The future of work

Matthew Taylor and **Fabian Wallace-Stephens** explore employment scenarios

Roberto Mangabeira Unger talks about the knowledge economy

Martin Rees takes a look at the role of the scientist

Tim Eyles

"We seek to influence how as a society we can respond, with a focus on good work for all"

In the six months since I became the RSA's Chair, I have been hugely impressed by the commitment of the organisation to the vision of a world where everyone can participate to create a better future; and, of course, the RSA's Fellows are a key part of this process. I arrived as the RSA unveiled the fantastic refurbishment of its Fellowship spaces, which aim to support collaboration and the dissemination of ideas. Rawthmells, our new coffeehouse, is proving to be a great success, with Fellows regularly presenting ideas in the mini-amphitheatre, The Steps, and using the workspaces to collaborate. I have seen at first hand the strength of our Fellowship network, with Fellows' meetings across the country developing new initiatives.

This aim – of bringing people together to generate ideas that help to solve some of the most pressing challenges of our time – runs through the RSA's history. Today, we see profound changes shaping the way we work, and it is to this that we return in this edition of the journal. Our Future Work Centre held its inaugural awards earlier this year. These recognise companies that are adapting and innovating so that we might not only meet the challenges of the future, but can also move closer to achieving 'good work' for all. By championing those who are finding new ways of working that benefit their workforce and the economy, the RSA is helping to spread these ideas and ensure that today's workers will not be left behind in the shifting landscape.

In their article, Matthew Taylor and Fabian Wallace-Stephens write in more detail about this landscape and how the Future Work Centre is responding. The government accepted most of the recommendations Matthew set out in his review of modern work, and this is resulting in legislation that will improve the lot of many workers. But we must also look ahead. The centre's work has identified potential future work scenarios so that we are better equipped to take action now if we are to deliver 'good work' in the future.

Anticipating where we will go next means looking to the most advanced mode of production. In a fascinating and wide-ranging interview, Roberto Unger argues that, unless the knowledge economy becomes far more inclusive, it will deepen inequalities.

As Tom MacMillan of the RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission highlights, discussion about the future of work too often focuses on white-collar jobs and fails to look to other sectors for solutions. Tom argues that there are lessons to be learnt from the rural economy, which has already undergone some of the changes and challenges now facing the service sector.

What makes a good scientist and what kinds of myths might put people off pursuing this as a career? Professor Martin Rees explores the scientific professions, highlights the need for diversity of workforce and approach, and debunks some of the stereotypes. Meanwhile, Rachel O'Brien looks at the government's backing of the RSA's proposal for the New Futures Network, which seeks to take a place-based approach to increasing the number of prisoners released into employment.

It is not just the nature of work that feels precarious. Lord Mandelson draws on his experience as a minister and European Commissioner to argue that as well as trade, we must focus on how we retain the strong relationships that have benefited the UK and the European Union in relation to security.

At the RSA we are able to draw on evidence about the trends that are changing the way we work. Through our global network of Fellows, a group of optimistic and active problem-solvers, and working together with our research and platforms, we seek to influence how as a society we can respond, with a focus on creating good work for all. ∎

Tim Eyles is Chair of the RSA

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38 CHARTING LONELINESS
In order to tackle loneliness, we need to be able to define what it actually is, says Kimberley Smith

42 COMMON GROUND
Tom MacMillan of the RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission explains that the urban economy can learn a lot from the rural

Short read

Periscope

1 According to AI company DeepMind, one of its healthcare algorithms can detect more than 50 eye diseases as accurately as a trained doctor. How will this affect the future of work? (Page 12.)

2 In 1879, the Cadbury brothers moved their factory to the countryside; this was the first 'factory in a garden' (page 16).

3 It is increasingly hard to achieve in science at a young age: in the US biomedical field it is now unusual to get a first research grant before the age of 40 (page 22).

4 There are three forms of free labour: wage work, self-employment and cooperation. We should aim for a future where the latter two prevail, says Roberto Unger (page 28).

5 The Wates Principles, aimed at improving corporate governance, were launched in 2018 (page 30).

6 According to the Ministry of Justice's latest figures, just over a quarter of people leave prison in England and Wales with a job lined up (page 35).

7 The late John Cacioppo, a leading social neuroscientist, described loneliness as a "public health problem". But what can we do to tackle this issue? (Page 38.)

8 According to Defra, there are 466,000 workers in UK agriculture (page 43).

9 In Singapore, all citizens aged 25 and over can receive a lump sum of money to develop their skills (page 48).

10 Dennis Skinner and Ken Clarke have been MPs since 1970 (page 50).

RSA US

NEW US CHAIR

Ric Grefé will guide the RSA US team over the next three years

Ric Grefé, who is currently Design Thinker in Residence at Williams College, Massachusetts, has been appointed as the new Chair of the RSA US. Ric previously led the American Institute of Graphic Arts, a professional association for design in the US, for two decades; prior to this he was a legislative strategist for public broadcasting in Washington, DC and an urban design and policy analyst.

Throughout his career, Ric has sought to promote creative design-focused thinking in tackling the serious problems the world faces today, working with business and civil society organisations. He said: "The most effective solutions must emerge not from designers alone, but from those who have been trained in the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences, using human-centred design principles and techniques."

He is an advocate of the RSA's mission to unite people and ideas to resolve the challenges of our time and, as part of his new role, seeks to equip young people with the means to keep the human experience in mind when aiming to tackle pressing issues. During his three-year tenure as Chair, Ric wants to "expand the influence and impact of the RSA in the civil discourse of the US."

To get in touch with the RSA US, please contact US Director Alexa Clay at alexa.clay@thersa.org

Images from iStock

CAROL JACKSON
1955–2019

It was with great sadness that we learnt Carol Jackson, who was the RSA's Chief Operating Officer between September 2011 and January 2019, died in March.

Among Carol's many achievements was working closely with the RSA's Director of Fellowship, Oli Reichardt, on the successful delivery of the Rawthmells project.

Matthew Taylor, the RSA's Chief Executive, worked alongside Carol for seven years. He said: "Having left the RSA just earlier this year, Carol retired early with plans to travel, enjoy her family and work in her garden. Tragically that did not happen. She was a great person and a wonderful colleague, bringing professionalism, conscientiousness, patience and good humour to all her work, including some very difficult and complex challenges. Carol was trusted and admired by her team and was always a source of insight and common sense among her colleagues."

Everyone at the RSA sends their best wishes and thoughts to Carol's husband Andrew Wilks and their two children.

15%

Only 15% of parliamentarians polled for the RSA's *Four Futures of Work* report think the government is doing enough to prepare for the changing world of work, despite nearly half saying the topic is as important as Brexit. What will work look like in 2035? Will we be facing a Big Tech Economy, a Precision Economy, an Empathy Economy or an Exodus Economy? The Future Work Centre's report examines where we are heading.

To find out more about the research visit https://t.co/yd7tPwr1cX

INSPIRING FUTURE THEATRE

The UK's theatre industry is world-leading, but skills gaps are appearing in off-stage roles. UK Theatre, headed by Cassie Chadderton FRSA, has launched the Inspiring Future Theatre project (in conjunction with Society of London Theatre). This highlights to young people the kind of off-stage roles available, with the aim of developing a skilled and diverse future workforce.

In one year the project has recruited over 1,000 ambassadors who have talked with more than 42,000 young people.

Follow #InspiringFutureTheatre to find out more

PINBALL KIDS

New RSA data shows a rise in admissions to Pupil Referral Units (schools for excluded students) in the final term before those pupils' GCSE performances would count towards the excluding school's exam results. The research, featured in *The Times*, is part of the RSA's Pinball Kids project, which will continue to explore how to reduce avoidable exclusions.

To find out more about the RSA's Pinball Kids work, visit https://bit.ly/2UcaFwn

8m

With 8 million people in the UK finding it "near impossible" to live without cash, the RSA's *Cashing Out* report warns that declining bank branch networks and a disorderly 'dash from cash' are harming many communities and pose material economic and social risks, particularly to vulnerable consumers and smaller businesses.

For more information on this and the RSA's work supporting an emerging network of regional community banks, contact Mark Hall at mark.hall@rsa.org.uk

Agenda

THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY

As the recent public outcry about plastic pollution attests, a significant shift is needed in the way we manage our resources. As a partner on the Cities of Making programme, the RSA has been investigating the role of manufacturing in cities, including its potential to support the transition to a circular economy. A new research project is launching in the next few months; keep an eye on the RSA website for updates.

To find out more about the RSA's work on the circular economy, contact Josie Warden on josie.warden@rsa.org.uk

HERITAGE NETWORK

The Public Services and Communities team is planning a new programme of work around how heritage is often an untapped collective asset for social and economic change, with significant potential to better support inclusive growth in local communities.

To receive updates about opportunities to get involved as they arise over the coming months, sign up to the RSA Fellow-led Heritage Network here: www.thersa.org/heritage-network

Fellowship

New Fellows

Chris Earney heads the UNHCR's innovation service. The team aims to make innovation as accessible as possible to both the agency's staff and the forcibly displaced people they work with. The team works on culture and competency-building around innovation, as well as on projects in deep field locations. The aim is to create an environment where innovation can flourish.

Lydia Gardner worked on developing community-based social enterprises for over 10 years. She is now senior regional projects manager at Tree Shepherd, which supports Londoners who are trying to start enterprises or sustain established yet fragile businesses. The company focuses on marginalised entrepreneurs and operates in areas undergoing change due to regeneration. Its client base is 80% BAME, and start-ups are 70% female-run.

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

Meet other Fellows in person at Fellowship events and network meetings, which take place all over the world and are publicised on our website *www.thersa.org/events*.

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

Find out more at our online Project Support page www.thersa.org/fellowship/project-support

CATCH UP ON THE CONVERSATION

Unmissable online highlights from a packed public events season, selected by the curating team for your viewing pleasure.

No more #FOMO. Whether in New York, Nairobi or Nottingham, you need never miss out on another big thinker or world-changing idea.

Subscribe to our YouTube channel and 'like' us on Facebook to catch up on the latest content, direct from the RSA stage to a screen near you.

youtube.com/theRSAorg

facebook.com/rsaeventsofficial

Psychotherapist **Philippa Perry** shares frank, wise and funny insights into parenting with journalist and broadcaster **Miranda Sawyer**. Rejecting idealised 'perfect parenting' planning, Philippa offers realistic advice on building lasting, emotionally intelligent parent–child relationships, so that young people grow up feeling secure, and knowing who they are and what they want.

