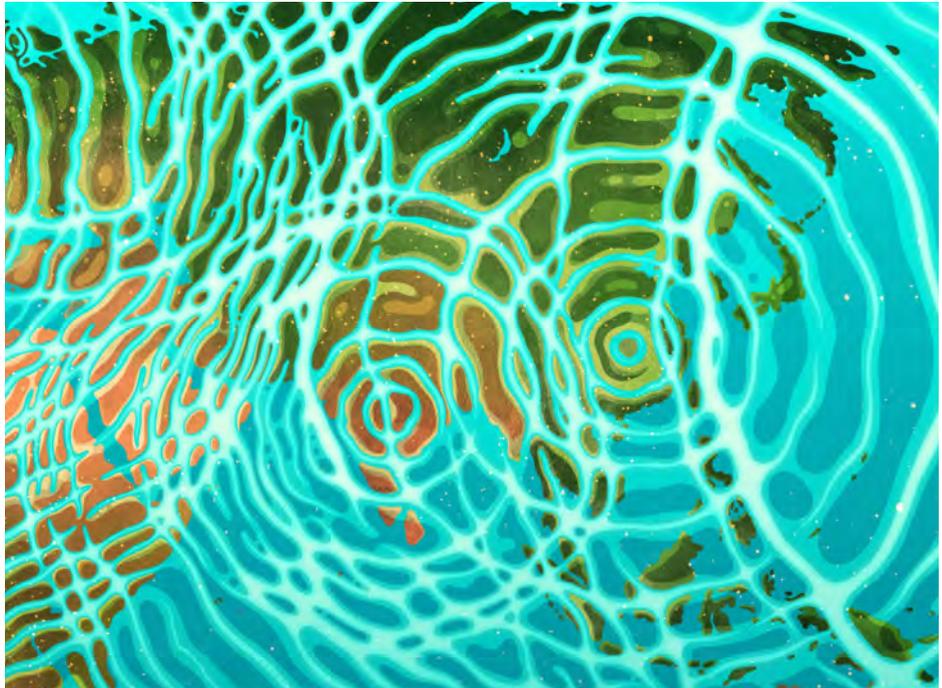
Gambino: Are western democracies always going to be curbed by their belief in free speech in their efforts to combat disinformation?

Nye: We're wrestling with this now as we deal with things like how should we amend Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. We haven't quite absorbed the role of large-scale social media. I think you're going to see a national debate on this growing and continuing over the next few years. There's never a perfect answer when you have trade-offs between different values and security and freedom but I think it's something we will be able to manage if we get our act together.

Gambino: China's increasingly been making the case that US values aren't supported by the majority of people around the world. What does that say about China's assertiveness and its increasing public opposition to democratic values?

Nye: Some people say it shows how strong China is; I would say it shows how weak it is. If you think about it, we pose an ideological threat to their system, but they don't pose an ideological threat to us. Look at international public opinion polls by Pew and Gallup and others. They show that China does not do very well when people are asked about whether a country is attractive or not, which I call a country's soft power. With all their vaccine diplomacy and trying to act benign, China is highly distrusted. You find much higher levels of attractiveness, or soft power, for the US than you do for China. Maybe that's why they have to make these aggressive speeches like at Anchorage recently, which I think was originally primarily for domestic consumption. Their real fear is something that threatens the central party control over the public in China. I'd rather have our problems than theirs!

Gambino: Both the Trump administration and the Biden administration have taken a very hard line and have tried to rhetorically and otherwise really stand up to China. What do you make of that response?

Nye: There's quite a difference between Trump's approach and Biden's. Trump essentially put tariffs on China, which I think was justified, but also put tariffs on our allies at the same time. Before the recent meeting in Anchorage, Biden had a high-level meeting of the Quad. The Biden administration has said let's get our allies in line, let's get a common position, and then be tough with China. Trump said let's be tough with everyone simultaneously. I think Biden's going to be more effective.

Gambino: Do you think we're witnessing an end of arms control?

Nye: Arms control is less central and is weaker than it was at the height of the Cold War, but there are

still some aspects that are important. There was recently an extension of the US–Russian agreement on strategic weapons to 2026, but I think even more importantly we have the non-proliferation treaty, which was negotiated in 1968 and still remains crucial. You also have other aspects of arms control, such as missile technology control, so let's say that it's not as healthy as it was, but it ain't dead yet.

Gambino: Biden has obviously made a big push to break with his predecessor but where do you see the US going?

Nye: There was a deepening of mistrust of the US during the Trump administration because of his withdrawing us from the joint comprehensive plan of action (JCPOA) and the Paris Agreement, and because of his criticism of our own allies in Europe and Asia. It takes time to recover from mistrust. Biden has tried to repair that relatively quickly by re-joining the Paris accord and by pledging to dedicate US$4bn to Covax. All these things were helpful in terms of restoring America's reputation and soft power, but as some of our European friends have said: what happens if Trump comes back, or somebody like Trump, in 2024? Can we really trust you? Biden has made some important steps in the right direction.

In terms of alliances, it's interesting to see with this recent meeting of the Quad the willingness of India to work with others as they see a rising threat from China. The reinforcements of NATO that Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken have tried to create indicate that these alliances are probably going to stay fairly strong. The interesting question would be whether we're able to work together in some of the new areas such as climate issues and pandemics. China produces more greenhouse gases than the US does and you have to realise that while we're competitive with China on things like the South China Sea, when it comes to greenhouse gases and climate issues we have to work with them. You need to have China inside the deck, not outside; we are all ecologically interdependent.

Gambino: Is the world more prepared for the next pandemic, the next global crisis? Has this experience made countries resilient, or by this trend of turning inwards is that a dangerous sign?

Nye: In some ways we're better off, in some ways worse off. Worse off is the rise of vaccine nationalism, but the good news is something like the Covax facility of the World Health Organization to get vaccines to poor countries. But frankly I don't know that we've learnt the lesson that until everybody is vaccinated, or at least you have herd immunity at the global level, nobody is safe. We're being slow in learning that lesson and I would put a lot more effort into Covax and getting vaccines to poor countries.

The better news is the speed with which vaccines were developed. People used to talk about taking a decade to develop vaccines, and some people even expressed scepticism at the beginning of the pandemic whether we would ever have a successful vaccine, and so the science has progressed quite remarkably. The question we face is whether the politics can even begin to keep up with the science.

Gambino: Will the lessons from the pandemic help us to go forward and tackle climate change?

Nye: If you look at the scientific and economic side of climate change, the advances in production and lowering the cost of renewable energy have been quite dramatic. In politics you have the failure of the 2009 UN Copenhagen Climate Change Conference, but compare that with four years later in Paris and the ability to get the Paris Agreement. So there is some progress, but on the other hand it's nowhere near fast enough. The interesting question is whether we're going to see some technological breakthroughs that are able to deal with decarbonisation in areas like industry. We've got a long way to go on the technology and economics and, politically, we're just not moving fast enough. You do see a change in public attitudes though, which is healthy. The public is much more aware of climate change than it was a decade or so ago.

Gambino: Where do you think we're going over the next few years?

Nye: I tend to be mildly optimistic. If we get the pandemic under control and if we get the economy moving then the style Biden is using of trying to reduce the temperature of polarisation in American politics has a somewhat better chance of succeeding. The prospects for those 'if' clauses being true now look reasonably good, so that's what makes me mildly optimistic. But if something goes wrong on either of those 'if' clauses I'll become pessimistic.

In my new book I say you have to learn how to balance power over others and power with others, and there are some areas where we're going to have to combine those two things at the same time: power over and power with. And that's not easy for Americans to do. I think Biden gets it. ∎

VACCINE DISTRIBUTION

Until the pandemic is under control globally, no country will be safe

by Salim Abdool Karim
🐦 @ProfAbdoolKarim

Salim Abdool Karim is Director of the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa and CAPRISA Professor of Global Health in Epidemiology at Columbia University

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in immense suffering throughout the world, with over 140 million cases and 3 million Covid-19-related deaths reported by mid-April 2021. Over the course of the pandemic there has been a rapid accumulation of knowledge and understanding about the previously unknown pathogen, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), that causes Covid-19. Undoubtedly, one of the greatest scientific achievements has been the successful development, in less than a year since the new virus was first identified, of several highly efficacious vaccines against SARS-CoV-2. To date, eight candidates have been approved by a regulator, five additional candidates have approval for early or limited use and several more candidates are in development. The first vaccine was administered on 8 December 2020 and, as at 14 April 2021, 840m vaccine doses had been administered worldwide, with 184 million people being fully vaccinated.

Although the development of these vaccines provides hope that we can begin to control the spread of SARS-CoV-2, the inequitable distribution and availability of vaccines across the world casts doubt on how rapidly, and even if, some measure of global epidemic control will be achievable. Currently, 77% of all vaccine doses have been administered in just 10 countries (the US, China, India, the UK, Brazil, Turkey, Germany, Indonesia, France and Russia), while some countries are yet to start their SARS-CoV-2 vaccination programmes. From a policy and public health perspective, global equitable access to a vaccine, particularly prioritising protection of healthcare workers and the elderly, is the key to mitigating the worldwide public health and economic impact of the pandemic. Unfortunately, vaccine nationalism has resulted in unequal distribution of and access to SARS-CoV-2 vaccines. The Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), Tedros A. Ghebreyesus, has cautioned about this issue, saying "the world is on the brink of a catastrophic moral failure".

Inequitable access is not new

Global inequitable access to medicines has a long history, usually on the basis of cost. For example, poor countries with substantial burdens of hepatitis B liver disease could not afford vaccines until about a decade after the first was licensed. In the past 25 years, inequitable access to AIDS treatments has been at the forefront of this challenge. This has led to the development of several innovative solutions, including voluntary licensing arrangements for cheap generics, the Patent Pool to make intellectual property (IP) more
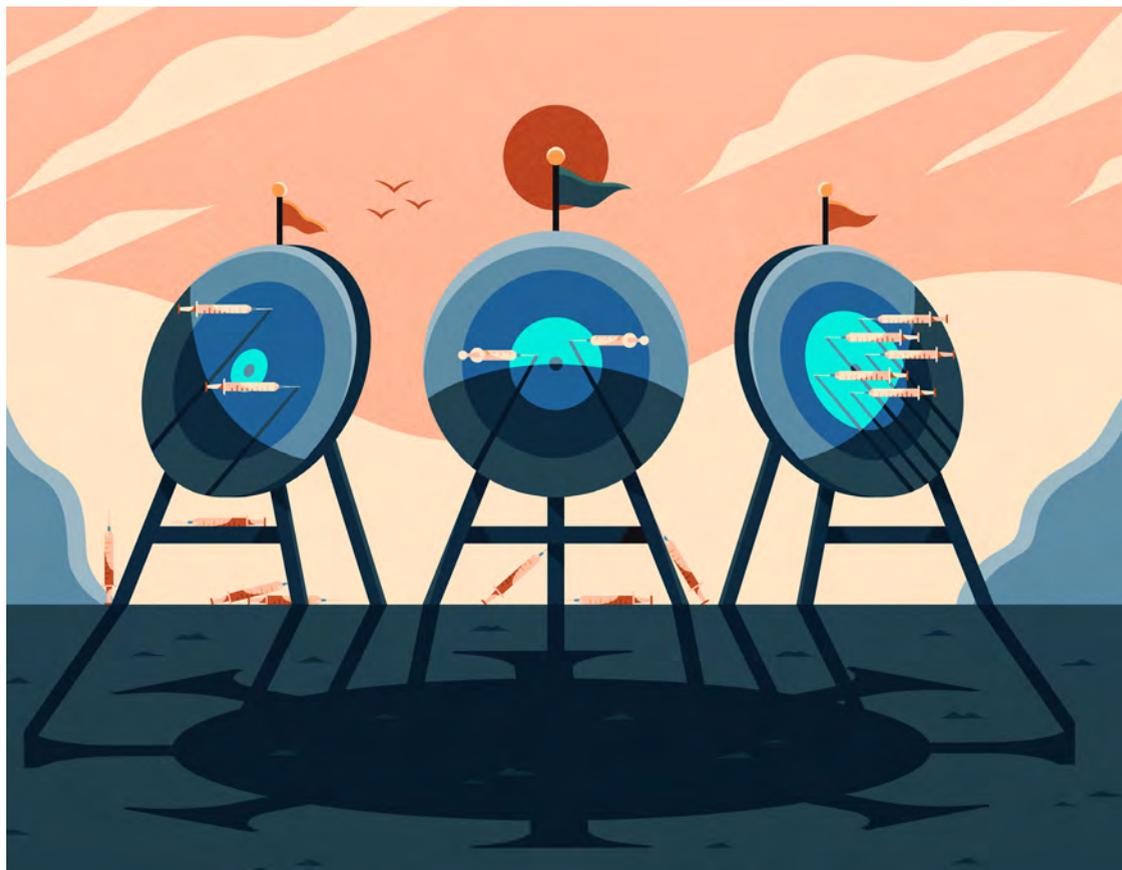
readily available for generic medicines manufacture, and The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria as a global solidarity mechanism for wealthy countries to support treatment in poor countries.

In the Covid-19 pandemic, vaccines were not the first essential medical resource that was not equitably available. During the early stages of the pandemic, there were problems in various countries with access to personal protective equipment (PPE), cellphone technologies for contact tracing and polymerase chain reaction (PCR) diagnostic kits to identify those who have the infection. Most developing countries stood at the back of the queue for these precious resources, which were in short supply and high demand across the globe. Some of the innovative approaches to solving these challenges are now being applied to vaccines; for example, to improve its access to diagnostic kits, the African Union created the African Medical Supply Platform so that countries could pool their buying power to become major purchasers of these essential goods. Inequity in access to essential Covid-19 medical resources does not stem only from available financial resources. Direct government involvement in funding vaccine development in exchange for prioritised access, local capacity to develop and manufacture vaccines, willingness to bypass Covax and inter-country political relationships all play a part.

In addressing this problem early in the pandemic, the WHO, in collaboration with its partners, launched the Access to Covid-19 Tools (ACT)-Accelerator partnership, which supports efforts to develop tools including diagnostics, treatment, vaccines and health system strengthening to fight Covid-19. The vaccine pillar of the ACT-Accelerator initiative is known as Covax. Initiated in April 2020 by Gavi, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) and the WHO, Covax is a global mechanism that invests in the development, manufacturing, procurement and distribution of Covid-19 vaccine candidates, offering member countries equitable access, regardless of income level, to successful vaccines as they become available. At present, the goal of Covax is to provide countries with enough doses to cover 20% of their populations.

What is vaccine nationalism?

Despite initiatives like this to create global equity for vaccine access, many countries have adopted a 'me first' strategy that has created a global race to secure vaccines. There are four ways in which countries have become involved in vaccine nationalism. First, some countries with more resources, like the US and Russia, chose not to participate in Covax. Further, some of the participants in Covax, such as South ▶

Africa, chose to bypass it, entering into bilateral deals with pharmaceutical companies, paying higher prices and jumping the queue, thereby re-directing doses away from initiatives aimed at fostering global equity. Second, some high-income countries such as Australia, Canada, the US and the UK placed early orders to buy far more vaccines than they need for themselves; Canada, for example, purchased enough vaccines to immunise every citizen five times. Third, some countries – Russia, China and India – rushed into licensing or using unproven vaccines before the efficacy trial results were available in order to secure early access. Fourth, some countries or blocs (India and the EU for example) with vaccine manufacturing capabilities imposed temporary bans on the export of vaccines to re-direct locally manufactured vaccines to themselves.

The inequitable distribution of resources significantly undermines the effective management and control of the pandemic. This concern is not hypothetical or theoretical; it was demonstrated by the actions of individual states in the US in March 2020 regarding PPE and ventilators. During that period, the absence of a centralised federal government procurement strategy for these items meant that US states were competing against each other, against the federal government and even against cities to procure the necessary equipment. This was a disastrous situation, as it resulted in prices being driven up and PPE and ventilators being distributed on the basis of available resources, rather than need, and failure to ensure equitable and effective distribution. Such maldistribution of essential Covid-19 resources leads to the loss of lives.

Exactly the same is true of vaccines. At present there is a limited number of vaccines on the market. As such, supply is fixed, and current models predict that there will only be enough vaccines to cover the world's population by 2023. As mentioned above, countries that can afford to pay higher prices can enter bilateral deals with pharmaceutical companies and negotiate to jump the queue. By doing so, they remove vaccines from the available pool and end up limiting vaccine allocations to other countries, which undermines the objective of systematically vaccinating the highest number of people across the globe in order of priority in the shortest period of time.

According to the Duke Global Health Innovation Center, to date high-income countries have secured 4.7bn doses, upper-middle-income countries have secured 1.5bn doses, lower-middle-income countries have secured 731m doses and low-income countries have secured 770m doses. Some low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) with vaccine manufacturing capacity, such as India and Brazil, and those with the infrastructure to host clinical trials, such as Peru, have

"There is a mistaken belief by some countries that they can vaccinate their populations and then they will be safe"

used those assets as leverage to negotiate purchase deals. However, most LMICs have not been able to secure enough vaccines.

Pharmaceutical companies, with the exception of Johnson & Johnson, have not adopted a single exit price for their SARS-CoV-2 vaccines. The prices are therefore open to market forces, especially as the use of non-disclosure agreements means that these companies can prevent differential pricing from becoming public. More demand, especially from countries under significant pressure to buy vaccines, means higher prices. High-income countries with large buying capacity are able to pay higher prices, again pushing lower-income countries out of the equation and furthering inequitable distribution.

Vaccine nationalism and the hoarding of vaccines are a consequence of limited supplies. Unfortunately, SARS-CoV-2 vaccines are currently manufactured by just a handful of companies. However, there are vast capabilities throughout the world to manufacture vaccines. For example, in Africa, companies like Biovac and Aspen in South Africa, Institute Pasteur in Senegal and VACSERA in Egypt could rapidly adapt to start making SARS-CoV-2 vaccines if provided with the funding, IP rights and know-how. Access to IP has proven to be particularly challenging, as it has been argued to be a major driver of innovation. But devastating pandemics require urgent and special consideration. Essential medicines for the pandemic should be declared public goods. The IP for essential medicines like Covid-19 vaccines could then be made available either in the public domain or through mechanisms such as the WHO Patent Pool or compulsory licensing. The reliance of LMICs on others for the development of vaccines as well as diagnostic technologies has also highlighted the dire need for these countries to increase local investments in science and technology to build self-sufficiency and enhance their capacity to control pandemics.

No one is safe until everyone is safe

The spread of SARS-CoV-2 in one part of the world will almost certainly affect other parts of the world. Even for a country with high vaccination rates, if neighbouring countries have ongoing elevated rates of viral transmission as they have not been able to vaccinate so widely or rapidly, new outbreaks could occur and new variants could spread when the populations interact. Defeating the pandemic requires global control, which can only be achieved through the equitable global distribution of vaccines.

Some vaccines have already been shown to have markedly lower efficacy against variants of concern, particularly the 501Y.V2 variant, which was first described in South Africa. Clinical trials show that the efficacy of the AstraZeneca vaccine was 3.2 times lower against the 501Y.V2 variant, meaning its effectiveness drops from about 70% in the UK and Brazil to 22% in South Africa.

It would be unethical and immoral if young low-risk people are being vaccinated in one country while those at highest risk, such as healthcare workers and the elderly, have not been vaccinated in other countries. This unconscionable situation has already occurred. Israel, in the midst of its third wave, has made vaccines available to young, low-risk individuals while many of its neighbouring countries have not vaccinated healthcare workers yet. In April, all states in the US, which has been grappling with a substantial epidemic, had expanded vaccine availability to low-risk young people while 10 countries in Africa had not yet started vaccinating high-risk healthcare workers. Fundamentally, there is a mistaken belief by some countries that they can vaccinate their populations and then they will be safe. This simply is not true. There is no endgame that sees one country achieving sustained control of the virus while the rest of the world is dealing with rampant spread.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a wake-up call on how not to distribute vaccines in future pandemics. A global mandatory mechanism under the control of the UN needs to be established for the equitable distribution of essential pandemic medical supplies, in preparation for the next pandemic.

In the Covid-19 pandemic, no one is safe until everyone is safe. The spread of the coronavirus has highlighted the inter-dependence between individuals, between communities and between countries. Each person's risk of infection is influenced as much by the actions of others as it is by their own. The antidote to vaccine nationalism is the recognition and appreciation of our mutual inter-dependence and the need to act with all our humanity to seek a just and equitable approach to vaccine access to overcome this pandemic. ∎

DANGEROUS DECEPTIONS

Belief in conspiracy theories is on the rise. To tackle the problem,
it is the underlying causes that must be addressed

by Hugo Drochon
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Political Theory
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Great Politics*
(Princeton, 2016)

Not one but two viruses have been spreading during the pandemic: Covid-19 and conspiracy theories. You have probably been in contact with both: did the virus originate from a bat or a pangolin, or was it deliberately leaked from a Wuhan laboratory? Is the 5G network helping to spread it? Is mass vaccination a plot by Bill Gates to have microchips implanted into our brains?

These kinds of belief rise in times of fear and uncertainty. When a new threat appears that is hard to explain, conspiracy theories fill the vacuum that rational and public discourse would normally occupy. The pandemic has been an ideal breeding ground. With everyone fearing for their lives and livelihoods, it is easy to become a bit paranoid. We have all been there, and the lockdowns have not helped. Feeling isolated only heightens the sense that people are out to get you, and to break that isolation we have all turned to social media, where conspiracy theories are rife, to keep in touch with family and friends.

Conspiracy theories claim that the best way to explain an event is that it is a secretive plot by a powerful and unknown group of people, most likely for nefarious ends. Conspiracies of course do exist but the difference between conspiracies and The Conspiracy Theory is that when we think of the latter, we think of a select secretive group who somehow through their machinations control everything that happens in the world, whether in politics, the economy or the environment.

True believers

Who believes conspiracy theories? A lot more people than you might think: since 2015 I have been conducting a number of surveys with YouGov, in part funded by the Leverhulme Trust and in collaboration with the University of Cambridge, and our research suggests that up to half the UK population hold at least one conspiracy belief. Donald Trump launched his political career with one conspiracy theory (Obama was not born in the US) and seems to have ended it with another (the election was stolen). In the UK, we have David Icke, he who thinks that the Royal family are actually alien lizards. Hitler used the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a forgery that claimed to give an account of Jewish leaders meeting in a Prague cemetery to plot world domination, to justify the Holocaust.