Watch now: youtu.be/UuQslxS6Uil
#RSAParent

Climate collapse is a real and present danger. Journalist **David Wallace-Wells** joins *The Guardian*'s environment correspondent **Fiona Harvey** to issue a stark warning about the urgency and scale of the climate crisis, and a powerful call to political action.

Watch now:
youtu.be/NRb9Xx7jlKM
#RSAClimate

What happens when we outsource the work of social change to the winners of global capitalism? Political analyst **Anand Giridharadas** and the RSA's Director of Economy **Asheem Singh** discuss the dangers of 'win–win' approaches to change that often simply preserve an unjust status quo.

Watch now:
youtu.be/GpfqwAS8MhA
#RSAChange

Influential media theorist **Douglas Rushkoff** reminds us that being human is a team sport, and argues that, amid increasing automation and alienation, our best path forward is to restore the social bonds that define our existence.

Watch now:
youtu.be/UxH6oWI40FE
#RSAHuman

WORK IN PROGRESS

Our working lives seem to be changing faster than ever before; we need to find ways to promote good work and prepare to meet the challenges ahead

by Matthew Taylor and Fabian Wallace-Stephens
🐦 @RSAMatthew @fabian_ws

It is now getting on for two years since Theresa May joined me at the RSA to launch the final report of the inquiry into modern employment practices. It has been a long and mainly grim 18 months in UK politics, yet the progress made since the publication of my report shows that good things can happen even when everything else seems to be falling apart. In the end the government committed to implementing all but two of my recommendations. Some of them did not need legislation – for example, a consultation on strengthening the protection of workers on parental leave – and have been acted upon. Others, such as abolishing a loophole that allowed employers to pay agency workers less, and guaranteeing all workers a basic statement on terms and conditions on day one of their employment, are currently going smoothly through parliament. The big question of employment status – whether, for example, taxi drivers and parcel couriers should be classed as workers or self-employed – requires primary legislation and will take a lot longer to turn into even draft legislation.

Good work

Perhaps more than any of the individual recommendations, I have been most pleased by the way the idea of 'Good Work' (the title of the inquiry's report) seems to have changed the terms of debate. Just a few years ago, when I worked in government, to talk about quality of work was seen as a luxury and a distraction from the much more important question of making sure there were enough jobs to go round. Obviously, the buoyant labour market has helped, but now improving quality of work is an accepted national goal. If I did not have the RSA to run, I could be on the road speaking at conferences about the subject almost every day. I have been appointed to the government's Industrial Strategy Council in part to ensure that work quality is included in that strategy.

The RSA is undertaking a project with Carnegie UK Trust to explore the relationship between job quality and productivity.

One of the reasons that I was asked to conduct the inquiry was the RSA's excellent research on self-employment and the gig economy. The impressive and growing programme of our Future Work Centre means I have support to do further work on some of the recommendations that need further pushing.

One example is industrial partnership. Of all the recommendations, perhaps the one I had to push for hardest was to lower the threshold for workers to have rights to company information and consultation (and therefore, implicitly, to representation). This has now gone from 10% of all workers, which was both tough to achieve and anyway the same as for trade union recognition, to just 2%. What is needed now is a campaign to encourage both workers and employers to take this small but significant step towards partnership at work. The RSA will be working with a range of actors to develop such a campaign.

Another idea that needs backing is for the government to develop a national employability framework. There is a broad and growing consensus that what are sometimes called 'life' or 'soft' skills are as important, if not more important, to employers and individuals as qualifications based on academic subject and knowledge. There are tough questions to answer about whether capabilities such as creativity or problem-solving are transferable from one domain to another, about how they are taught and about how they can be accredited. We should aim for a world in which every person has a continuously evolving digital portfolio that records not only their formal qualifications but the capabilities they have demonstrated through training, working, volunteering and wider life experience. But the revolution cannot even begin while we have hundreds of slightly ▶

Matthew Taylor is Chief Executive of the RSA; Fabian Wallace-Stephens is a Researcher in the RSA's Future Work Centre

"Improving quality of work is an accepted national goal"

different and competing employability frameworks. The RSA will be working with partners to take forward this agenda.

All in all, the inquiry is a success story. But I am absolutely certain it will not be the only way the RSA's research and convening power makes a difference to the quality of working life. With technology continuing to have a huge impact, it is vital that, with reports like our excellent *Four Futures of Work*, the RSA stays at the centre of the debate. I will now hand you over to Fabian, to go into more detail about our current work in this area.

Four futures of work

Last year, DeepMind, a pioneer of deep learning, announced that one of its healthcare algorithms could detect more than 50 eye diseases as accurately as a trained doctor. Elsewhere, additive manufacturing enabled the first 3D-printed concrete house (taking just 24 hours to construct). Breakthroughs in radical technologies capable of disrupting whole industries seem to be coming thick and fast. With livelihoods at

stake, there is a growing sense of urgency for positive action to safeguard a future of good work.

The RSA's Future Work Centre was born out of this need. Our *Four Futures of Work* report marks our attempt to look into the future, highlight the challenges workers may face come 2035, and start to offer policy and practice interventions as potential remedies.

Predicting the future is no easy task. The standard fare from thinktanks and consultancies is to make predictions about the number of jobs at risk from automation. These range from concerning to comforting, from 35% (University of Oxford) to just under 5% (McKinsey Global Institute).

With methodological guidance from Arup's Foresight team, the RSA opted for an approach known as scenario planning. Pioneered by oil giant Shell in the 1970s, scenario planning is a tool to help decision-makers prepare for multiple eventualities. It involves identifying high-impact, highly uncertain drivers of change, and then exploring the different ways these 'critical uncertainties' could play out over time and how they could interact with each other.

Unlike predictions about automation that focus on job losses, our scenarios consider a broader range of effects that technologies could have on labour markets. For example, how internet of things devices such as wearables could lead to an increase in workplace monitoring. Or how big data could lead to the emergence of gig economy platforms in new sectors. Crucially, our scenarios factor in technological diffusion, considering not only how these technologies could develop in controlled environments, but also whether they will actually be adopted by businesses. Driverless cars may never overcome regulatory roadblocks, while cybersecurity risks could spur a public backlash against a whole suite of technologies.

Our four scenarios handle this uncertainty in a way that numerical predictions cannot. They also recognise other influential forces at play, such as the health of the global economy and the future of the worker voice. On the one hand, membership of traditional trade unions has been falling since the 1970s, but on the other an alternative movement is gathering steam, including new unions for the self-employed and gig workers.

While the four scenarios identified – the Big Tech Economy, the Precision Economy, the Exodus Economy and the Empathy Economy – are not exhaustive portrayals of the future, they present a wide range of plausible outcomes in a way that is vivid and easy to grasp. Ultimately, we hope they provide those in positions of responsibility with a practical tool to help prepare today's workforce for tomorrow's workplace, whether that is civil servants in the Treasury advising on changes to tax policy, or further education college leaders questioning how their curricula should evolve to meet new skill demands.

Future Work Centre
Above all, these scenarios remind us that, whatever futurists may speculate about the singularity, right now and for the foreseeable future it is human beings, not algorithms, who will decide whether technology will make our lives better or worse.

The Future Work Centre is now turning its attention to the question of what policy and practice reforms are needed to enable a future of good work. By this autumn we will have developed a blueprint for a new social contract geared towards this end. Our *Four Futures of Work* report lays the groundwork for this, and our Fellowship have already been making significant contributions through their various networks. The Reinventing Work Network, for instance, shares progressive, human-centred workplace and work–life philosophies and practices. ▶

Four futures of work

The Big Tech Economy
This describes a world where technology has developed at a rapid pace, leading to widespread automation. Self-driving buses, vans and bin lorries have reserved lanes in major cities. Versatile robots, capable of complex tasks and human interaction, have become ubiquitous in sectors such as hospitality and healthcare. Unemployment and economic insecurity have crept upwards, with people lucky to find 20 hours of work a week. But this is tempered by widely felt improvements in living standards as technology lowers the cost of everyday goods and improves the quality of public services, and as people find new outlets for meaning and purpose in their considerable leisure time. The ultimate winners are the Silicon Valley tech giants Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple, which not only complete their capture of the digital economy but enter new sectors, hoovering up the profits from productivity growth and transferring them overseas. The dizzying pace of technological change leaves workers and unions incapable of responding, and well-oiled PR machines and highly visible corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes help the tech giants to stifle dissent.

The Exodus Economy
This is characterised by a protracted economic slowdown, after a financial crash on the scale of 2008 takes the world by surprise. Unemployment rises and leads to new austerity measures. Automation is limited, as funding for innovation has dried up, but the UK is trapped in a low-pay, low-productivity paradigm. There is a rise in zero-hours contracts and agency work as firms bid to cut costs. Many household names, once captains of industry in the 20th century, go under or are subsumed in a flurry of M&A activity. This is the age of resentment. Disgruntled with a failing economic system, workers take to the streets in *gilets jaunes* style protests. Unions organise mass 'log-offs', bringing the gig economy to its knees. Others leave urban areas altogether in search of alternative lifestyles. New economic models gather interest as co-operatives emerge in large numbers to serve people's core needs in food, energy and banking. ▶

The Precision Economy

This portrays a world of hyper-surveillance. In this scenario, many technologies have failed to live up to their hype, with ambitious projects such as autonomous vehicles abandoned altogether. The internet of things proves to be definitive, with businesses installing sensors across their supply chains. Automation is modest, but workers are subject to new levels of algorithmic oversight and a pervasive ratings system. On the shop floor in retail, for example, in-store sensors collect data on footfall while wearables track staff activity. Manager-analysts then review metrics and assign ratings following shift competition. Equipped with predictive algorithms and real-time organisational data, employers embrace on-demand labour strategies. Waves of 'Uberisation' ripple across the economy as gig platforms enter new sectors. Workers with in-demand talents or high ratings see enhanced pay and opportunities for progression. But many are left to battle it out for piecemeal work that does not pay well, and offers little control over working hours and minimal task discretion. Clever UX (user experience), gamification and the promise of upward mobility keeps workers logged in.

The Empathy Economy

This envisions a future of responsible stewardship. Under this scenario there are technological breakthroughs comparable to those in the Big Tech Economy, but public attitudes sour as the risks become more apparent. Tech companies decide to self-regulate. Automation is contained as businesses work with unions to adopt tech on mutually beneficial terms. Rather than squeeze, pressure and scrutinise workers, technology is applied to augment their capabilities, from virtual reality being used by retail workers to role-play customer interactions, to personal trainers using wearables to create bespoke training regimes for their clients. Workers see improvements in living standards as the gains from productivity growth are mostly retained in the UK. Disposable income then flows into high-touch sectors such as care and education, which are most resistant to automation. But this work is emotionally demanding, with people required to manage their own emotions in the service of boosting the feelings of others.

Workers will need to find ways of upskilling and reskilling themselves, whether this means moving into high-tech or high-touch roles, or finding their current job transformed. More robust lifelong learning programmes are necessary. Personal Learning Accounts, currently being piloted in France and Singapore, could give every worker, self-employed and employee alike, funds to reskill. But we also need to realise that not everyone will be able to enter a flashy new tech job. Low-skilled work will persist, so we need to consider how people can also develop within these roles. Occupational licensing would be one way to bestow more status upon these jobs and potentially raise earning power.

To address economic insecurity, we need to rethink our safety net for the 21st century. In the short term, this will mean ironing out the faults of Universal Credit, while in the medium term we must continue to explore the potential of universal basic income through rigorous pilots. We also need a new settlement for the self-employed (including gig workers) that would see them pay higher rates of National Insurance in return for more protections. And to the extent that capital becomes more important as a source of income, we will also need to give workers a stake in the businesses and technology that are becoming more profitable, potentially through sovereign wealth funds.

In an ever-changing labour market, unions will need to modernise to stay relevant. Changes to legislation could help to reverse the atrophy in membership, for example by enabling digital balloting as they do in Denmark. But unions should also consider partnering with, and potentially funding, smaller worker voice outfits. Unions could even begin offering new financial services, drawing on examples such as the National Domestic Workers Alliance in the US, which developed a portable benefits platform, Alia, to give domestic workers access to sick pay.

Just as unions need to become more agile, so it is with regulation. As the emergence of gig platforms has revealed, we need clearer rules for determining employment status and rights, as well as more effective enforcement. GDPR may also need to be strengthened, including through a new right to data portability for gig workers that enables them to move their ratings across platforms. At a macro level, we need more robust competition policy to reign in the power of superstar firms. In every case, regulators should aim to address problems by working hand-in-hand with employers, tech companies and other stakeholders, a collaborative approach the RSA has called 'shared regulation'.

The Future Work Centre is about more than developing flagship ideas for social reform. In our pilot

"To address economic insecurity, we need to rethink our safety net for the 21st century"

sector lab, which draws on the service design expertise of RSA Lab, we are working directly with employers in the retail sector to understand their challenges and provide them with strategies to help ensure workers can benefit from oncoming disruption. One idea to emerge, particularly suitable for the Empathy Economy, is an upskilling programme for shop-floor workers, which focuses on equipping them with high-touch customer service skills and developing their aptitude to interact with new technologies such as robotics.

The centre is hoping to develop the field of WorkerTech and other social innovations that are improving the lives of workers. To this end, the Future Work Awards 2018/19 identified 28 of the most pioneering examples from around the world. These align with the pillars of the new social contract we outlined earlier, demonstrating that we can look to the grassroots as well as government for responses to the changing world of work.

For example, campaign group OUR Walmart launched WorkIt, an app that leverages AI to augment the expertise of trained advisers and provide low-wage workers with information on their workplace

rights. With more than 15,000 users, WorkIt was a key tool in a campaign that has resulted in 500,000 Walmart employees receiving a significant increase in paid family leave. Pursuit, a tech-training programme based in Queens, New York, has enabled hundreds of workers from low-income communities to upskill as computer programmers, raising their income from $18,000 to $85,000, on average. Portify, a fintech company that leverages open banking to provide gig workers with alternative credit-scoring, has worked with platforms to reach 30,000 users. It offers them a range of financial services to address economic insecurity, including emergency credit when their bank balance runs critically low.

The RSA will continue to support this field, not only through the next Future Work Awards but also through our Economic Security Impact Accelerator, working to deepen the social impact of 12 UK-based organisations that participated in the Awards. The Future Work Centre embodies the direction of travel for the RSA, as we move towards larger programmes of research and social change that draw on our unique assets, including the Fellowship. ∎

GOOD COMPANIES

Is it possible to expect companies to behave ethically and still satisfy all stakeholders?

by Justin King

Justin King is Vice Chairman at Terra Firma, a Non-Executive Director at Marks & Spencer and Public Interest Body member at PwC

I believe that we are today seeing the most fundamental reassessment of the role business plays in society since the Victorian era. Many of the UK's most well-known and respected brands were established at that time. Retailers such as Sainsbury's and Marks & Spencer, founded in London and Leeds respectively, set out their stall (literally) to act as trusted intermediaries to consumers who were no longer able to buy direct from farmers or producers. During the 19th century much of the food consumed, particularly by the poor, was adulterated or contaminated, resulting in a series of scandals and eventually new legislation. Brands such as Cadbury and Rowntree's were founded on the back of the increasing demand for 'pure' chocolate, putting the founder's name on the tin (so to speak) to provide reassurance as to product provenance.

We remember many of these companies for their long and proud heritage of what we now call corporate responsibility. Bournville, the 'factory in a garden', is testament to the Cadbury brothers' concern for their employees, and the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust continues to support pressing social issues to this day. It is telling that, when such brands are taken over by larger multinationals, they go to great lengths to reassure the public that they will be careful custodians of this proud heritage.

Other leading businesses and their founders from that era are remembered for their endowment of the arts, such as Henry Tate or Samuel Courtauld, or the sciences, such as Henry Wellcome. Sometimes this generosity may have been born of enlightened self-interest, but one can argue that the subsequent good such projects did was a net gain for society. Titus Salt,

the founder of Salts Mill in Bradford, may have been motivated to create Saltaire to enhance his workers' productivity, but the ensuing improvement in health and quality of life showed how capitalism and business could lead the way in bettering society. Whatever your view of these industrialists' motivations, it is hard to argue that this was not an extraordinary period. Business was generating wealth and shaping society far beyond just creating jobs and paying taxes. In my opinion, the 100 years or so since has not bettered this era.

Social compact

So how is it that, after this period of generous business philanthropy, we find ourselves still facing so many questions about the compact between business and society today? I, and many like me, believe that the capitalist system, and successful commerce, has been the generator of incredible feats and inventions worldwide. It has been the bedrock of the UK and many institutions and services we take for granted. The National Health Service, our social security system and close to full employment are all arguments for the success of business and capitalism. Without the societal wealth that comes from successful commerce, we could not afford these elements of our social compact. Yet the financial crash of 2008 and subsequent austerity, Brexit, and the continuing public narrative about 'fat cats' and other business practices that are seen as unfair mean that this argument does not hold sway with the majority of the population.

It is easy to see the roots of this dissatisfaction in the financial crisis. The narrative that the rich survived, even thrived, in a crisis of their own creation and that ▶

"Business is, and must be, about competition, about winners and losers, about some businesses thriving, some surviving and some ceasing to exist"

it is the many – the middle and working classes – who have paid the price for this excess is widely accepted.

It is a common occurrence to see businesses that have generously awarded their owners and managers go on to shed jobs as part of cost-cutting exercises, or duck out of their obligations to retired workers. The perception is that business is only fair to those it can profit from. And the advent of tech 'unicorns', which achieve fabulous wealth in a very short period of time, in many ways further illustrates the perceived unfairness of business. These companies generate substantial value but very few see these rewards. Often this wealth is achieved through practices in areas such as data and tax that are increasingly seen as unfair.

No doubt these, and many other examples, have played and continue to play their part in the low regard in which businesses and business people are held by much of the general public.

The rise of responsible governance?

But I see a deeper, more long-standing issue. For my entire 35 years in business I have observed the letters CSR (corporate social responsibility), and more recently ESG (environmental, social and governance), and wondered why it is that we in business feel the need to label these principles as if they are somewhat outwith the core activity and purpose of business. When I was at M&S in the early 2000s, the mantra of "healthy back streets equalling healthy high streets" was deeply ingrained in the way the company did business. I had left by the time 'Plan A' – Marks & Spencer's sustainability programme, which aims to turn the company into a zero-waste business and reduce its emissions by 80% – was launched, but it has rightly been hailed by many as one of the most comprehensive articulations of a business's wider compact with society.

However, although M&S's actions are highly laudable, it cannot be ignored that over the past 15 years or so the business's primary responsibility to its shareholders has not been fulfilled. Having recently rejoined the board as a non-executive, it

is hard to argue against that. But I believe focusing on this confuses the issue. A different and more comprehensive compact with the community you serve, and from whom you derive your ability to make profit, is necessary but clearly not always sufficient for a business to thrive. It must also do a great job for its shareholders: this will always remain an integral part of the compact.

We must remember too that consumers, who are also voters, must play their part in this change. Their behaviour is not necessarily always consistent. When I have done talks on business ethics I hear repeated outrage about the behaviour of international corporations on tax, yet when I ask for a show of hands of those prepared to pay a tradesman in cash, for a discount, many hands are in the air.

This breakdown between business and society has been coming for a long time, but it is increasingly finding its voice. This has manifested itself in legislation – vast swathes of it in recent years. All of it is aimed, I would suggest, at curbing what are seen as the excesses of bad behaviour in business, and much of it is concerned with the idea that fairness must be at the forefront of our thinking.

Business is, and must be, about competition, about winners and losers, about some businesses thriving, some surviving and some ceasing to exist. Much of what flows from this will be seen as unfair by those who are affected. I have worked most of my life in retail and today one can hardly dispute that our so-called high street is undergoing profound change. Whatever the cause of this, it is never going to feel fair if it is your job that has been lost. I believe that fairness should be part of our lexicon, but it cannot be the core objective, as many seem to think it should. Competition is at least as powerful and positive a force as collaboration in creating public good. However, business will always be inherently unfair in the eyes of many.

Developing strong business values
So what should businesses do? I admit that I am sceptical about many companies' recent adoption of CSR and ESG guidelines – in many cases, I believe this is little more than window dressing. However, used in a deep and integrated way, these principles can form the real basis for a different kind of business alongside a transparent, explicitly stated purpose. To be clear, this cannot be simply to maximise shareholder value. That should be the *outcome* of a business with clear purpose. Businesses should have strong values, supported and reinstated from the top down. At Sainsbury's one of our values was "respect for the individual" and as a result I would often receive letters from colleagues saying in effect, 'How can this be a value if this is how my manager treats me?' It became a framework to govern behaviour and a mirror for those in leadership positions.