Belief in conspiracy theories is a way of making sense and giving meaning to your life. If things are not going your way then maybe it is because there are people blocking you. There is something empowering about thinking you understand the world and how it works and there is also a strong sense of community among people who believe in the same conspiracy theories.
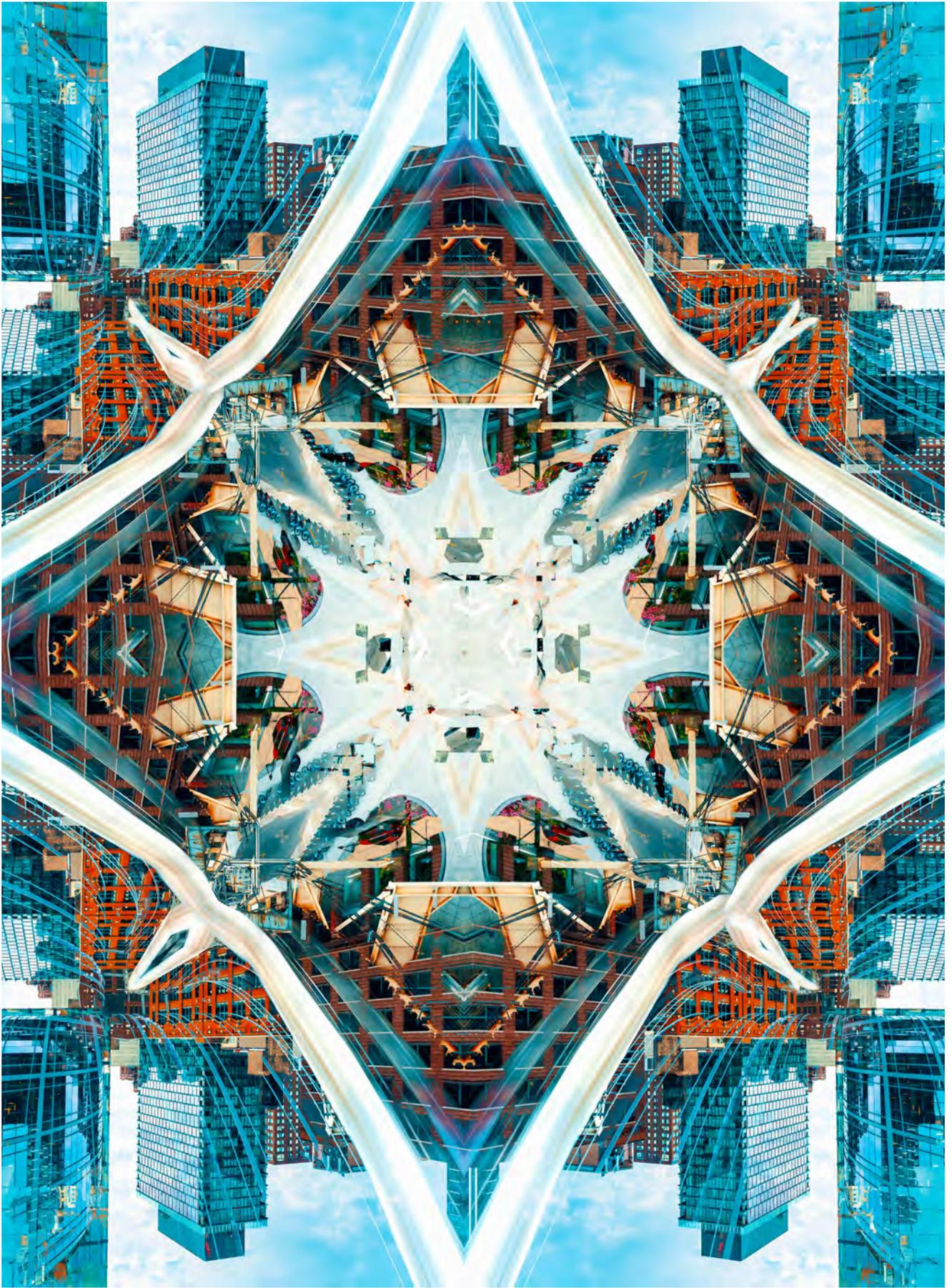
"It is a sense of exclusion that pushes people towards conspiracy theories"

You will find conspiracy theorists across all walks of life, but certain people are more prone to believe than others. The stereotype of the middle-aged man behind his computer in his basement with the tin foil hat? Yes, he is more likely to believe them, probably because he feels excluded. Maybe he does not have a job. Maybe he is not very educated. Maybe he does not participate in politics. Maybe he is on his own. The studies we have done with YouGov suggest that older unemployed men, who are economically insecure and get their news from blogs and social media, are more likely to be attracted to conspiracy theories. They tend to be right-wing (sometimes far-right), distrust government, which they do not feel represents them, are superstitious, and reject the political system as a whole. Right-wing people are more likely to believe conspiracy theories because they like order, which conspiracy theories provide, and when that order seems under threat – and many right-leaning people believe that to be the case today – their susceptibility to believing in conspiracy theories also rises.

Does any of this matter? What harm could it do that someone believes aliens have landed in Roswell? Probably not much, unless you think the US government is deliberately hiding the fact from you. The problem is that belief in conspiracy theories is linked to intolerance, disengagement from politics, the willingness to use violence and vaccine-hesitancy.

You can see where this is going. With a colleague at Nottingham, Annemarie Walter, we are currently completing a study of Covid-19 conspiracy theories, drawn from the 2020 YouGov-Cambridge Globalism Project, which shows that people who believe in them are less likely to adhere to social distancing and hand-washing recommendations or to wear a mask, and are more likely to refuse to get tested or vaccinated. When the way out of the pandemic is through vaccination, the danger of anti-vax conspiracy theories is clear.

And all of this can also spill over into violence quite quickly. Witness the 5G phone masts set alight in this country, precisely when phone lines are so urgently needed for the emergency services. Although not directly linked to Covid-19, a number of those who participated in the storming of the US Capitol in January, spurred on by Donald Trump, were followers of QAnon, the internet conspiracy theory that holds that a number of Democratic politicians (Obama, Hillary Clinton) and Hollywood actors are part of a paedophilic sex-trafficking ring.

An inevitable part of democracy?

So are conspiracy theories a threat to democracy? After all, conspiracy theorists question the government's 'official line', and for a democracy to function do we not need a critical public? Are conspiracy theories not a form of free speech? That is what defenders of

conspiracy theories say, and they point to John Stuart Mill's defence of free speech in *On Liberty*. There, Mill gives two arguments in favour of free speech: that if there is an open exchange of ideas individuals are more likely to abandon false beliefs, and that forcing individuals to publicly defend their beliefs saves them from descending into mere dogma.

Does this apply to conspiracy theories? One should not underestimate the level of resources that can go into trying to counter conspiracy theories, whether it is the amount of time Obama spent releasing his birth certificate to prove he was an American, or the hours MI6 had to expend setting up a taskforce to examine whether Princess Diana was in fact secretly still alive and living on a desert island with Dodi Al-Fayed. Needless to say, both these theories tapped into underlying racism, and a classic conspiracy theory known as the 'great replacement', which sees cosmopolitan elites in league with immigrant minorities to replace the 'indigenous' population: a recurring theme among the alt-right.

Attempts to disprove these conspiracy theories can help but do not work entirely. After Obama released his birth certificate in 2011, belief in the birther conspiracy theory declined, but it did not disappear. And needless to say, it did not stop Trump from campaigning for the US presidency on the back of a number of conspiracy theories, and continuing to appeal to the type of racism that underpinned the birther movement.

The reasons conspiracy theories do not disappear is that they have a 'self-sealing' capacity: any new information brought forward that might challenge the view is immediately seen instead as further proof of it. Ever tried to convince someone a conspiracy theory they believe is not true? Did you get anywhere with that, or did your interlocutor respond 'well you would say that, because you're part of the plot too'?

But what happens when conspiracy theories come to dominate the public sphere as they have of late, thanks to social media? Or, even worse, when they have been spewed out by those 'on high', like Trump. Should we repress them? Not only would that prove to conspiracy theorists that the (deep) state is, in reality, plotting against them, but in a liberal democracy repression cannot be the answer. To do so would be to move towards an authoritarian regime, and in authoritarian regimes (think Erdoğan in Turkey) conspiracy theories are official state propaganda.

Democracies need critical publics to keep leaders in check, and although conspiracy theorists are not open to refutation, they do play a role in that. As Christopher Hitchens once put it, conspiracy theories are the "exhaust fumes of democracy". It

is a somewhat obsolete remark given the ecological disaster we are facing, but otherwise he is right: you need the petrol of a critical public to keep the engine of democracy going, and conspiracy theorists are the toxic emissions that democracy emits. They are a necessary evil for a questioning citizenship to exist; the price to pay, if you will.

Why believe?

But perhaps we can take another tack, by better understanding what drives belief in conspiracy theories in the first place. As the evidence suggests, it is a sense of exclusion that pushes people towards conspiracy theories: exclusion from work, politics, friendships, family and so on. Maybe it is not conspiracy theories that lead to a disenchantment with democracy, but disenchantment with democracy that leads to conspiracy theories.

In the different conspiracy theories surveys we have conducted with YouGov, respondents who lived in countries that had better political participation rates and better socioeconomic integration tended to have lower levels of conspiracy beliefs than in others. For Europe, that means countries like Denmark and Sweden have lower levels of belief in conspiracy theories than, say, Portugal, which is one of the most economically unequal societies in Europe (the UK is somewhere in between). Our latest Covid-19 conspiracy theory survey has a welcome international dimension beyond the west, and there the findings are even starker: countries that do worse on democracy and development indexes, such as Nigeria and Turkey, have more than twice the level of conspiracy belief than Scandinavia. This suggests that if we want to reduce the power of conspiracy theories, better political, economic and social inclusion is the answer.

The vaccination rollout has been extraordinarily successful in the UK, and the early – and very real – fears about vaccination hesitancy have thankfully not been borne out, especially among ethnic minority groups, who tend to me more anti-vax. But the successful rollout seems less to do with trust in the government than fear of the virus itself, and the willingness to do almost anything to go back to a semblance of normal life. Yet what will happen when this original enthusiasm starts to die down? Will we return to pre-pandemic levels of vaccine hesitancy?

It seems the answer is to rebuild trust in democracy by better integrating people into the political, economic and social life of a country. To beat Covid-19 we have developed a vaccine, now we need to develop a vaccine against conspiracy theories. That vaccine will not go by the fancy title of AstraZeneca, BioNTech or Moderna, but by the older name of trust. ∎

A PUBLIC RECKONING

An inquiry into the pandemic must put bereaved families first

by Nazir Afzal OBE
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His book, *The
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out now

During the second wave of the pandemic in the UK, 2,000 families lost a loved one every day. In total, almost 130,000 families have suffered loss, including my own. We are asking whether our government could have done anything to prevent so much loss, and we need answers.

The government has belatedly committed to a public inquiry despite having been urged to do so last year. This is not surprising: what is clear is the UK's response so far has been neither well prepared nor adequate. The weakness of the country's pandemic preparedness was exposed in 2016 by Exercise Cygnus but was ignored.

Part of the problem is ideological. The government has an aversion to 'large state' infrastructure and will always be late/reluctant to put rules or restrictions in place. It sees direct management of the population as a failure and this led to non-existent border controls for much of the past year and the internal spread of the virus, with devastating effects. The advice was for people to stay at home if they got Covid-19; for some, hospitalisation came too late. My brother did not get into hospital. He died at home, alone.

The government seems to have a low level of respect for local authorities and, with that, for public health leadership. While African nations seem to have controlled the virus through their well-established screening networks across villages – set up in response to Ebola and AIDS – in the UK, public health systems were marginalised.

Many bereaved families feel there was no support for us, no general kindness or thought to how traumatic it was to be refused things such as being able to say goodbye to a loved one. Burial rights and other mourning rituals did not happen. The impact on vulnerable cohorts, including Black and Asian minority groups, was obvious almost from the beginning, and yet nothing was done.

I could go on. The point is that the inquiry needs to start and should closely involve the public and bereaved families. Historically, an effective pandemic response requires speed, clarity, willingness to accept mistakes and a commitment to international cooperation. If they are to rebuild trust, politicians and their advisers need to share the uncertainties that inform political decisions and must not hide behind science to avoid responsibility.

The inquiry must explicitly recognise and explore the different impacts on different communities. In its framing, it must question the narrative that is treated as established 'fact' around key timelines, including when Covid-19 actually arrived in the UK.