In our information age it has never been easier to share the purpose and values of a business with every part of the community. When I am researching a company, it is always this part of the website or annual report that I turn to first. I want to see if the business understands the community that it serves and professes to be a vital part of, and how it intends to do business in a values-led and purposeful way. If I cannot see that, I do not even turn to the financial section.

If the business is consumer-facing, I want to see this come alive in every aspect of its communications about itself. To be proud of the fact that it is doing business in a different way. After all, if you do not share your values with customers, they cannot be expected to give you the vote of support that ultimately matters: their wallet.

When advising businesses on how to use these challenges to shape their future, I tell them: always start with your customer. Ask them what they expect from you and how you currently measure up. It follows that you must do the same with your colleagues (or employees). They serve your customers and are closer to the 'coal face'. Are you truly able to see the business through their eyes? Do they share fairly in the success of the business? Are they properly informed on the decisions that the leadership is making? To do this well, almost all businesses need a major reset of their communication. Two ears, one mouth, as someone once said. As part of this, you must have processes through which colleagues can challenge management. The current debate is around employee directors; but I think that it needs to be much more granular and day-to-day than that. The final area business should focus on is consistency. Is everything that you do consistent with the values and behaviours that you espouse? It amazes me how often businesses fall at this hurdle. And yet for me, it is the keystone for strong and sustainable change.

Businesses must respond to the challenges that we now face. To show that they do indeed understand that their permission to operate, to make profit, comes only with the consent of society. If they continue to behave in a way that goes against that core truth, then we will continue to see society turn against business. But if business embraces this moment, and reshapes itself to better serve society, then perhaps in 100 years this period will be seen as the moment when capitalism found a new, fairer way of doing business. One that will sustain us well into the 22nd century. ∎

BEYOND THE LABORATORY

Our future depends on a larger, more diverse scientific community engaging the public in meeting the huge challenges we face

by Professor Martin Rees

The world's future depends on making wise choices about the energy and food we use, our health and that of the planet, and the role of robotics and space exploration. Making these choices requires us to deploy the best scientific knowledge, while also recognising that debating these questions should not be left only to scientists; they matter to us all and should be the outcome of public engagement and deliberation.

When we think of the scientist, too often we still alight on an image of an Einstein lookalike, an unkempt figure (usually white, male and elderly) or a youthful geek version, alone in their laboratory. There is still too little racial and gender diversity within the scientific community. In tackling this, we need a raft of changes, starting while children are at school and moving on to engaging the public far more frequently and effectively. But we also need to be clearer about what a career in the sciences might look like and the huge range of options within the field.

For example, there is great intellectual diversity, offering scope for a range of expertise and styles. Just as it is hard for generic writing about sports to get beyond vacuous generalities, extolling humanity's competitive streak and so forth, so it is with the sciences. And just as it is more interesting to write about the distinctive features of a particular sport or the particularities of especially exciting games and key players, each branch of science has its methods, characters and conventions. Science can be pursued by lone experimenters in a lab, but it can also be pursued by ecologists gaining data in the field, or involve quasi-industrial teams working on giant particle accelerators or big space projects. Almost always, this work involves collaboration, debate and a fascination with discovery.

Another common perception of scientists is that they all follow a distinctive procedure, which is described as the 'scientific method'. This belief should be downplayed. It would be truer to say that scientists follow the same rational style of reasoning as (for instance) lawyers or detectives in categorising phenomena, forming hypotheses and testing evidence. A related and damaging misperception is the mindset that supposes there is something especially 'elite' about the quality of their thought. Academic ability is one facet of the far wider concept of intellectual ability possessed in equal measure by the best journalists, lawyers, engineers and politicians.

Cultivating new talent

The great ecologist E O Wilson avers that to be effective in some scientific fields, it is best not to be too bright. He is not disparaging the insights and eureka moments that punctuate (albeit rarely) scientists' working lives, but – as the world expert on tens of thousands of ant species – reminding us that research can mean decades of hard slog and that armchair theorising is not enough. Indeed, harnessing and implementing a scientific concept for practical goals can be a greater challenge than the initial discovery. A favourite cartoon of my engineering friends shows two beavers looking up at a vast hydroelectric dam. One beaver says to the other: "I didn't actually build it, but it's based on my idea."

Those embarking on research should pick a topic to suit their personality, skills and tastes. Is their temperament best suited for fieldwork? For computer modelling? For high-precision experiments? Or for handling huge data sets? Young researchers may find it especially gratifying to enter a field where things are advancing fast: where they have access to novel techniques, more powerful computers or bigger data sets, and where the experience of the older generation is at a deep discount. Aspiring scientists may also be wise to avoid heading straight for the most ▶

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Rhenium
75
Re
186.207

Selenium
34
Se
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Argon
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Ar
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Carbon
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Hydrogen
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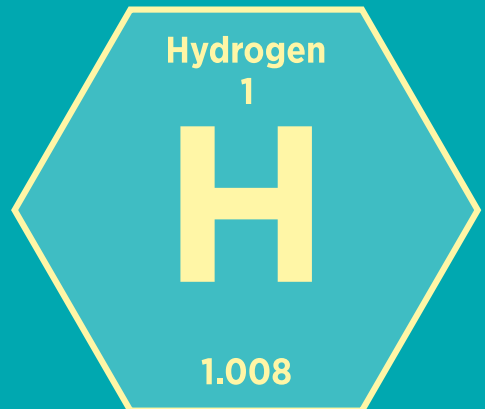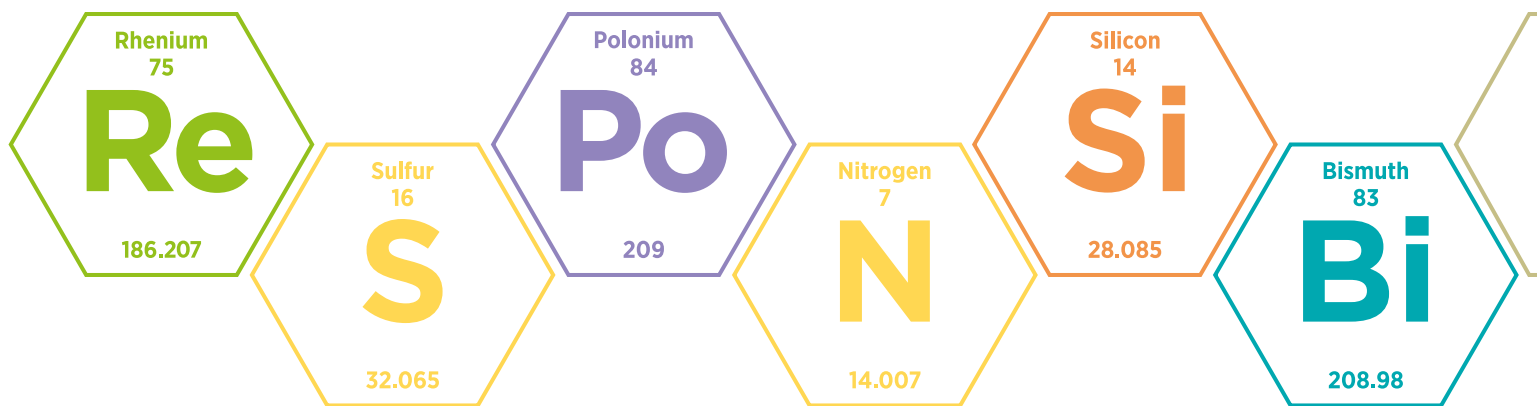
important or fundamental problem and to multiply the importance of the problem by the probability that they will solve it. While it may be tempting to swarm into research on the unification of cosmos and quantum (plainly one of the intellectual peaks we aspire to reach), this great challenge, like those posed by finding a cure for cancer or understanding the brain, need to be tackled in a piecemeal fashion, rather than head-on.

The best laboratories, like the best start-ups, should be optimal incubators of original ideas and young talent. But there is an insidious demographic trend that militates against this in traditional universities and institutes. Until 20 years ago, the science profession was still growing exponentially, riding on the expansion of higher education. Then, the young outnumbered the old. In addition, it was normal (and generally mandatory) to retire by one's mid-60s. The academic community, at least in the west, is not now expanding (and in many areas has reached saturation level) and there is no enforced retirement age. In earlier decades, it was reasonable to aspire to lead a group by one's early 30s but in the biomedical community in the US, for example, it is now unusual to get your first research grant before the age of 40.

This is a bad augury. Science will always attract 'nerds' who cannot envisage any other career. Laboratories can be staffed with those content to spend their time writing grant applications, which usually fail to get funding. But the profession needs to attract a share of those with flexible talent and the ambition to achieve something by their 30s. If that perceived prospect evaporates, such people will shun academia, and maybe attempt a start-up. This route offers great satisfaction and public benefit – many should take it – but in the long run it is important that some of these people dedicate themselves to the fundamental frontiers. The major advances in IT and computing over the past few years can be traced back to basic research done in leading universities, in some cases nearly a century ago. And the stumbling blocks encountered in medical research stem from uncertain fundamentals. For instance, the failure of anti-Alzheimer's drugs to pass clinical tests may indicate that not enough is known about how the brain functions and that the effort should refocus on basic science.

The expansion of wealth and leisure – coupled with connectivity – will offer millions of highly educated amateurs and 'citizen scientists' greater scope than ever before to follow their interests. These trends will enable leading researchers to do cutting-edge work outside a traditional academic or governmental laboratory. If enough make this choice, it will erode the primacy of research universities and enhance the importance of 'independent scientists' to the level that prevailed before the 20th century. Perhaps this will enhance the flowering of genuinely original ideas, but it may mean certain important areas are neglected.

Engaging the public
For the wider public to be engaged in the ethical dilemma that scientific discovery frequently presents, we all need enough 'feel' for the key ideas of science, and enough numeracy to assess hazards, probabilities and risks, so as not to be bamboozled by experts or credulous of populist sloganising.

Science is the one culture that is truly global: protons, proteins and Pythagoras are the same from China to Peru. Science should transcend all barriers of nationality and faith. It is an intellectual deprivation not to understand our natural environment and the principles that govern the biosphere and climate. And to be blind to the marvellous vision offered by Darwinism and modern cosmology (the chain of emergent complexity leading from a 'big bang' to stars, planets, biospheres and human brains), which renders the cosmos aware of itself, is a great loss. These 'laws' or patterns are the great triumphs of science. To discover them required dedicated talent, even genius; great inventions need equivalent talent. But grasping the key ideas is not so difficult. Most of us appreciate music even if we cannot compose or perform it. Likewise, the main tenets of science can be accessed and enjoyed by almost everyone, if conveyed using accessible language and illustrated attractively.