Questions about whether we got the timing right, locked down too late and could have prevented deaths will be headline issues. Initially, we were told not to wear masks. Why? We need to look at

Illustration from iStock
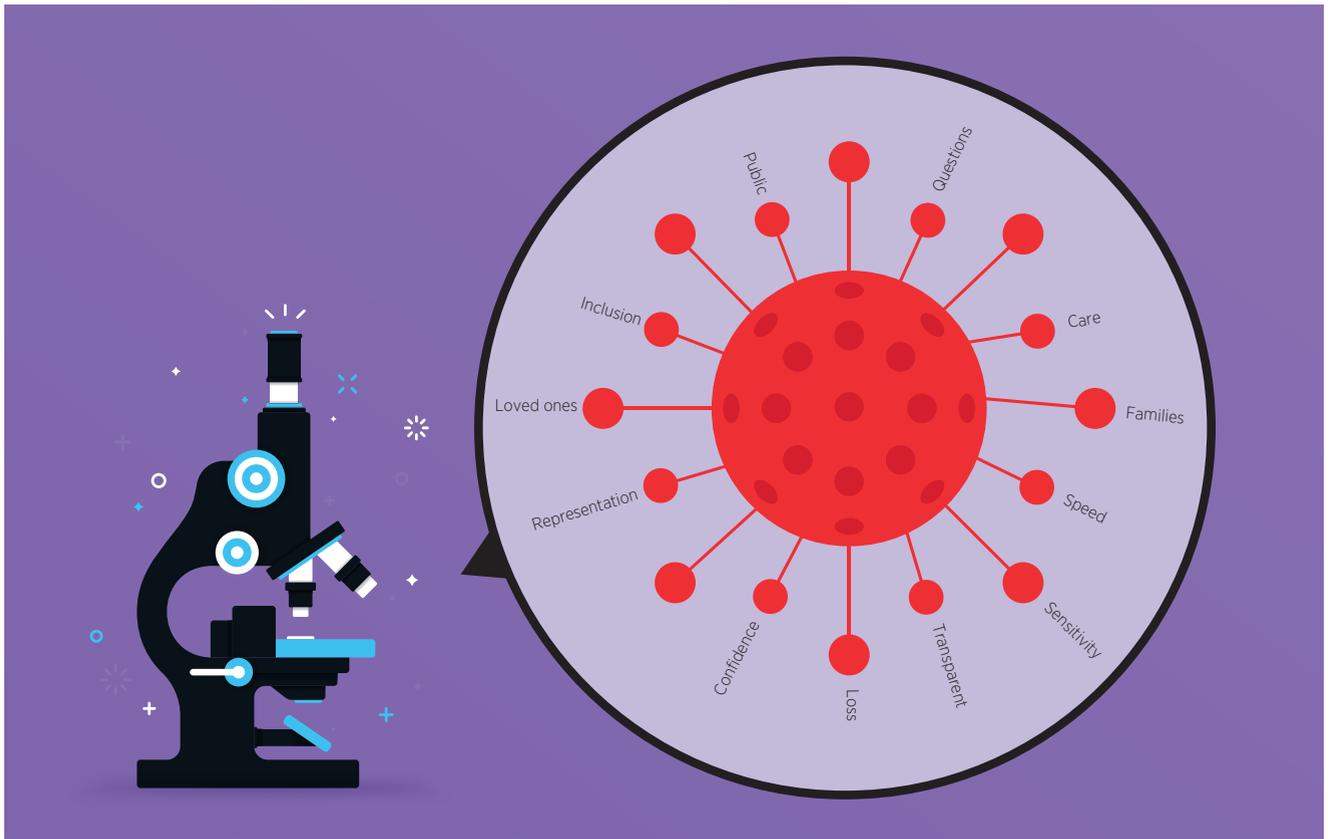
whether or not decisions were made through the lens of equality. What the NHS did or could not do will form a substantial part of the inquiry.

There will be big questions about the relationship between the government's prioritisation of short-term economic recovery over lives, and the longer-term impacts this is likely to have.

Engaging bereaved families

There should already have been a rapid review so that mistakes could be identified and resolved in real time. The government has suggested this is an exercise to apportion blame, a reflection of how little they trust the inquiry process. But it can be done. In the immediate aftermath of the Hillsborough disaster, Lord Justice Taylor conducted such a review lasting 31 days, delivering urgent recommendations that were implemented with speed.

As for the full inquiry, we must learn from Grenfell, where the legal representatives of the bereaved families were not able to ask a single question during the inquiry. There must be meaningful participation.

Grenfell was beset by poor and inappropriate facilities for the families. These things need thinking through alongside the scale of the project needed to find an inclusive solution. As well as livestreaming to the wider public to ensure transparency and accountability, sensitivity is needed to ensure that families have overspill space, given that some of the evidence will be deeply upsetting.

As with Grenfell, there should be a wide public consultation about the terms of reference. This needs to be done in two stages, with a second round of representations likely to gather more nuanced and effective submissions. Funding will be an issue and should be addressed in consultation to gauge the public mood.

Testifying in these massive public spectacles is daunting and risks re-traumatising people, and support for witnesses should be offered as a matter of course. The pen portraits families were permitted to present at Grenfell were helpful. Offers of IT and counselling support should be made for those who are grieving and being asked to recount profoundly disturbing events in their life. Many Grenfell families felt lost and excluded; this must not happen again. A clear communication pathway between the inquiry and families will be essential.

There must not be a massive delay between the end of the evidence and the final report and an interim report and recommendations should be published. The process must not be dominated by lawyers and the inquiry chair should be supported by a panel with public confidence, rather than an imposed judge. Most importantly, we cannot wait years for the process to start and finish. ∎

"The world is not short of people with good ideas, it is short of ways of actually achieving change"

Immy Kaur interviews Matthew Taylor shortly before he steps down as RSA Chief Executive

🐦 @ImmyKaur @RSAMatthew

Immy Kaur is the founder and Chief Executive of Civic Square. **Matthew Taylor** is the outgoing Chief Executive of the RSA and next Chief Executive of the NHS Confederation

Immy Kaur: What has the past year been like for you?

Matthew Taylor: The past year has been an amazing and challenging and sometimes joyful and sometimes sad time for us all. I've got an eight-year-old daughter and I realise she'll be talking about this when she's in her 70s. She'll sit around with her friends and they'll say, do you remember 2020, do you remember the Covid years?

For the RSA, I think we've been fortunate in comparison to many other organisations. We've got reasonably stable finances and we've been able to ride the storm of losing our hospitality business; but it's been really tough for the staff who work in that business, and for the people who work in RSA House.

Kaur: How has this year challenged or changed you, or confirmed or not confirmed some of the assumptions you had about the future?

Taylor: It's too early to say what the long-term consequences will be. At the RSA, we've argued that this is a real opportunity for a reset, but then there are some people who say we just want to forget about it and go back to normal as quickly as possible. The reality is somewhere between those things. There are certain things that have happened that will change us. We won't necessarily know what they are for some time, but then we'll look back and realise Covid-19 was the turning point.

Human face-to-face contact is like vitamin C, you don't notice that you need it until you've not had it for a long time and you start to get run down. We're ▸

"There are certain things that have happened that will change us. We'll look back and realise Covid-19 was the turning point"

all going to realise, if we haven't already, that it's had a deeper impact on us. For instance, my wife has had long Covid, and that's been really tough on her, and I'm also acutely aware of the fact that if you've been bereaved from Covid-19 over the past year that is a completely different experience as well.

The other really deeply significant thing that's happened in the past year has been the Black Lives Matter movement. That has galvanised people.

Kaur: What are some of the big things we need to think about when it comes to emerging from Covid-19?

Taylor: There is a deeper understanding of inequality and a recognition of how hard we're going to have to work to understand and challenge deep-set inequalities. That is going to persist. For example, if you look at what the NHS says, the emphasis now in all of their communication is on inequality, inclusion and access. There's a real shift there. We have also had to think much more deeply about wellbeing, which coincided with a rising concern about mental health anyway.

The third thing is that it will be easier for politicians to argue for long-term investment around resilience. It will be harder for people to say let's not worry about something that might never happen. How long that will last I don't know, but certainly at the moment no one's going to say we shouldn't invest because there might never be another pandemic, or we shouldn't invest because climate change might never happen. That would not be a credible position any more.

Kaur: Tell me a little bit about what the Fellowship has looked to the RSA to do during this Covid-19 period.

Taylor: In terms of the RSA, there's probably three really big things that have happened that wouldn't have happened without Covid-19. The first is negative, and that's been that RSA House and our hospitality business have had to close down, which has been tough on the colleagues working in that area.

But then there are two positive things. First, this notion of Bridges to the Future. We decided very early on that we were going to explore this relationship between crisis and change and we were one of the first out of the blocks in talking systematically about that. My colleague Ian Burbidge did some fantastic work based on the specificities of this and he developed some powerful ways of thinking about the changes that people made during Covid and whether or not those would or should last. It's probably been one of the most powerful bits of intellectual property we've ever developed. It's been used all around the world.

The second positive thing has been our funding for Fellows' Covid-19-related projects. One of the things I'm proud of creating at the RSA is the Catalyst Fund, which is a sum of money made available to Fellows' projects looking to make change in the world. We did a special round of funding to support Fellows' initiatives related to the pandemic and we had some fantastic ideas coming through. We're really proud of the way that Fellows have responded, and we're proud of the way the RSA has taken this question of the relationship between crisis and adaptation and long-term change and brought some really quite powerful tools to thinking about that.

Kaur: You've transformed the Fellowship in your time as CEO. What was it like when you started in the role?

Taylor: If I was forced to choose one thing that I'm proud of as Chief Executive it would be the change in Fellowship. When I became Chief Executive, a model of Fellowship had emerged which, broadly speaking, made Fellowship feel like it was a reward for what you'd achieved in the past. A status symbol. There's nothing wrong with giving people a sense of status, I just didn't think it was what a charity should be doing.

We went on a journey to change the Fellowship so it was no longer seen as a reward for past achievements, but an invitation for future engagement. We made this shift and at first we did lose some Fellows but we soon began to put numbers on again and now we've got more than 30,000 Fellows; Fellowship numbers have risen even during Covid-19. What we know

"The Fellowship now is much more cohesive as a group of people who share broad values"

from our surveys is that these are Fellows whose commitment to the RSA is about values, it's about their intentions for the future, it's about wanting to work with other Fellows to make a difference. The Fellowship now is much more cohesive as a group of people who share broad values and a broad commitment to be impactful in the world.

I didn't always get change right. I was too ambitious in the early stages and tried to do too much too soon. I have come to understand that some change takes time. You have to recognise that there will be good days and bad days and keep an eye on where you ultimately want to get to. And by the way, we're not at the end of that journey. I still don't think Fellows are as engaged as I'd like them to be. Although they really get the values of the RSA they don't know as much about our actual research work as I'd like them to, which is one of the reasons we're now working in a more programmatic way. We'll stay in the same areas for several years so that Fellows can really get it.

Kaur: You've talked in the past about leaving your role in Number 10 because you felt the traditional way of making change was broken and you wanted to think about new models of change.

Taylor: When I was working in Number 10 and working for the Labour Party the world evolved around three Ps: pamphlets, press and politicians. You would produce research, produce policy, try to get it into the mainstream media – which meant a lot in those days – and you tried to get politicians to adopt it, and if you did that you'd succeeded. Over the years I became disenchanted with that, partly because it didn't seem to achieve the changes I hoped it would achieve, partly because it didn't engage people.

One of the things I was proudest of when I left government was having created the Children's Trust Fund, which was the idea of a basic endowment that children got at birth and that their parents could then pay into. It was slightly more for poorer kids and it meant that every child at 18 would inherit a little bit of a nest egg.

After the 2010 election one of the first things the coalition cut was the Fund. I'm not making that point as a critique of the coalition; my point is: ▶

this was a policy that we should have won massive public support for. If we had that tide of support we probably would have held onto it, but it just came across as a nice paternalistic thing that we did.

I came to the RSA with a different way of thinking about change, and over the years I've tried all sorts of different formulations. My first annual lecture was about what I call pro-social behaviour. How could we recognise the importance of people's voluntary behaviours? There was a lot of talk at the time about anti-social behaviour, so what about promoting pro-social behaviour?

I went through all sorts of different formulations and nearly every time, every formulation I had was too complicated. But the thing that has endured is this idea of thinking like a system and acting like an entrepreneur. Imagine a systemic future: don't imagine just changing one thing, imagine what the whole system would have to look like to achieve a sustainable change. But then adopt an approach

to change that is agile, adaptive and opportunistic, recognising the world is continually changing. This is now embedded in our Living Change Approach.

It feels to me that the RSA really has become an organisation that thinks deeply not just about what it wants to change but about the method of change, and that's vital. The world is not short of people with good ideas, it is short of ways of actually achieving change.

Kaur: In your early days at the RSA you warned about the public becoming ungovernable. Does this feel like it's still the case? What has your time at the RSA taught you about leadership and diffuse models of change?

Taylor: As progressives, we have to make a choice. Do we indulge in pessimism and bleakness about all the things that are going wrong, or do we choose to recognise that there are things that are going right that we should also celebrate? It's vital for us to give confidence to people about change.

We should also recognise that there are things that have really progressed. For example, in my lifetime the attitude towards the LGBT community has been utterly transformed. When I went to school homophobia was not occasional, it was mandatory. The change around that has been fantastic.

One's approach to change needs to be pragmatic and to recognise that change can come from multiple places. When I did my review for Theresa May on good work, I produced a report that I thought the government could implement. People might criticise me for that and say you should be more radical; I didn't want a report that the day it launched the government would say, we're not going to do this. What's the point in that? At the same time, I developed this idea of good work; this idealistic concept that all work should be good work, and that's entered into the public discourse.

You need to have as broad a range of tools as possible. Activism, being out on the street, mobilising people is great, deliberative engagement is great. But sometimes a phone call to a journalist can achieve an enormous amount. Sometimes finding the right politician or the right official can take things forward. You've got to have that range. If you keep hammering away with the same tool you won't make much progress and you will become exhausted and disillusioned.