We cannot afford to leave this knowledge to the specialists: how science is applied concerns us all. Advances in technology have led to a world
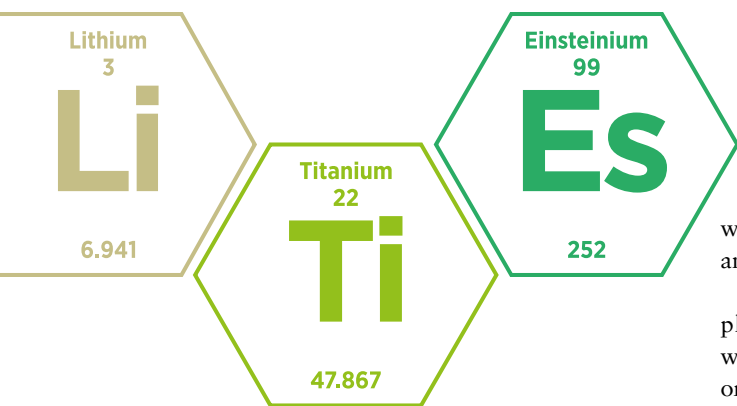
where most people enjoy a safer, longer and more satisfying life than previous generations, and these positive trends could continue. At the same time, environmental degradation, unchecked climate change and unintended consequences of advanced technology are collaterals of these advances. A world with a larger population more demanding of energy and resources and more empowered by technology could trigger serious, even catastrophic, setbacks to our society.
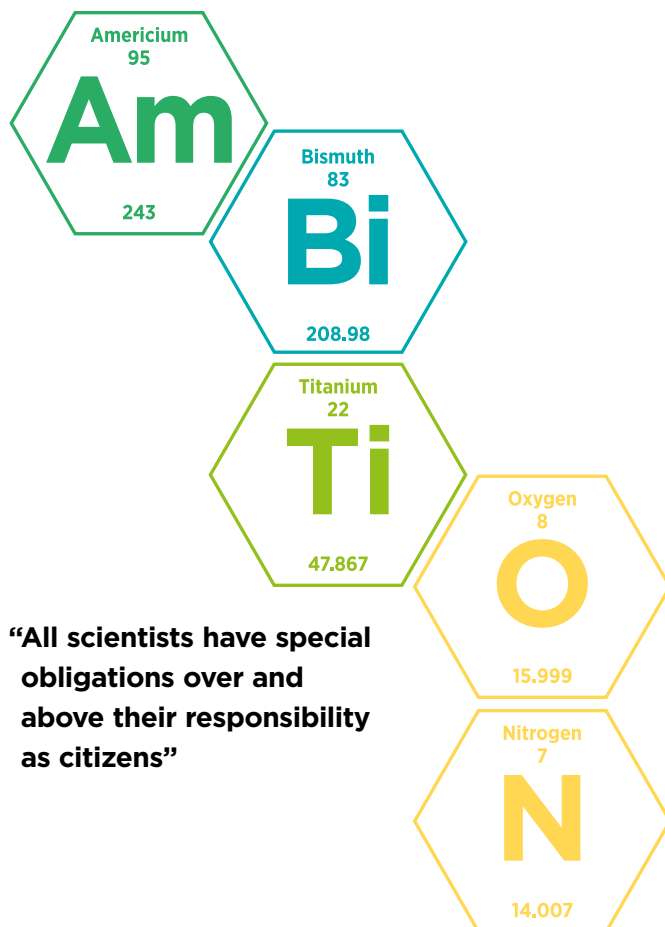
All scientists have special obligations over and above their responsibility as citizens. There are ethical obligations confronting scientific research itself: avoiding experiments that have even the tiniest risk of leading to catastrophe, and respecting a code of ethics when research involves animals or human subjects. Even graver issues arise when scientific research has ramifications beyond the laboratory and has potential social, economic and ethical impacts that concern all citizens, or when it reveals a serious but still-unappreciated threat. You would be a poor parent if you did not care what happened to your children in adulthood, even though you may have little control over them. Likewise, scientists should not be indifferent to the fruits of their ideas and creations. They should try to foster benign spin-offs, commercial or otherwise. They should resist, so far as they can, dubious or threatening applications of their work and alert politicians when appropriate. If their findings raise ethical sensitivities – as will happen acutely and often – they should engage with the public, while realising that they have no distinct credentials outside their specialism.

One can highlight some fine exemplars from the past: for instance, the atomic scientists who developed the first nuclear weapons during the Second World War. Many of them returned with relief to peacetime academic pursuits, continuing not just as academics but as engaged citizens, promoting efforts to control the power they had helped to unleash, whether through national academies, the Pugwash movement or other public forums. The new 21st-century sciences have consequences as momentous as nuclear weapons. Those engaged with the new challenges span almost all the sciences, are based all around the globe, and

work in the commercial sector as well as in academia and government.

Their findings and concerns need to inform planning and policy through forging direct ties with politicians, senior officials, non-governmental organisations and the private sector. Although experts who have served as government advisers have often had frustratingly little influence, we know that politicians are influenced by their inbox and by the media. Scientists can sometimes achieve more as outsiders and activists, leveraging their message via widely read books, campaigning groups, blogging and journalism, or – albeit via a variety of perspectives – through political activity.

The role of the scientist needs to be refreshed so that we can better tackle the challenges we face in the 21st century. But it is not just scientists alone who can provide solutions; they should be leading the way, backed by an educated populace who are engaged with key scientific issues. The recent climate change protests organised by schoolchildren give great hope for the potential for future change. Science must do all it can to encourage such engagement. ∎

"All scientists have special obligations over and above their responsibility as citizens"

"We change ourselves by trying to change the world, and we can hope not just for freedom from the economy but for freedom in the economy"

Matthew Taylor talks to Roberto Mangabeira Unger about the knowledge economy, the crisis in liberal democracy and how we might bring about real change

🐦 @mangabeiraunger

Roberto Mangabeira Unger is a Brazilian politician and Harvard law professor. His latest book, *The Knowledge Economy*, examines how we can make the knowledge economy less insular and more equitable

Matthew Taylor: When I heard you had a new book out I assumed it would be about the crisis in liberal democracy. While it is very much about where we are now, it does not advertise itself as being about this specific moment. What is your perspective on why so many people feel there is a particular crisis in liberal democracy?

Roberto Mangabeira Unger: Let me say something about my attitude to the current historical situation. For over 200 years there has been a revolutionary project that has two sides. One side is the political side carried by the doctrines of democracy, liberalism and socialism, opposed to the entrenched systems of social division and hierarchy that have beset most societies. The other is the personalist side carried especially by the worldwide popular romantic culture and its message that the ordinary person is not so ordinary after all; that we're all becoming more human by becoming more godlike, by ascending to a higher form of life with more scope, intensity and capability.

And while this remains the most powerful revolutionary project in the world and continues to command the agenda, it has weaknesses because its advocates no longer know what its next steps should be when it comes to either the political agenda or the moral agenda of humanity. One of the fundamental ▶

motivations of all my work is to find the ideas and means by which this revolution could go on.

Taylor: When you look at trends towards political polarisation, populism and pessimism, do you view these as things that are likely to lead us to crisis or as opportunities for a re-emergence of this project?

Unger: The last great moment of institutional and ideological refoundation in the rich North Atlantic world was the social democratic settlement of the mid-20th century. The American equivalent of which was Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, where the state was allowed to acquire the power to regulate the economy more intensively, to compensate for the inequalities of the market through retrospective redistribution by tax and transfer, and to manage the economy counter-cyclically. Institutionally conservative social democracy came to be the main dispensation. The North Atlantic world saw a variation of that settlement with an attempt by the governing elites to reconcile European-style social protection and American-style economic flexibility within the boundaries of a barely

adjusted version of the older settlement. But none of these fundamental problems of contemporary societies can be solved or even addressed within those limits.

Take the hierarchical segmentation of the knowledge economy. The advanced practice of production, rather than deepening or spreading, is confined to insular vanguards that exclude the vast majority of businesses and workers. The result is both economic stagnation and the aggravation of economic inequality that compensatory redistribution is powerless to master. Another example is the absence of an adequate basis of social cohesion. The European nations used to be tribes based on homogeneity of culture where states orchestrated money transfers as a complementary basis of social cohesion. But money is an inadequate social cement and this becomes manifest as cultural homogeneity is eroded by migratory flows. The only adequate basis of social cohesion is direct engagement with others: forms of collective action outside the boundaries of family. Or take the weakness of democracy. Low-energy democracies continue to make change depend on crisis. So the basic rhythm of European life in the 20th century was that the

"The advanced practice of production, rather than deepening or spreading, is confined to insular vanguards that exclude the vast majority of businesses and workers"

Europeans awoke when they were at war slaughtering one another and then when peace was re-established they fell asleep again and drowned their sorrows in consumption. They have not been able to find a way to be both at work and at peace.

These problems cannot be solved within the established boundaries. We need to rediscover the structural content of public life. The liberals and socialists of the 19th century understood the progressive cause as having as its goal the ascent of the life of the ordinary man and woman to a higher level. The goal was not the humanisation of society, but the divinisation of humanity. Their vision of a shared greatness was too narrowly moulded on the aristocratic idea of self-possession and their method of structural change succumbed to a series of institutional dogmas or blueprints. But we no longer believe in these dogmas and have a larger, more magnanimous and more contradictory view of what this greatness consists of. We have the unprecedented task of reshaping the structural background of society in order to become bigger, to provide a larger life for all – without that we die slowly – and to achieve what should for all of us be our largest goal, which is to die only once.

Taylor: You think big, have big visions, but that never stops you being fascinated by where we start and what we do next. You don't want to make vision the enemy of the institutional tinkering.

Unger: I don't believe that we can separate the reshaping of political life from the redirection of the economic world. No country reforms its politics and its state in order to later decide what to do with the reformed state or reformed politics. That's not how it happens. The reformation of politics and the state occur only when they need to occur, in the midst of a struggle to change the direction, including the economic direction of the country.

That was one of the provocations behind my work on the knowledge economy; we have a revolutionary practice of production. Adam Smith and Karl Marx, the two greatest economic thinkers in history, both of them philosophers, thought that the best way to understand the workings and prospects of the economy was to study the most advanced practice of production in their time. Now its different, now it's the knowledge economy. It's not just a bunch of gadgets, it's a different way of doing things. But it is confined, it is under quarantine, it is arrested within these insular vanguards, and the consequence is economic stagnation, formidable boundaries to economic growth, and at the same time the

deepening of inequality. We then can ask what forms of governance of political life can respond. That is how change in the character of political life arises; because we need to do something but don't have the instruments to do so, and we create these in the midst of the struggle.

Taylor: Is it possible to even start to envisage things being different unless we address the legitimacy deficit that our democratic institutions now suffer?

Unger: The fundamental problems of society remain unaddressed and as a result there's a vacuum. In many countries, rightwing populism has arisen in this vacuum and is promising what it can't deliver. It has no real project and its political economy is pretty negative: to buy a few more years for declining mass production and put constraints on migration. It doesn't even have a constitutional programme other than the strengthening of executive authority. So it is a kind of liquefaction and, by nature, is temporary, as power depends on having an institutional legacy, which it lacks. There is a huge opportunity for the would-be agents of transformation, if they had a project! The problem is that they don't.

Taylor: Let's turn to the project. I did a piece of work for the prime minister over two years ago that was ostensibly to look at the ways in which we regulate and tax the newly emerging economy, gig work in particular. With your phrase "the larger life for all" ringing in my ears, one of the decisions I made early on was to say that we should focus on what constitutes good work. Although the government has implemented most of the recommendations, for me the most important thing is that the notion of good work has had traction. What I really found thrilling about your book was the vision of everybody's work being fulfilling, decent and fair and offering them scope to grow and to express themselves. That might be a revolutionary idea we need?

Unger: So, Karl Marx and Keynes had two bad ideas, among many other bad ideas of theirs. One is that the reign of scarcity was about to be overcome and as soon as scarcity was overcome we could devote ourselves to private sublimities. The other idea is that it was very good that scarcity would be overcome because practical work is a hateful burden preventing us from doing the real thing. Both of these ideas were mistaken. We're not about to overcome scarcity, which is endlessly reproduced in new forms, but also work doesn't have to be a hateful burden. We can aspire to a noninstrumental relation to work. ▶

We change ourselves by trying to change the world, and we can hope not just for freedom from the economy but for freedom in the economy.

One of the promises of a radicalised and disseminated knowledge economy – which we are very distant from achieving – has to do with the relation between the worker and the machine. In Henry Ford's assembly line or Adam Smith's pin factory workers worked as if they were one of the machines, through repetitious movements. Now we understand that the machine can mean something else. Everything that we've learnt how to repeat we express in a formula. Everything we can express algorithmically we can embody in a physical device. That means we can devote our supreme resource, our time, to the not yet repeatable. The combination of the machine and the human being can be immensely more powerful than either of them separately. No human being should be condemned to do the work that can be done by machine. Our objective must be to become more human by becoming more godlike, and we have the machine to do the routines that we can then preserve ourselves from.

That cannot happen under the present economic order; it requires that work be free. There are three forms of free labour: wage work, self-employment and cooperation. It was only in the late 19th century that the ascendancy of wage labour as the predominant form of free work became naturalised. The universal conviction of both the liberals and the socialists was that wage labour was a deficient form of free labour, retaining many of the characteristics of slavery and serfdom. So what we want is an economic future in which the higher forms of free labour, self-employment and cooperation, come to prevail. For this to happen, we have to invent new mechanisms for decentralised access to productive resources and opportunities.

Then we can imagine a progressive political economy that has three main themes. First is this relationship between the backward parts of the production system and the advanced parts. Second is the relationship between capital and labour, and third is the relationship between finance and the real economy. The immediate problem we have is the condemnation of an increasing part of the labour force to conditions of precarious employment. There are new realities of production: they require flexibility, and flexibility has been turned into a pretext for the imposition of radical economic insecurity. So we need a new set of rules that prevent flexibility from becoming an excuse for the depression of wages and the abandonment of work to radical precariousness.

There are practical ways to do this: for example, a principle of price neutrality that says temporary work has to be remunerated at least at the level of the equivalent form of work done under conditions of stable employment. The goal further ahead is the ascent of these higher forms of free labour gradually replacing the deficient and inferior form, which is wage labour. That can only happen in a world in which the most advanced practice of production ceases to be an island, and it can only happen in a world in which finance is no longer allowed to serve itself but is enlisted in the productive agenda of society, given that finance can be a good servant but is always a bad master.

Taylor: The RSA is steadfastly for a universal basic income (UBI) that is actually part of a welfare system that incentivises and supports work; we are not for UBI as an abolition of work. We support a UBI approach that is much more practical, much more modest, as a more appropriate form of welfare.

Unger: Two things are required in the social order that we should desire: one is that the individual agent should be and feel protected in the haven of safeguards and capability-enhancing endowments. But the reason why he needs to be protected is so that he can thrive and act in the midst of a storm. It's like the parent says to the child: I love you, now go out and raise a storm in the world. What we want is for the individual to be guaranteed protection – that's half of the task. But the other half is to organise the storm, the extended plasticity in social life, so that the individual can then be like the Seraph Abdiel in *Paradise Lost*, unshaken, unseduced, unterrified. This requires us to organise this form of radicalised experimentalism in economic and social life. Those two projects are the complements to one another. And this whole argument about the knowledge economy, about labour, about finance, is a set of variations on that theme.

Taylor: The book reminded me of the themes of your past work. For example, encouraging progressives not to focus on symptoms but to focus on underlying systems, a focus on the importance of institutions and institutional renewal and institutional invention. The importance of, on the one hand, having a mobilising vision of an alternative society, but on the other hand a willingness to be agile, experimental and pragmatic about how it is we embark upon that road. To what extent do you think those methodological insights that you've been arguing for are coming to be?

Unger: We have a fundamental confusion in thinking about change. If I propose something that

"Our objective must be to become more human by becoming more godlike"

is distant from what exists today, people say that's very interesting but it's utopian. But if I propose something that's close to something that exists, they say it's feasible but it's trivial. That results from a misunderstanding of the nature of transformation and of a programmatic argument. It's not about blueprints, it's about successions, it's not architecture, it's music. That false dilemma between the utopian and the trivial is aggravated by a feature of the history of ideas. Contemporary social sciences are, for the most part, each in their different ways rationalisations of the existing arrangements. They have no structural imagination.

We did have an old form of structural imagination, classical European social theory such as Marxism, which, however, misrepresented the nature of structural change because it compromised with a series of fatalistic illusions. One of those illusions is the idea that there are these systems like feudalism, socialism, capitalism, each of them is an indivisible package, and then we get this idea that politics is either the reformist management of a system or the revolutionary substitution of one by the other. Then the unavailability of the revolutionary substitution becomes an alibi for its opposite, which is the management of the existing order, its humanisation. That's the characteristic position of the contemporary progressives, the humanisers of the inevitable. That's not how structural change is. It is fragmentary, but it can nevertheless become radical in its outcome if it persists in a certain direction.

If we think in the bad old way about structural change we can't understand it, and not understanding structural change we then embrace a bastardised criterion of political realism, which is proximity to the existent, which is absurd, and that then brings us back to this false dilemma. So here's a problem that we have: the high culture of the academy is hostile to the structural vision that we need. Much of the time, the social sciences are rationalisations of the existing order; the pseudophilosophical disciplines of political theory and legal thought are wedded to humanisation of the existing order, not the reimagination and remaking of society. They pretend to be enemies of the status quo but are allies in the disarmament of the transformative will and imagination. So we don't have the ideas that we need. And we have to produce them along the way, in the midst of this storm. We need this imagination and we don't have it. The task of this programmatic rethinking is the immediate provocation to the development of a different way of thinking about society.

Taylor: Roberto, your new book, *The Knowledge Economy*, certainly does provide exactly the food for thought to enable us to reimagine, but also to start to think about some of the material steps to start on this journey, so thank you. ∎

FINDING GOOD GOVERNANCE

As trust in institutions weakens and institutions become more complex, it is more important than ever for cross-sector learning about good governance

by Dr Tony Breslin and Cosette Reczek

🐦 @BetterGovCom

Dr Tony Breslin FRSA is Director of Breslin Public Policy and co-founder of Transform Governance

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From Kids Company to Carillion, from BHS to RBS, from Oxfam to Grenfell, from Rotherham to Rochdale, from Volkswagen to Patisserie Valerie, one theme has appeared pervasive: an at least apparent failure of governance. While these issues – and some of these examples – are not restricted to the UK, there are common themes that emerge that suggest the time for cross-sector learning, enhanced governance literacy and greater thought diversity is long overdue.

In the UK, whether one looks at the new Charity Governance Code, the recently published Wates Principles that guide corporate governance, or the advice issued by the National Governance Association (NGA), which represents school governors, the themes and phraseology overlap. Yet the level of inter-sector activity and the opportunities for cross-sector learning remain relatively few and far between. For example, while there is some encouragement – including a recent report from the Institute of Directors (IoD) – for those in business to take up governance and other voluntary roles in charities, schools and colleges, there is little travel in the other direction. The corporate boardroom, in particular, too often appears to be a closed shop.

In seeking to establish an independent all-sector Better Governance Commission – which we hope to be able to launch in early June at the inaugural Better Governance Summit at the Open University in Milton Keynes – we aim to address this silo-constrained thinking. We have three objectives in mind: first, to *promote cross-sector learning* about governance (and leadership more broadly) within the boardroom; second, to build *governance literacy* beyond the boardroom, addressing the dearth of understanding about what school and college governors, non-executive directors and charity trustees actually do; and third, to enhance and deepen the *diversity of ideas* through wider public participation in governance.

This last aim is vital if we are to challenge the inevitable groupthink that emerges when the board table is filled by 'people like us', by the usual suspects, whatever the setting or the sector might be. Achieving greater diversity should serve to rebalance the multiple gaps around gender, disability, age, ethnicity, social class and culture that are so prevalent in all of our boardrooms. And it should also bring to bear a range of different perspectives, experiences and ideas that recent governance failures have highlighted the absence of.