Kaur: How do you as a leader listen to what's important but also learn to block out some of the noise that can prevent really good work from happening?

RSA Fellowship in action

Climate Change All Change

Climate Change All Change, a UK-based project engaging schoolchildren in finding solutions to the climate crisis, has received a £10,000 RSA Catalyst Scaling Grant to expand the reach of its work.

The project, co-founded by David Lloyd Jones FRSA, DaeWha Kang FRSA and Kimberly Safford, links primary schoolchildren with designers who encourage and help the children to create concepts in architecture, urban, rural and product design, transportation, food and clothing for a climate-changed future.

The children's designs are elaborated further in the design studio, before being given a national stage. International rollout of the programme will follow. The grant will be used to bring more designers and primary schools on board and to launch the first seven-school co-design programme. Climate Change All Change looks forward to further collaboration with the V&A, which has been supporting the project from the outset.

"We felt that the barriers to climate change were not technical ones, but the collective will to act," says David. "The project offers schoolchildren opportunities to engage creatively and contribute fresh insight and exuberance. The co-design process will open children's eyes to the thrill of making things and introduces the intricacies of aesthetics. The results will, in turn, galvanise public action."

■ *To find out more, visit https://cc-ac.org/ or contact David Lloyd Jones on david@cc-ac.org*

Taylor: On a personal level, for one reason or another, I'm just driven to be a changemaker. That is not necessarily a good or a bad thing. I often think if only I'd done a proper job, like being a doctor or a teacher, done something like that and made a real difference rather than all this abstract stuff. I have incredible doubt. I suffer a lot of anxiety. I don't try to be a changemaker because I'm heroic, I do it because for one reason or another I'm driven.

Kaur: It's good to hear that it comes with the territory. When I asked Konda Mason, the co-founder and CEO of Impact Hub Oakland, the same question many years ago she said it's harder not to do this work. It's harder for me not to.

Taylor: Maybe one good thing about Covid-19 is we're all feeling a little bit more able to be open and vulnerable about these things. If you're lucky enough to do work that matters to you, that work is going to give you pain as well as pleasure.

Kaur: We all know about your deep optimism about people's ability to drive change, but at this moment, as we're slowly coming out of the pandemic, how optimistic are you about our collective ability to create the world we need?

Taylor: I always avoid either being optimistic or pessimistic because I just don't know what the future is. It's up to us.

My next job is going to be running the NHS Confederation. I'm very flattered that they gave the job to me, and the reason I applied was because there's a bigger consensus now about the future of the NHS than there has been in the past 35 years. Even though there's a lot of political polarisation in our country, when it comes to the NHS there is a deep commitment to a more integrated health service, a more locally accountable health service, and to a health service that really does focus on population health and addressing health and equality.

I'm really excited to be part of something where it feels like people want to go in the same direction. Over the years in politics I've often heard the phrase, how do we save the NHS? How does the country save the NHS? I think we need to flip it. How does the NHS save Britain? If you look at the NHS at its best – and it's far from perfect – the values that it exemplifies, the diversity of the people in it, it is still the one institution (the BBC sadly is not what it used to be) that makes us feel proud of ourselves. I've chosen to work in an area where I think there's real hope.

"It's vital for us to give confidence to people about change"

Kaur: The NHS is interested in the business of care, wellbeing and health and these are fundamentals that are going to be the core features of a society that thrives in the tough times we're coming to.

Taylor: I completely agree with you about care. Of many episodes of my *Bridges to the Future* podcast, one I'm most fond of is with Madeleine Bunting whose book, *Labours of Love*, is absolutely brilliant and about precisely this, how we need to raise the status of care. We need, as a society, to understand how incredibly important care is to us both as carers and as people who will one day need care.

Kaur: What's next for the RSA?

Taylor: Leaving the RSA has been really hard for me and I view the appointment of my successor with profound ambivalence. I knew it was something that had to happen. But, you know, it's like having your children adopted by someone else!

When I heard that Andy Haldane had been appointed I was absolutely delighted. Andy is a class act, he's a brilliant communicator, a thoughtful, progressive guy, and so to hand over to someone of Andy's stature I'm delighted. He will absolutely take the RSA to a new level. I want the RSA to be twice as good in five years' time as it is now, and no one will be happier than me if that happens. ∎

FOLLOW THE MONEY

Financing of political parties can seem opaque and foment distrust, but effective legislation is hard to implement

by Emmanuelle Avril
🐦 @EmmanuelleAvril

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Is it possible to identify a clear path for a form of political funding better suited to contemporary conceptions of democracy? According to Andrey Tomashevskiy, who conducted research on 45 parties in nine OECD countries between 1996 and 2013, parties which receive a greater percentage of their income from private donors tend to adopt more extreme positions on socio-cultural issues. Meanwhile, the current UK system of political funding is under fire for allowing big donors, who often hold populist, extremist views, to influence politics.

In a political climate marked by the advent of the 'turned off' voter, party funding is an often overlooked but key aspect of political life that has the potential to seriously distort the way the representative democratic system functions. Public trust in political parties and the political system is essential to a healthy democracy, but has been undermined by successive party funding scandals. According to the Electoral Reform Society, 75% of the UK public believe that big donors have too much influence on political parties. A 2019 OECD report, *Financing Democracy*, found that four out of five citizens around the world think that the system is not working in their interests and that a key reason for this is "the perception that when it comes to politics, money talks."

Identifying the sources of funding that parties benefit from gives us an idea of who may be in a position to influence party lines and help a party over the finishing line at elections. Being aware of how the money – and how much of it – is spent tells us about imbalances between parties and reveals dubious activities and areas that are as yet insufficiently regulated.

Even if there is a consensus around the need to clean up politics in order to restore public trust in political parties, there is no agreement on the way forward. As public funding of parties is minimal in the UK, parties are reluctant to let go of vital sources of income. Yet their standing in the public eye is seriously eroded by perceptions of corruption and wrongdoing created by these flows of money.

Attempts at regulation

The UK was comparatively late in adopting a legislative framework to regulate parties' funding and spending. Until 2001, British political parties were not required to disclose the identity of their donors, and campaign spending was not limited. Following a series of scandals that demonstrated the power of money to distort the political process – the most prominent of which was the 1994 'cash for questions' affair, in which it was revealed that MPs had been paid to ask questions in parliament – Britain took the step

of aligning with legislation already in force in other European countries in an attempt to 'clean up' politics. The recommendations of the Neill Committee then led to the passing of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 and the creation of an impartial and independent Electoral Commission.

The new law had three specific aims: to ensure that political parties had sufficient funding to operate correctly; to rebalance public and private funding in order to limit the volume of donations originating from inappropriate sources (for example, individuals based in foreign countries); and to improve a wider range of parties' chances of winning elections.

In order to achieve the first aim, opposition parties have benefited from receiving some state funding (called 'Short Money') in proportion to votes received. But as this is only available to those parties that have obtained either two seats or one seat and over 150,000 votes in a general election, the bulk of these funds go to Labour, the Scottish National Party and the Liberal Democrats. To better monitor where party donations are coming from, the law requires that parties declare the donations received each week during the period between the dissolution of parliament and polling day. And, in order to level the playing field, strict limits were imposed on local campaign finance for parties and candidates, with

paid-for broadcast advertising by parties forbidden in favour of state-funded and strictly regulated party election broadcasts. The Electoral Commission sets out detailed guidelines for each election, establishing clear spending limits and deadlines, as well as defining what constitutes legitimate campaign spending. Any campaign expenditure over £250,000 must include an independent auditor's report.

However, this system is incomplete for a number of reasons. First, the Commission lacks the means to enforce these rules, since the fines it can impose are not really dissuasive. Second, at the national level, some types of campaign spending, such as advertising in the press, on billboards, or on social media, remain completely uncontrolled. Online campaigning is a rising concern: a 2020 Electoral Reform Society report, *Democracy in the Dark*, refers to this as the "Wild West", where vast amounts of money are spent on dubious activities, such as the creation of misleading websites and accounts seeking to misrepresent the positions of rival parties.

Another area of concern is that foreign actors are able to influence the UK democratic system by sponsoring politicians on overseas trips or offering them stock options and engaging them to lobby on their behalf; an example here is David Cameron's alleged attempts to lobby government ministers on ▶
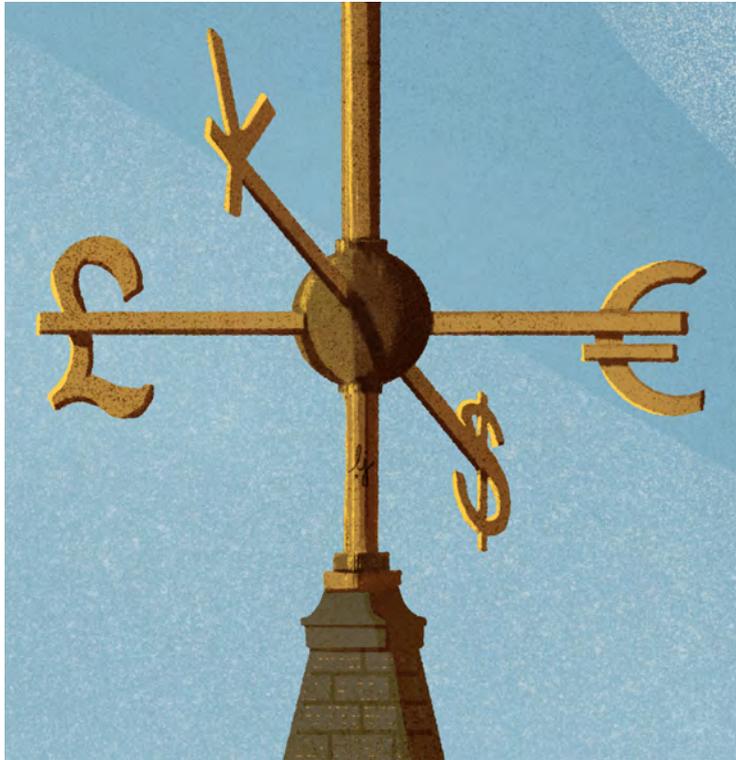
> ## "Big money is still very much a part of UK democracy"

behalf of financial services company Greensill Capital. More generally, the current system of party funding does not prevent money of unknown provenance from entering the political system through opaque company donations. To contribute to a political party, politician or other political campaign, companies only need to be registered and "carrying on business" in the UK, a loophole that came to prominence during the 2016 EU referendum.

How does the UK compare?

Despite these regulations, big money is still very much a part of UK democracy. According to data collected by anti-corruption campaign network Transparency International, the UK is one of only six countries (along with Slovakia, Austria, Italy, Hungary and New Zealand) not to impose limits on donations. Although there are strict limits on what candidates and parties can spend, in the UK there are no ceilings on how much individuals and groups can contribute to candidates or parties.

Globally, the fifth annual report of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), published in 2019, shows that political finance is handled in a wide variety of ways. The most suitable political finance regulations are determined by each country's political system, level of economic development, and the degree of democratic maturity

and stability. Yet the report identifies a number of global trends that may point to a convergence in party finance models. Since the early 1990s, there has been a movement toward increasing levels of regulation.

The current UK political funding system can be seen as a hybrid between the very restrictive French system and a much less regulated US system. While in the US companies and large private contributors can donate unlimited funds (via the super PACs, which pool and distribute campaign contributions), in France donations by private corporations have been prohibited since 1995 (business owners may make personal contributions). This has not, however, prevented scandals (such as the Bygmalion affair involving Nicolas Sarkozy's 2012 presidential campaign).

One important trend is a global increase in the funding of political parties through public subsidies, with, according to the IDEA database, around two-thirds of countries providing direct public funding to parties. Public funding is viewed as a means to level the political playing field and reflects the perception of parties as essential pillars of democracy. Currently, total public funding of political parties in Britain only amounts to 22% of their annual income, well below the European average, which currently stands at 67% (Spain has the highest level, at 87%). Most party funding systems combine public and private funding (a mix recommended by the Council of Europe).

The downside, however, is that many European countries display a worrying trend of political parties becoming highly dependent on public money, raising concerns that by increasing the amounts of public subsidies available, the largest parties – those in a position to legislate on the matter – are in effect serving their own interests. There have thus been attempts to find a better balance. Germany, for instance, has worked to encourage party fundraising through a 'matching grants' mechanism where public subsidies can never be higher than the amount raised by the party itself.