Our Better Governance initiative has the RSA deep in its DNA. A couple of years ago, as part of the RSA's work on school governance (Breslin, 2017), one of us found ourselves in the luxuriant surroundings of the foyer of one of the UK's leading business organisations. The purpose of the visit was to explore what lessons – if any – those of us involved in school governance might gain from our counterparts in the corporate world, and vice versa. The initial greeting from our host was less than encouraging: "Look, I'll be honest, I'm sure there's nothing that those of us in the business world can learn from your school governors." An hour or so later, we were closer to agreeing that our comparative worlds had more in ▶

Illustration by Phil Hackett

common than we had each expected and that the traffic was encouragingly two-way.

The conversation inspired further forays across sectors and settings, ultimately resulting in a recommendation in the final report: "Agencies across the governance landscape [ought] to work together to establish a cross-sector working group or commission on governance." This, in turn, translated into one of six headlines on which the report led, urging those involved in governance in apparently very different settings to "… share lessons about what is and isn't good governance across and between sectors".

"If we are to better understand how our world works, and if we are to be effective as citizens, this lack of governance literacy, even in our most learned circles, simply has to be addressed"

In January 2018, Ann Reeder at Frontline Consulting, who has led efforts to establish the Non-Executive Academy, the association for non-executives based in organisations committed to the delivery of public services, offered to support efforts to make this kind of cross-sector working a reality. As a result, we have held seven roundtable discussions involving: the Non-Executive Academy; the IoD; the National Council for Voluntary Organisations; the NGA; the inter-disciplinary consultancy Campbell Tickell; delegates at a conference organised by Frontline Consulting for members of police and crime panels; and ICSA: The Governance Institute.

From recommendation to roundtables
Throughout this process we have tried to focus on areas designed to test the case for a commission. We wanted to explore to what extent those involved in governance across sectors, particularly as non-executives, can learn from each other, to identify what benefits might accrue and how this might be facilitated. We set out to identify a set of key principles that should inform governance, scrutiny and accountability, whatever the sector, organisational type and focus of activity, and to assess the potential for the transferability of board skills across sectors. In reality, our discussions have been wider ranging, not least because each roundtable has drawn individuals with different sectoral interests and from a wide range of backgrounds and governance responsibilities, from company directors and charity trustees, to school and college governors and members of NHS trusts.

However, five key themes and challenges are emerging. First, the process has revealed that, while governance in each sector and sub-sector is marked by particular qualities and practices, governance across the sectors has more similarities than differences, opening up the possibility of cross-sectoral learning and sharing.

Second, it has highlighted the particular barriers that exist in different sectors in relation to increasing diversity and widening participation in governance, and how practice might be improved by exposure to other settings.

Third, we found that, in some settings, well-intended attempts to 'professionalise' governance can serve to weaken the connection between those on governance boards and those they serve; intentionally strengthening governance in one respect while unintentionally weakening it in another. This is a particular concern, for instance, in emergent practice in school governance, where calls for 'professionalisation' have combined with the 'upstreaming' of governance that has resulted from the formation of Multi-Academy Trusts to reduce the agency and involvement of parents, staff and local people in the process of governance.

Fourth, participants have shown us that the interplay between those involved in governance roles and those who hold executive responsibilities is very nuanced, and much more so than represented in the literature and in the induction and development programmes for non-executive directors, trustees, school and college governors, and others who report to governing boards. Such programmes typically emphasise the distinctions between the strategic and operational realms, without acknowledging that great governance often manifests itself at the intersections between these spheres.

Finally, within the organisations that participated and across our stakeholder communities, we found that literacy in governance beyond the boardroom is often low. This meant that the purpose and efforts of those who serve as directors, trustees or governors are routinely misunderstood – sometimes to the point of caricature – and often unacknowledged. If we are to better understand how our world works, and if we are to be effective as citizens, this lack of governance literacy, even in our most learned circles, simply has to be addressed.

Why? Because at a time when many citizens feel disconnected from, and mistrustful of, the political sphere, a similar disconnectedness from, and mistrust of, those involved in governance would represent a double whammy not just for the effectiveness of our organisations but also for the health of our democracy and society. In the corporate world, this trust deficit has the potential to impact negatively on the bottom line

while obscuring positive interventions: for instance, in the sphere of corporate responsibility. This is vital; people's engagement in governance is not simply an instrumental connection to a single organisation. Rather, serving in a governance role – especially in a voluntary capacity such as a school or college governor or a charity trustee – is a means through which we engage in our communities and in society. And with larger companies now required to report on corporate responsibility, the connection between governance and community is cemented in all sectors.

Towards a Better Governance Commission

Clear and transparent governance frameworks are the means through which we as communities of stakeholders hold our organisations – and, in particular, their executive leaders – to account. This is true whether these be corporations, public services or charities. It is also true of the increasing number of mixed-mode bodies that do not sit comfortably in any single sector: the NHS hospital that contracts out a range of its services or support services; the publicly funded school that sits within a multi-academy (charitable) trust; or the corporation that spawns a charitable foundation as part of its (now required) foray into corporate social responsibility. The intrinsically blurry lines that these organisations find themselves crossing on a daily basis require a cross-sector grasp of governance issues and pose particular challenges to those responsible for commissioning, governance and policy.

Thankfully, help is at hand. The various new sector-inspired codes noted earlier provide evidence of an emergent set of universal themes, activities and skills that together might constitute the foundation of a governance literacy that is not sector-bound and silo-defined. Such literacy might be especially valuable in those contexts where a single, sector-anchored analysis is manifestly insufficient. Further, it might give rise to a set of governance principles of use to those innovators and architects who are busy establishing the post-modern local and global organisations of the future, be they community groups, tech giants or anything in between.

But acknowledging the possibility of a set of universal core principles does not mean that we are suggesting a 'one-size-fits-all' analysis, a kind of multi-cultural governance soup where every ingredient is thrown into the mix. What we are suggesting, however, is that we need a deeper cross-sector analysis that is able to draw on the multiple forms good governance can and does take in different settings, and a comparative grasp of those governance principles that must hold in any setting.

Although, against the backdrop of recent high-profile examples, there is a risk of exaggerating the extent of current governance failures, the consequences of poor governance, whether it grabs the headlines or not, have material and broad impact. Given this, how we govern our schools, hospitals, public bodies, charities and corporations is far too important to be left to chance, or to policy afterthought. We think it is time to take a new look at and reflect upon what the characteristics of great governance should be and why change is needed. We need to shine a light on who is involved and who is missing from our boardroom tables, and why. A cross-sector Better Governance Commission might have much to contribute to such a project. ■

RSA Fellowship in action

ProxyAddress

A main cause of homelessness in the UK is the end of a shorthold tenancy. Without an address, which is essentially also a form of identification, people find it hard to access vital services and get back into housing.

Chris Hildrey FRSA became aware of this problem when he was selected to be one of the Design Museum's Designers in Residence in 2017. "Essentially what I found was this bizarre catch-22," says Chris. "Having no address prevents you from accessing those areas of key support at the point you need them most. It's an absurd flaw in the system."

Looking for a solution, Chris set up ProxyAddress. Using existing records to find empty properties, the organisation links homeless people with an address they can use. Having a residential-sounding address removes the stigma, and uncertainty, of using a homeless shelter as a postal address.

ProxyAddress received an RSA Catalyst Seed Grant of £2,000 last year and is about to conduct a trial involving 100 people in Lewisham in order to demonstrate that the project complies with anti-fraud regulations. Chris hopes to roll the project out across the country. "When I speak to people who are going through this it's heart-breaking. Many are without family or friends, completely isolated in the middle of cities. It's important to remember that people are the focus of this project and always will be."

To find out more, contact Chris on chris@hildreystudio.com, or visit www.proxyaddress.co.uk
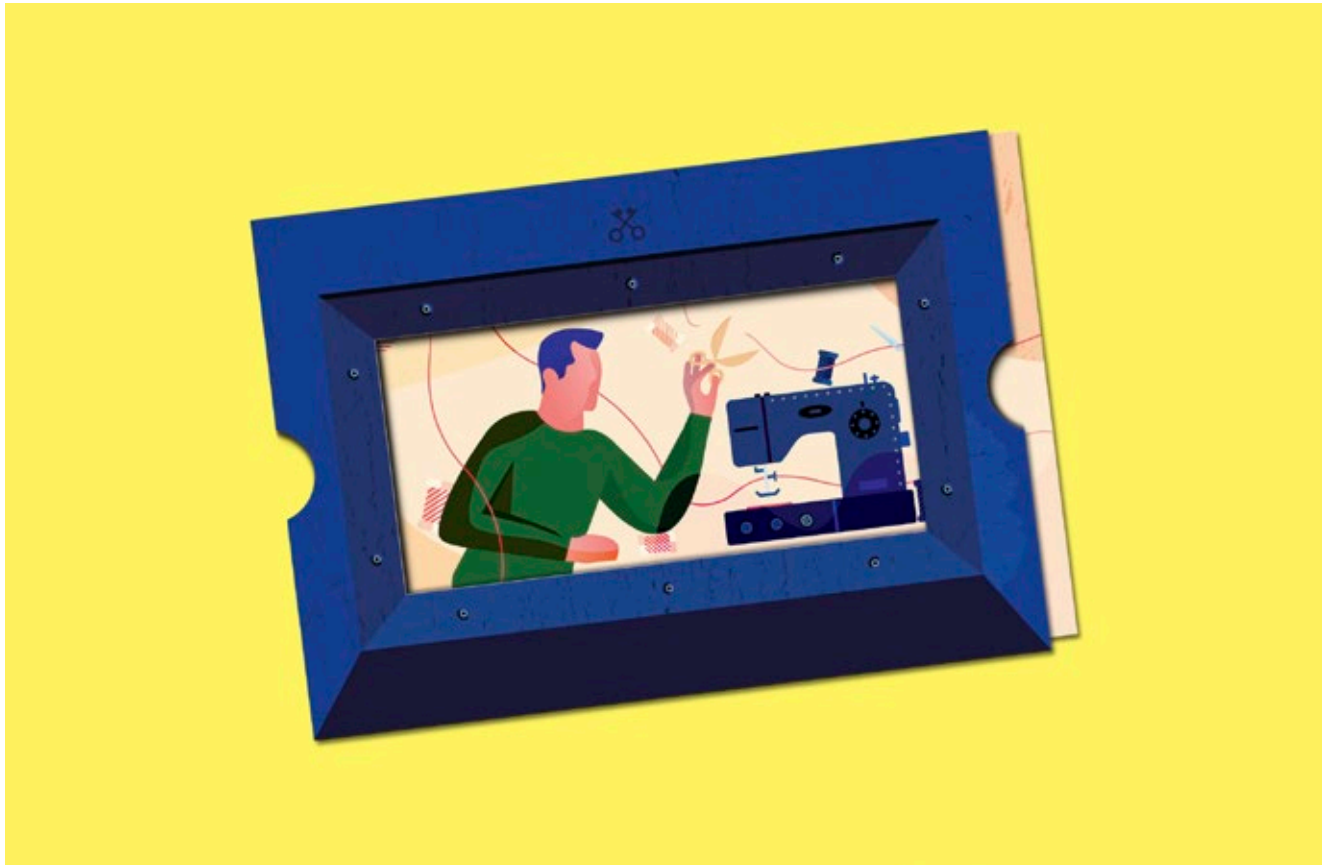
LABOUR GAINS

With the right tools at its disposal, the government's New Futures Network could boost prisoner employment

by Rachel O'Brien
🐦 @racobrien

Prisons are a microcosm where contemporary challenges play out in a confined space. On the one hand, the prison workforce is exposed daily to deep-seated societal challenges including high levels of inequality, substance misuse and mental health needs. It is charged with responding when these shape-shift or when new problems rapidly emerge. On the other hand, the closed environment does not just present a barrier to physical movement. Combined with underfunding, capacity pressures and commissioning models that curb curiosity and innovation, it can also limit engagement with the ideas, tools and networks that drive solutions.