Reforming UK party funding?

One main difficulty in devising party finance regulations is that most broadly accepted democratic theories do not point unambiguously to any one model of party finance. There is therefore a need to find country-specific solutions that take into account the historical evolution of political party systems and different political cultures. Nevertheless, a few key principles may be identified. For example, there is a consensus across countries that measures to structure party finance should aim to improve participation, increase transparency and bring in more effective sanctions.

In the UK, there are calls to consider the benefits of providing better public funding to political parties to ease the financial burden on candidates. Finding the right balance is the tricky part as it is impossible to identify the perfect ratio for levels of public and private political funding. Public funding should provide for the basic needs of any party that has passed a certain threshold of public support so that it can perform its core functions of citizen participation and representation, the rest being made of resources raised elsewhere.

An integral dimension of party funding reform in the UK is acceptability by voters. According to research by the Electoral Reform Society, most voters agree that the current system allows politics to be bought by large donations and are supportive of measures that would seek to correct this. Ending the dominance of big money in UK politics could be achieved through caps on donations, lower national spending limits, closer monitoring to prevent foreign entities being able to influence parliamentarians, and exposing dark money in the political system. Paradoxically though, measures to increase transparency, although important in cleaning up politics, can have a negative effect on public trust, by drawing attention to wrongdoings. In any case, a reactive approach, which merely responds

to scandals, is unlikely to restore public confidence in the political system.

Correcting inequities

Ideally, money should have nothing to do with politics and each citizen's vote would have equal weight in elections. But in practice, in democratic regimes, parties need vast amounts of money to carry out activities that are essential to the representative system. Since money cannot be taken out of politics, it must be closely monitored and controlled.

It is possible to seek solutions to rebalance and correct the worst sources of inequity in terms of political influence, bringing more people into the democratic process so as to increase citizens' feelings of political efficacy. But the persistence of economic inequalities is perhaps the single greatest problem of liberal democracies and the likely source of public disillusionment with political institutions.

Rebuilding confidence will not be achieved by just filling the gaps. Public trust will only develop if the increasingly unbearable persistence of vast inequalities in terms of wealth, power and access to politics, which feed a feeling of exclusion from democratic life, are addressed. ∎

Images from Aneta Ivanova

THE GOOD LIFE

The RSA is developing a programme of work that looks to put wellbeing at the centre of all our systems

by Ruth Hannan
🐦 @HannanRuth

Over the past year, it has become clear that the systems that surround us – whether work, transport, public services, government, community or family and friends – not only struggle under extreme pressure but ultimately cannot cope with complex challenges. The national lockdown was presented as needed in part to "protect the NHS" while mental health agencies struggled to maintain their services. We closed schools to quash the spread of Covid-19, while some of the poorest families were unable to feed their children.

The pandemic has shown that our systems are not designed to cope with the complex needs of a diverse population. Of course, this is not a typical situation, and you may be thinking it cannot be then used as a comparator. However, Covid-19 exposed the extent to which, even before the pandemic, we had managed to design complex systems that could not really cope with the complexity of the 21st century.

At the RSA we are exploring a programme of work that tries to look at how we can cope with this complexity. Our vision is a "world where our collective wellbeing drives the systems that surround us". But what does that mean? And is this bold enough to truly capture the global social inequalities that affect so many? Is wellbeing a strong enough term?

Fundamentally, we believe it is. For us, wellbeing means the ability of individuals to lead a good life. However, for this vision to be realised, we believe we must see wellbeing as a systemic issue, which can be impacted by a range of complex factors, including both objective circumstance and subjective sense of security and happiness. The distribution of wellbeing is unequal, not just from individual to individual but because of systemic and structural inequalities.

Rebranding wellbeing

The RSA is by no means the first organisation to look at the value of complex thinking and placing wellbeing at the heart of systems; the British economist Richard Layard and colleagues situated wellbeing as crucial to happiness in their work on the annual *World Happiness Report*. UK charity What Works Wellbeing has made strides to embed wellbeing in policy and community practice and there is a growing movement to develop wellbeing economies, with the Wellbeing Alliance (which national governments are joining) developing strong partnerships in this space. In addition, some governments, including those in Wales and New Zealand, are starting to embed wellbeing in national policy.

Despite this recognition of the importance of wellbeing (and its more complex applications), it remains peripheral. To change this, it needs a rebrand. The RSA's aim is to develop a compelling articulation of what is needed to lead a good life and the factors that enable the development of humane systems to support this as an end goal. It is the connection between these that we feel is crucial. Too often individuals must fit into systems that do not meet their needs. Labels such as 'hard to reach', 'challenging behaviours', 'hidden', 'complex needs' or 'troubled families' begin to be used, which allow systems to remain unchanged and individuals to be underserved. The RSA believes ▶

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that there needs to be a clear shift to systems that are guided by people, not through the current method of consultation but by embedding participatory methods at all levels of service design.

Wellbeing has an image problem. The wider perception of its meaning is individualistic; often closely aligned to mental health but positioned as self-care. It is slight and shallow as opposed to robust and deep and too often implies that wellbeing is simply the responsibility of the individual to take care of themselves and improve. It is still often seen as less important than mental or physical health, yet wellbeing is crucial to population health and can capture the social and health inequalities that affect us throughout our lives. Recognising that wellbeing interconnects with social justice is critical for its rebrand. And, despite the increasing interest in it at a policy level, wellbeing remains far from the day-to-day experiences of those at the hard edges of life.

Dealing with complexity

To give some context, I was not always a policy wonk; I used to do real work in local third sector organisations supporting unpaid carers. So often, the people we supported had a complex web of issues that sat behind what led them to our door. Being an unpaid carer was the reason they came to us but often this was after they had ricocheted from one service to another, with each agency only able to address one facet of the life challenges they faced. Often, these challenges were linked to the fact that the person they supported was not getting the help they needed from the NHS or local authority. It is hardly surprising that carers get exhausted by this process.

All of this was (often) built on a foundation of poor housing, inflexible work options, schools that did not understand disability, issues around young carers and services designed to deal with one issue, as opposed to wrapping around a household (or family). When doing this job, I learnt to see the complex web of relationships and challenges woven around the individual sitting in front of me; my role was to help identify those threads and support that person to work through them so that they and their family were able to have a good life. For me, this was real, tough social action. This was and is wellbeing work.

Many services designed to support us are called 'integrated' or may use the term 'joined up', but often this means that individual services do not have the range of skills within them or a wider understanding of how their service connects with others to ensure that individuals and community needs are met. Toby Lowe's example of the linear nature of public service commissioning (as part of his Human Learning Systems work) in relation to obesity services highlights that there are hundreds of factors contributing to outcomes, but commissioned services are often only able to affect a small number of these factors, meaning the individual's complex wellbeing needs are not met.

The landmark 2010 report *Fair Society, Healthy Live*s (the Marmot Review) showed that social inequalities – such as household wealth, where you live and the start you have in life – significantly impact wellbeing, yet services that talk about wellbeing will have little impact on these structural factors. For instance, the Marmot Review shows that children who have low cognitive scores at the age of 22 months tend to catch up with their peers by the age of 10 if they are from high socioeconomic groups, whereas the scores of their peers from low socioeconomic groups actually worsen.

We need to change the systems that currently propagate a model of wellbeing inequality by not working together; we need to see the interconnectedness of people's individual challenges.

A good example is the way we have approached road and public transport infrastructure thus far. We embraced car travel so wholeheartedly that it is now a huge contributor to population health damage through air pollution and a reduction in active travel. Research by Amanda Howell in the US shows that not factoring in access to affordable public transport can make affordable housing unaffordable if residents must spend excessive amounts on transport. Another example is work structures, which are created so that low wages, long hours and poor working conditions impact on our ability to live a balanced, well-supported life. The RSA's work on economic insecurity identified that 30% of all workers felt they did not earn enough to maintain a decent standard of living. Essentially, systems do not work alone or collectively to fundamentally support our wellbeing.

Systems as well as individuals

Our research at the RSA shows that the complex nature of people needing to live a good life means we must look beyond poverty and inequality. These are vital areas of work, but embracing wellbeing inequality as a systemic issue means that those experiencing inequality and poverty do not remain siloed, allowing the challenges they face to be tackled collectively. Moving wellbeing into the space of system change and away from individual responsibility is important, but as the work on schools by Debbie Watson at the University of Bristol has shown, it is

"If ever there was a moment to seize change, it is now"

important to avoid seeing 'good' wellbeing as a one-size-fits-all solution; as an objective tick-list as opposed to something that is subjective.

So where does that leave us? I feel there are some crucial elements to consider if we are to approach wellbeing as a systemic – as well as a cultural – challenge. The first is the opportunity to approach wellbeing at a population health level and build it into structural systems to prevent its deterioration. For example, this would include looking at house-building policy – the quality, quantity and size of homes – and transport policy, alongside systems to address air pollution, which particularly impacts poorer communities. It would mean developing an education system that has wellbeing woven throughout it. For example, pupils in Estonia consistently outperform their peers in the UK. In Estonia, early-years education is focused on enabling children to be "school-ready", meaning socially and emotionally ready, as well as educationally. And children are not grouped by ability.

At national policy level this would mean developing policies and encouraging practice that ensures employment is designed to support workers, guarantee good pay and conditions, and offer worthwhile experiences. And of course, there are the health and care systems, which – despite the language of integration – still rarely support the complex web of needs that make up wellbeing.

Participatory practice and wellbeing

The RSA has begun to explore how participatory practice can contribute to our wellbeing at both an individual and system level. There is a growing interest in participatory democracy, especially citizen assemblies and juries, with over 13 assemblies having being held since 2019 (it is hard to say how many more would have happened but for Covid-19). While this is incredibly welcome, the risk is that such approaches get commissioned by systems and services that are still more consultative than participatory.

It is important to ensure that a model designed to enable participation does not become another tool to enable the status quo to continue; co-production (widely used and promoted in health and care services) can be seen as quite a mixed bag across the UK. It needs proper investment and support to prevent it becoming a silo of its own. Shifting a system so that wellbeing becomes its core driver will not on its own fix things. Change takes time and is multi-layered; but if ever there was a moment to seize change, it is now.

Exploring organisations' role in system change is important. The RSA has an opportunity to work with local people, their communities, our Fellows, partners and policy leaders to hold a mirror up to ourselves and acknowledge we can do better. Together, collectively and supportively, we can address the wellbeing inequality that exists within our society. ■

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TIME FOR D-BONDS?

Democracy is as important as ESG principles, and investments should reflect this

by Marcos Buscaglia
🐦 @MarcosBuscaglia

Are you in favour of autocrats such as Russia's Vladimir Putin? This is an odd question to ask; you are, of course, against them. Now let me ask you another question. Are you in favour of global warming, men-only company boards or the degradation of the environment? Again, the answer seems obvious: you are, of course, decisively not.

The difference between these two questions is that, in the case of climate change and gender equality, you are taking actions in your financial portfolio. The development of the green bonds market and environmental, social and governance (ESG) standards are financial markets' response to citizens' demands on such topics. But in the case of the democracy question, if you look carefully at your pension fund or any other investment account you own, you will realise that you have most probably been financing governments that are weakening democracy.

It is time to close this gap. Democracy has been in recession over the past two decades, but financial markets seem oblivious to this trend. We should take it as seriously as global warming.

Granted, it is not as easy to measure democratic credentials as it is to measure climate change or to assess whether an investment project will degrade the environment. As democracy is most often not dying the old way – that is, via coup d'états – but is being subverted through 'legal' steps, approved by the legislature and accepted by courts, it is harder to make a clear objective case for how it is being undermined.

But it is not impossible. There are several reliable efforts to measure the health of democracy worldwide, including the indices created by Freedom House and The Economist Intelligence Unit. Importantly, they are all consistently concluding the same: democracy is in retreat. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has aggravated the situation.

In the meantime, foreign financing for governments that are weakening democracy has ballooned. In 1988, when Morgan Stanley launched its Emerging Markets Morgan Stanley Capital International (MSCI) Index, emerging markets represented just 1% of the total global investable equity universe. At the end of 2020, they comprised 13% of the MSCI World Index. The same trend is observed in the emerging market government bond market. The problem is that many of these high-yield, lower-rated emerging market government bonds have been issued by leaders that have been putting democracy at risk.

There are many alternatives by which investors can incorporate considerations on the democratic standards of the issuers. One is the creation of democracy indices, which has already started. These set stricter portfolio allocation limits for governments or companies in countries whose democracy standards have deteriorated by more than a pre-set margin in the previous year, or whose democracy index is below a certain threshold. Another one is to add the 'D' of democracy to ESG standards. What percentage of a fund manager's portfolio or a company's factories is allocated to countries that have hybrid democracies, or no democracy at all?

Lack of awareness has made investors, big and small, implicitly complicit with the deterioration of democracy. Something can and should be done before it is too late for the people across the world who are enduring the hardships of this democracy recession. ∎

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WHOSE FREE SPEECH?

Should political speech be regulated on social media?

by Nanjala Nyabola
🐦 @Nanjala1

Nanjala Nyabola is a writer, political activist and analyst

The Facebook page was nondescript and barebones. Just one stock photograph and a series of videos emblazoned with the logo of the campaign: 'The Real Raila'. The underlying assertion was that if Kenyans voted for Raila Odinga, the leader of the opposition, in the 2017 general election the country would be plunged into chaos. The short YouTube videos characterised him as a "dangerous, racist xenophobe", according to UK-based charity Privacy International. This content soon went viral with weeks left to the highly contentious election, adding fuel to the already simmering flames of political unrest. Later, it emerged that the campaign was designed and rolled out by an American corporation, Harris Media, which also worked on the political campaign of Donald Trump.

In 2021, the challenge of regulating political speech on social networking sites is one of the most important tasks ahead of us. Developing a robust framework to oversee who can say what, and on what platform, is particularly urgent as formerly domestic firms turn into multinational corporations with unprecedented reach. For years, many social media sites have argued that self-regulation is the best form of regulating speech on their platforms. But recent events in countries as disparate as Myanmar, Ethiopia, the UK and even the US have affirmed that relying on self-regulation is no longer feasible or desirable. Social networking sites have been quickly overwhelmed by highly paid, well-connected corporations like Harris Media building increasingly elaborate misinformation campaigns using the sites' technology. In fraught political contexts, this can have dire outcomes.

Defining political speech

At the heart of this challenge is the idea of political speech. Definitions vary, but fundamentally political speech is statements or expressions made about the behaviour of government or politics. Some speech is unambiguously political, for example speaking about an election or an elected leader. But some speech is harder to categorise, including discussing the personal life of a political figure or attempting to influence which matters dominate the public discourse.

Political speech is nearly universally recognised as a special class of speech and protected by varying laws and regulations. When a journalist guild prohibits media houses from accepting money from political figures in order to publish stories about them, this is a recognition that political speech should not be influenced by financial interests. When newspapers insist that advertorials for political figures must carry warnings that declare who paid for them, this is a recognition that political speech is important. In traditional media there is already widespread agreement that political speech matters a great deal and should be treated to a higher standard than, say, advertising for jeans.

On social media the dominant definition of political speech draws heavily from the US constitution, which is one of the few that has protection for political

speech built into its core. The First Amendment, one of the most litigated elements of US law, has a long line of cases defining political speech and, given that many of the social networking sites with international reach are US companies, it follows that their position broadly aligns with it.

But the US definition is very narrow and hyper-contextual. For example, US law considers paying for an advert to be a protected form of political speech. This formulation is at odds with how much of the world sees political speech (as well as the role of money in electoral politics), particularly in countries that have a history of incitement to widespread violence. Germany, for example, has elaborate restrictions on expressing neo-Nazi sentiments, and in Rwanda speech that denies the 1994 genocide is strictly prohibited. Both of these are forms of political speech that would be treated very differently in the US, where owning or even waving a Nazi flag is legal. Indeed, more countries than not have significant restrictions on political speech, although often these restrictions are designed to consolidate power rather than to protect citizens.

The trouble with regulation

Authoritarian regimes often have the most rigorous laws concerning political speech, and they are generally designed to suppress criticism. Uganda's 2011 Computer Misuse Act ostensibly protects against online misinformation but in practical terms is the main tool used to intimidate critics of the state

operating online. For instance, in 2019 activist Stella Nyanzi was sentenced to 18 months in prison under this law, in part for a poem she posted on Facebook calling the president a pair of buttocks.

As this illustrates, there is not yet an ideal model for what regulation of political speech on social media could be. Social media companies are multinational in a way that large media houses are not, so how could such regulation cover the varying contexts of political speech around the world? In January 2021, when Facebook gave itself the power to take down offensive speech by political leaders, it not only removed Donald Trump from the site, but also numerous postings by Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni and his acolytes. Trump's removal was rightly celebrated, but Museveni – who already controls traditional media in Uganda – retaliated by banning Facebook and thereby robbing his critics and human rights defenders of a crucial platform for their outreach.

Another important question is whether social networking sites would be willing to submit to some form of heightened regulation. So far, they prefer continued self-regulation even though everything from the past 10 years indicates that this creates more harm. Yet, as politics around the world becomes more polarised, social networking sites are increasingly becoming the main avenue for not only disseminating hate speech and promoting government propaganda, but also for critics of authoritarian regimes to make themselves heard. The challenge of crafting meaningful regulation of political speech remains. ∎

THE DARK SIDE OF GREEN

As far-right parties increasingly co-opt ecological policies, is there a danger that they will attract a larger supporter base?

by Jean-Yves Camus
🐦 @jeanYvesCamus1

Jean-Yves Camus is Director of the Observatory of Radical Politics at the Jean-Jaurès Foundation and an Associate Research Fellow at the French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs

Far-right parties in Europe, as well as far-right groups in the US, are often described as authoritarian movements whose only concerns are immigration, law and order, and an aggressive nationalism that rejects international regulatory agencies and agreements. Although this is partly true, climate change and environmental issues are so much at the heart of policymaking and party politics today that the far right cannot just ignore them.

Some of those parties are global-warming sceptics and think that anthropogenic climate change is a hoax; others do not deny humankind can negatively affect the climate but downplay the extent to which this has been the case and maintain a pro-industry stand, balancing a pro-climate policy against the need for continued growth and its benefits for employment. However, there are also far-right, and even radical-right, movements that promote an agenda of ecology and de-growth.

Ideological views of climate change

Global-warming sceptics, who include far-right figures such as Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro and many Trump followers within the Republican Party, are not just a threat to liberal democracy because they oppose the consensus built on the resolutions of COP21. After all, it can be argued that they are merely politicians favouring the interests of big business. But refusing to accept that anthropogenic climate change is a reality is an ideological position.

Other far-right parties, such as the Spanish Vox and the German Alternative für Deutschland, have a different approach. For them, the fact that the overwhelming majority of scientists believe climate change is man-made is not particularly important. What matters is that they see climate change as a creed imposed by the so-called elites and progressive political parties as part of a broader attempt to destroy the 'natural order' and 'traditional' values.

What can be particularly harmful for democracy is that many of those who believe climate change is a hoax will eventually support other conspiracy theories, such as the 'Great Reset' (the belief that the Covid-19 pandemic was orchestrated by a group of world leaders so that they could take over the global economy) and will spread their toxic message under the guise of supposedly dissident thinking.

Avocado politics

Other far-right politicians have understood the benefit they can gain from promoting a pro-environment policy, both in terms of attracting new voters and in becoming seemingly more mainstream.

The French Rassemblement national (National rally, RN, formerly the Front national), led by Marine Le Pen, has recently tried to show interest in environmental policy by adding 'Localism' to the salient features of its platform for the 2022 presidential election. Localism means favouring locally produced goods, including agricultural goods, over imported. But it is also deeply connected to identity issues; according to RN, buying local means boosting local employment and needs to be understood within the broader frame of the party's protectionist agenda and its "priority to the French" motto. However, on other environment-related issues, RN has constantly disagreed with the progressive and ▶
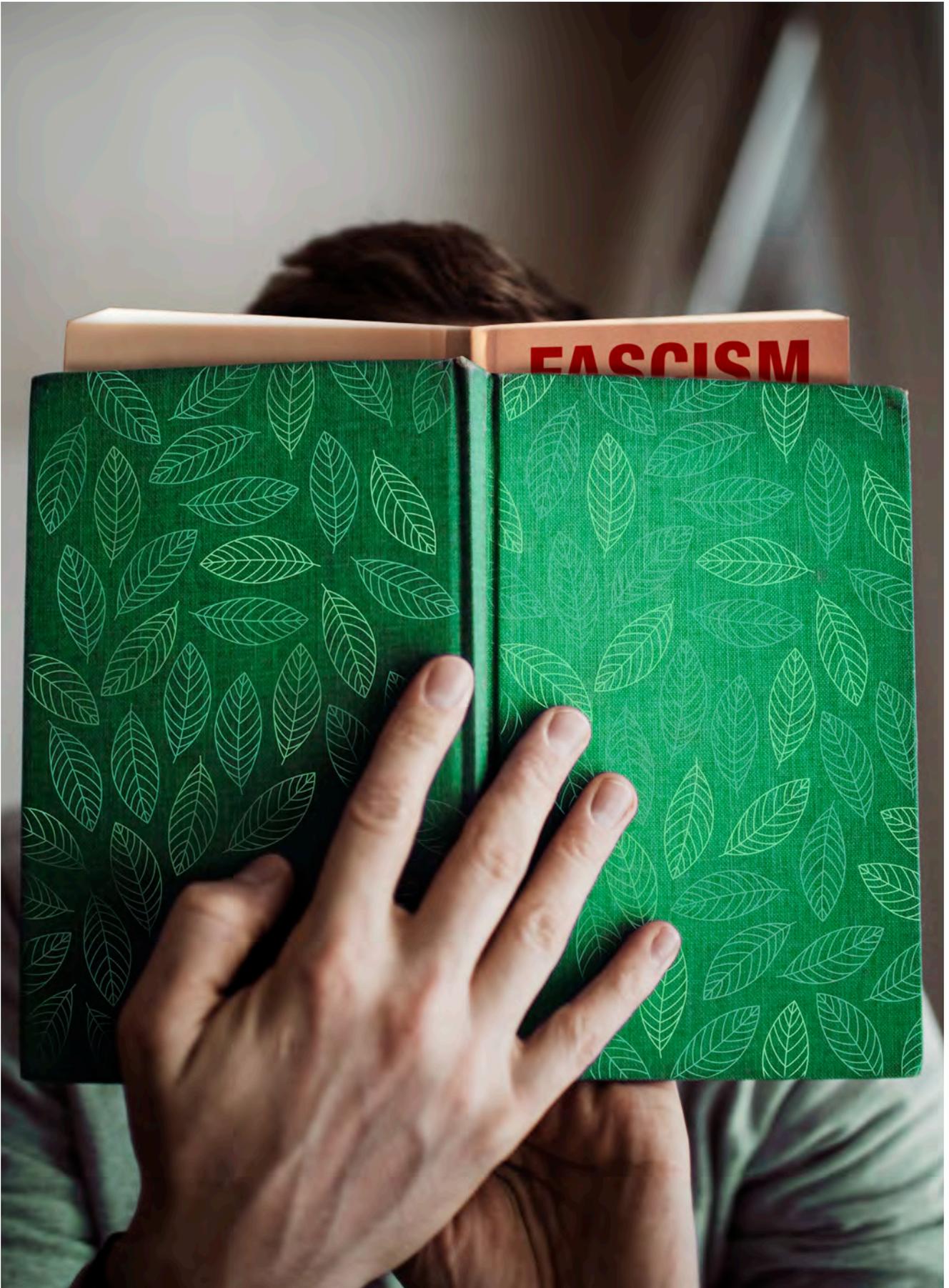
green parties, as does the Flemish Vlaams Belang. Both parties oppose wind-powered energy, stand for the continuation of nuclear-energy production and are vocal in supporting the lobby of car owners and manufacturers who are against higher road tolls, the increase of taxes on gasoline and moving to soft modes of transportation in cities. There is little doubt that far-right parties only show an interest in ecology as a public relations strategy.

One party that has successfully integrated environmental policy with its pre-existing far-right beliefs is the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), a former coalition partner of the Austrian People's Party. The FPÖ affirms in its party programme that its goal is "to preserve a homeland for future generations that facilitates autonomous living in an intact environment". It is interesting that this commitment to what can be interpreted as a green agenda is part of a paragraph in the party's manifesto dealing with "Homeland, identity and environment". In other words, environment is a concern for the party insofar as it goes hand in hand with nationalism and, in this case, a reminder that "the language, history and culture of Austria are German".

Thus the FPÖ makes it clear that, according to its ideology, there is a correlation between protecting natural resources and remaining faithful to the ethnic roots of one's people. This is perfectly in line with the long-standing tradition of the German *völkisch* movement, which sang the praises of a rural life true to 'old-time' values, as opposed to the corrupting influence of the cosmopolitan cities, said to be a fertile ground for revolutions and subversion. From the end of the 19th century until the 1930s, the segment of the German Conservative Revolution known as Jugendbewegung drew heavily on the concept of "going back to the roots of the Nation" through exploring the rural areas of Germany and their folklore, with an emphasis on the pagan past. Some *völkisch* groups, such as the Artamanen, became small groups of settlers who left the cities to live on farms, and who were planning to colonise the farming lands that were to be conquered by the Third Reich, a dream that never materialised.

The 'land' has been connected with ethnicity by many far-right groups. Ethnonationalists have also promoted the idea of a separate homeland for white people: the South African apartheid system was intended to restrict the settlement of Black people in specific townships and Bantustans, but its Afrikaner ideologues also thought of it as a means of keeping their communities faithful to the nationalist narrative of the Great Trek and the Orange Free State. This required that Afrikaner people live in a homogeneous or predominantly Calvinist-Afrikaner area. Today, some American white nationalists promote the creation of an 'ethnostate' in the Pacific Northwest, along the lines of the late white supremacist Harold Covington's concept of the Northwest Territorial Imperative.

Taken to extremes

A new issue facing democratic countries is the emergence of a small but violent minority of fringe activists who belong to the extreme right and use environmental topics to spread their openly fascist ideology. The New Zealand Christchurch shooter referred to himself as an "Eco-fascist" in his manifesto and claimed that environmentalism and responsible markets were as much a priority as ethnic autonomy and the armed fight against non-Europeans.

In a similar fashion, most of the so-called extreme-right accelerationists (who believe that western governments are so corrupt that the best thing to do is accelerate their demise through violent means) in the UK and in the US, as well as the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) in Scandinavia, have a goal of establishing the ethnostate for whites only. However, they also fight, as the NRM puts it, for "a modern society living in harmony with the laws of nature", meaning they support de-growth, animal rights and anything that can "promote the replacement of the materialistically wasteful mentality of our society with an ecologically sound mindset". The intelligence community across the western world knows that the lunatic fringe on the extreme right is trying to recruit new followers by using ecological language.

The tactical use of environmental issues by the far right is part of the broader challenge to democracy that comes from nationalist, populist parties. However, we should not be blind to the fact that environmentalists associated with the radical left also pose a threat to progressive values when they engage in direct action such as sabotage of power plants, unlawful occupation of land, or what is known, especially in the US, as eco-terrorism. Such methods undermine the credibility of peaceful and democratic attempts at convincing citizens that saving the Earth requires no further delay.

However, the main political problem for those with a progressive agenda is how to counter the narrative of radical-right parties as they try to hijack environmentalist policies. Fighting climate change is first and foremost a fight for equality. We must avoid the radical right's use of ecology to lure voters into their agenda of selfishness based on ethnicity and their fantasy of a 'golden age' when man and nature live in harmony on the basis of natural law. ∎

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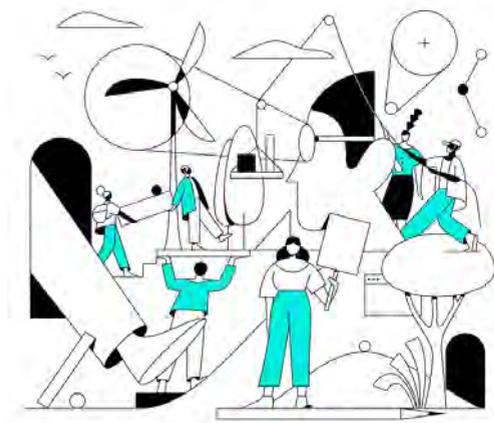
AMPLIFYING CITIZEN VOICE

Creating truly inclusive growth means ensuring all communities are heard equally

by Alexa Clay and Riley Thorold
🐦 @alexaclay @riley_thorold

There is a certain irony that the concept of 'inclusive growth' has often, in its application, been imposed top-down. In research and practice, inclusion has often been interpreted simply as a principle by which the proceeds of growth should be distributed, rather than a deeply embedded component of economic design and development.

This is why, in 2019, the RSA identified 'inclusive voice' (by which we mean equitable and influential public participation in economic policymaking and decision-making) as a key pillar of inclusive growth. Just as unequal economies usually have power structures that exclude many people from involvement in decision-making, we know that more inclusive decision-making often prefigures a more equal society.

Working alongside the UK Inclusive Growth Network – a coalition of local and combined authorities from across the UK – we are now asking what it might take to integrate participatory democracy and inclusive growth in the aftermath of a crisis.

The inclusive growth agenda tells us that the quality of growth matters as much as its rate; and we've found this also applies to civic engagement. Without genuine delegation of authority and distribution of power, even the sincerest attempts at civic engagement will be counterproductive. And without a genuine commitment to equal access and influence, participatory programmes risk reinforcing existing inequities.

Our research has also shown local democracy to be a complex and dynamic system, rather than a set of discrete institutions and processes. We should resist the urge to valorise single methods and instead see democracy as part of a living system. Participation is not a product to be pulled off a shelf, or an offset to traditional command-and-control decision-making. It is part of a cultural shift for distributing power and agency that is highly contextual, messy, and requires building connective tissue between institutions and civil society organisations.

Green shoots

Thankfully, many public authorities, including those in the Inclusive Growth Network, are already stepping up to the challenge. In North Ayrshire ambitious attempts at blending community wealth building and participatory democracy are taking root, while in Bogotá in Colombia multi-staged deliberative assemblies will give residents an ongoing role in agenda-setting and decision-making. In Seattle, Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality have resulted in US$30m being diverted from the police budget towards a participatory budgeting process for programmes that create "true public health and safety". These examples are just some of the green shoots of a more participative approach to governance emerging all around the world. They remind us that economic inequality and injustice are not inevitable, and it follows that economic democracy (of the kind we are supporting in Pittsburgh, Chicago, Anchorage and the Inclusive Growth Network) must be integral to addressing these challenges.

If inclusive growth is premised on the genuine distribution of power, underpinned by a systemic framework for democratic improvement and a sincere commitment to amplifying citizen voice, then it can animate a fairer, more resilient recovery. ∎

Alexa Clay is Director of RSA US and **Riley Thorold** is a Researcher at the RSA

DIALOGUES ACROSS DIVIDES

Talk Shop aims to make deliberative democracy accessible to all

by Perry Walker and Martin Yarnit
🐦 @Talkshop_UK

We set up Talk Shop, an organisation that aims to create dialogues across divides, in 2014 in the belief that deliberative democracy should be for everyone. Citizens' assemblies are great, but they can lead to what Oxford Professor of Politics Stuart White calls the "deliberative gap" between members of a citizens' assembly and the wider public. When the RSA gave us a Catalyst grant in 2018, we used it to show how this gap can be narrowed.

A citizens' assembly on the funding of adult social care had been commissioned by two select committees of the House of Commons. The 47 members of the assembly met over two weekends, discussing the issue with support from witnesses and facilitators. We succeeded in turning that into a kit that a group of people – sometimes a small group of half a dozen – could use to organise their own two-hour discussion. We call this approach Citizens' Assemblies Plus.

Over our time developing the Talk Shop approach and toolkit, we have learnt several lessons about what goes into creating a successful deliberative democracy experience. First: materials. Instead of the witnesses that speak to citizens' assemblies, we use digital cards with short amounts of text and sometimes illustrations. We aim to convey and stimulate feelings as well as thoughts. A card about adult social care called 'Attitudes to Ageing' included this quote: "It's very frightening. I have no family. If I have no one and go into a care home, I'm terrified that all my assets would be cheated." Using relatable situations encourages empathy and promotes open discussion.

Second, we include a lot of role play, as we find it opens people up to considering the experiences of others and encourages creative thinking. In the Assembly of Humans and More Than Humans, for example, roles include a bat, a peatbog and future generations in Greenland.

Third, we design our activities to be as game-like as possible, making them fun and meaningful at the same time. In 2019 we helped Clare Gage, now an RSA Fellowship Councillor for Central England, with her Create Change Chesterfield event, co-sponsored by the RSA. We led a Climate Walk, where people walked across the room, representing the journey from the present day to the year 2100. They discussed what behaviour changes they were prepared to make and rolled dice to see if they hit various climate tipping points, with the combination of the two determining their climate in 2100.

For the future, we are hoping to use role-play deliberation to get RSA Fellows around the world exploring the really complex issues. ■

🟦 *Visit talkshopuk.org/the-big-issues to find out more*

Perry Walker is co-founder of Talk Shop and Director of Open Up UK. **Martin Yarnit** is also co-founder of Talk Shop, a Fellow of the Centre for Welfare Reform and a Churchill Fellow

Top tips
- Keep it simple. Design your event by choosing activities that keep the instructions as short as possible.
- If you organise your own discussion on a contentious issue, help people develop empathy by asking them to role play the other side.
- Many local branches of the University of the Third Age have discussion or current affairs groups that are interested in talking through topics with materials such as ours.

Image from iStock

Voting

Can compulsory voting go some way towards rejuvenating democracy?

by Tomáš Došek
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One does not need to be a political expert to see that democracy around the world faces serious challenges. Of course, there is no magic solution, but over two decades ago political scientist Arend Lijphart argued that compulsory voting fosters voter turnout and, along with progressive parties, should, in theory, help to reduce socioeconomic inequalities. Indeed, compulsory voting has long been used in some of the most advanced democracies in the world, such as Australia and Belgium. However, it is most common in Latin America, which is among the most unequal regions. Many Latin American countries, such as Brazil, experience the highest income inequality in the world.

Does this mean that compulsory voting does not work? Not necessarily. The problem is that it is not a panacea. It does not operate in a vacuum; context matters. Comparative evidence shows that, on average, compulsory voting promotes higher voter turnout, particularly if combined with strong enforcement. Making voting compulsory helps to incorporate people – and younger people in particular – in a political community, provides a solution (although imperfectly) to their lack of interest in and attention to politics, and accustoms them to electoral participation.

On the other hand, critics say that we should not limit people's liberty by forcing them to vote, and compulsory voting has been shown to contribute to higher rates of invalid voting, vote buying and less informed voting which, in the end, worsens matters.

In Latin America, the problem is not compulsory voting itself but the mainly weak political parties and their personalist and clientelist relations with voters. These prevent them from holding government accountable and ultimately make parties unresponsive to people's needs. Democracy, and compulsory voting in particular, needs more programmatic parties without excessively fragmented party systems. Take Peru as a case in point. Almost 20 presidential candidates were on the ballot in this year's election, each connected with weak parties and the majority of them unable to offer distinguishable platforms. Together with disillusioned voters and intolerant discourse against progressive alternatives, this subverts the potential positive effects of a strong compulsory voting system on inequality reduction. States should strive to simplify voting rules and ballot design, bring voting infrastructure closer to people, promote information campaigns and provide better (civic) education for citizens.

Chile, which abolished compulsory voting in 2012, might serve as an example to other countries. Voluntary voting has resulted in a lower turnout and only worsened bias against marginalised groups, younger people and poorer voters. However, (re)introducing compulsory voting is much harder than getting rid of it. Now, in a context of increasing politicisation of inequality and growing social mobilisation, Chileans are charting a new constitution.

Well-functioning democracy needs all people to participate. Automatic voter registration should be the norm, and compulsory voting a welcomed complement. However, if this is not an option, we need to ask ourselves how much abstention and lack of interest democracy can endure. ■

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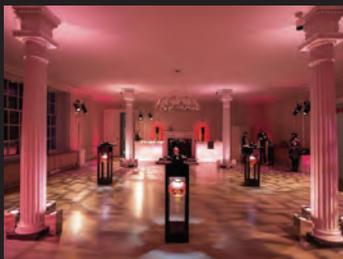
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