For example, synthetic cannabinoids (the most common of which is referred to as 'spice') emerged relatively swiftly in UK prisons in the early 2010s, enabled in part by innovations in drone and miniature mobile phone technology. Combined with cuts to frontline staffing and a slow response from senior civil servants and ministers, this has wreaked havoc in some prisons. In England and Wales, cuts have also further restricted the amount of time that staff can spend looking outwards and working with the wider community. Meanwhile, recent research by the charity New Philanthropy Capital has shown that non-governmental organisations are finding it increasingly hard to work within the prison environment.

Prisoners can't be choosers?

There is a broad consensus about the importance of employment in custody and on release, and evidence to show that employment can be a key factor in supporting rehabilitation. Part of this is about pay, but – just as importantly – the right kind of employment can support a shift in identity, belonging and purpose. Research, for example Jukka Savolainen (2009) and Beth Weaver (2015), shows a significant relationship between participation in employment, the accumulation of human and social capital, and the importance of citizenship and reciprocal relationships. Despite this, according to the Ministry of Justice's latest figures, just over a quarter of people leave prisons with a job to go to, and only 17% of ex-prisoners are in P45 employment one year after release.

Likewise, the prison reform programme launched in 2016, which emphasises the critical role of education, training and employment within custody, has had mixed results. Although there have been improvements in the number of people obtaining functional skills qualifications, according to Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons for England and Wales (HMIP), there has been a decline in outcomes against its purposeful activity test. In 2017–18, 43% of prisons inspected received an HMIP 'good' or 'reasonably good' grade, compared with 51% in 2016–17.

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Historically, employment and skills programmes in custody have often been out of step with both local employment markets and the wider economy. At its most unforgivable, this included prisoners undertaking (sometimes more than once) qualifications that no longer had currency with employers outside. This benefited the provider, while wasting public money and creating false hope.

This low base – and sometimes a sense that 'prisoners cannot be choosers' – has restricted the space to argue for quality and a more sophisticated approach. But there is some better news. The slow increase of using release on temporary licence (that allows people to work outside before the end of their sentence) suggests an acknowledgement that former justice minister Chris Grayling was misguided in restricting its use in 2013. There are even some signs that the success of prisoner employment programmes – through the Ministry of Justice's Education and Employment Strategy that launched a year ago – could deliver

"Work in the prison context can be positive, but without an ethical compass it can also be highly exploitative"

modest political capital. (Although this would require a stop to the ministerial merry-go-round.)

New futures
A number of organisations have been able to show positive impacts for individuals and shift the wider discussion about prisons' and prisoners' potential when it comes to improving employment outcomes. The most well-known of these is the retailer Timpson, which for over a decade has been training people inside prison and employing them directly on release. Organisations such as Bounce Back and Switchback have also developed impactful models of post-custodial employment. The challenge now is to ensure that the Education and Employment Strategy – and the new commissioning models that accompany it – support governors in learning from and scaling the best approaches, while enabling new players to make an impact.

It was with these issues in mind that the RSA developed its proposal for the New Futures Network, published in 2017. We consulted with practitioners, including officers, senior managers and governors, as well as wider justice services. This shaped recommendations for a new body to work with prison

leaders in supporting reform and ensuring that when people return to their communities they have the right skills and access to employers to secure a job and build a better life.

Nearly two years – and three secretaries of state – later, the New Futures Network is now a reality sponsored by the Ministry of Justice. The model in practice differs from the RSA proposal in some important ways. More tightly focused on employment (rather than broader reform that supports rehabilitation), it does not have the quasi-independent governance structures that we felt would bring greater challenges to the system.

It is early days and the New Futures Network is not yet loud enough or sufficiently developed to fulfil its role in championing change. However, led by Duncan O'Leary, a central team based in London (the RSA's preference was for locating the team outside the capital to prevent it being subsumed by Whitehall) has been appointed, with regional leads for prison groups across England and Wales starting this spring. An external recruitment campaign has brought in outsiders as well as serving prison officers. In addition, with sector champions in place – from hospitality, manufacturing, construction and retail – there is reason to hope for more noise and practical progress.

Depth, breadth and impact

As the New Futures Network takes its next steps, it will face some tensions and choices. It has to move fast enough to prove its worth in a context where marginal short-term improvements to employment outcomes will be welcome. But if it is to fulfil its potential for creating self-improving prisons and delivering longer-term sustainable impacts, speed and simplicity of process should not be sought at the expense of depth and complexity in content. Having started to forge links with local stakeholders – and in the absence of an independent board – the New Futures Network needs to challenge itself and those with whom it works.

First, it needs to combine sharing practical examples with wider exploration of what 'good work' means. Work in the prison context can be positive, but without an ethical compass it can also be highly exploitative. Developing the right ethical model will be critical to ensuring that programmes benefit the individual, the prison, the employer and the local community. It will also need to look beyond the justice context to the wider world of precarious employment, changing gender expectations, the rise of the high-tech, high-touch economy, and the existential crises of demographic and environmental change.

Second, it needs to resist exclusive focus on large-scale providers 'coming in' from the outside with fixed approaches. While scale is important, when looking at transformative learning and work, there needs to be space for the distinct contribution that social enterprises, charities and individuals can make in supporting rehabilitation, often through co-productive working with staff, prisoners and the community. This includes developing ways – including seed fund approaches – to support emergent ideas, including those developed by prisoners and officers. Enabling this bottom-up innovation can strengthen people's sense of ownership and involves problem solving and collaborative decision-making, which aid both individual development and institutional culture change.

Third, the New Futures Network needs the support of the Ministry of Justice to find both high- and low-tech solutions. This includes making a bolder case for finding safe ways to use new technologies that support work and the return to community. Smuggled mobiles aside, it is not just prisoners who are unable to use technology in the way that most take for granted; the prison officer shift remains a largely Googleless one.

More ambitiously, there is a pressing need to address the legacy data issues that hamper progress, as different systems fail to speak to each other. The Ministry of Justice's Data Lab has made progress in developing useful data and ways for organisations to assess their impact. However, we are a long way from being able to capture data that can identify not just whether in- and post-custody interventions make a difference, but which are most effective, for whom, when and where. The costs of reoffending are estimated to be between £9.5bn and £11bn per year, while the latest data from the Ministry of Justice shows a slight increase in reoffending amongst those who were given a custodial or community sentence in 2017. The gains of having a more granular understanding of what works could be huge.

The RSA's original proposal was clear that the scale of impact of any new body would depend on addressing the wider capacity pressures facing prisons and the levels of violence and harm (which remain high). This lies beyond the gift of the New Futures Network (and perhaps the Ministry of Justice). But when it comes to making the Treasury case for investment, neither should underestimate the potential impact of high-visibility employer support and robust cost benefits of employment (that go way beyond the justice budget). With these kinds of changes, our hope is that the New Futures Network can avoid falling into the bind we started with: facing today's issues without access to the tools, trends and ideas that will shape our tomorrows. ∎

CHARTING LONELINESS

Loneliness is increasingly recognised as a public health issue, but to tackle it effectively we need to be able to accurately distinguish between the many forms it can take

by Dr Kimberley Smith
🐦 @kimjsmith81

Social relationships are among the most important things we need in life; they are crucial to our wellbeing and our physical and mental health. Those people with larger social networks, more social support and high-quality relationships tend to have better health and wellbeing. However, when social relationships are deficient in some way, this can have a negative impact.

Loneliness is one metric of poorer social relationships that is receiving increasing attention. The late social neuroscientist and leading loneliness scholar John Cacioppo labelled it a "public health problem".

Defining loneliness

Despite the amount of attention paid to loneliness, we still struggle to identify what it is, and it can be confused and conflated with similar constructs. This is concerning, as in order to help people to be less lonely we need to know what loneliness actually is. Yet many researchers have differing definitions.

Most definitions incorporate perceptions and evaluations of relationships. For instance, sociologist Peter Townsend defined loneliness as a perceived deprivation in social contact, Louise Hawkley and John Cacioppo define it as perceived social isolation, and professor of public health Mima Cattan defines it as the unwelcome feeling that accompanies isolation. The most commonly used definition is that of US social psychologists Daniel Perlman and Letitia Anne Peplau, who propose that loneliness is an unpleasant affective state that results from a discrepancy between the quality and quantity of relationships we perceive we have and the quality and quantity of relationships we want to have. They suggest that most definitions of loneliness have the following in common: first, that loneliness relates to a perceived deficiency in social relationships; second, that it is a subjective experience; and finally, that the experience is aversive.

Further complicating matters, researchers have identified different types of loneliness. In his seminal work on the subject, American sociologist Robert Weiss suggested there were two main kinds: social loneliness, which is linked to a lack of a social network; and emotional loneliness, which is linked to an absence of emotional attachment. Furthermore, Dutch sociologist Jenny de Jong-Gierveld suggested that a differentiation can be made between 'situational loneliness', when one becomes lonely in response to a situation or event, and 'chronic loneliness', which can be thought of as a persistent state. Many scholars believe it is chronic loneliness, rather than situational loneliness, that might be linked with many of the adverse health and wellbeing consequences that have captured the attention of the media and governments.

Meanwhile, US psychologist Clark Moustakas differentiated between types of loneliness by the affective impact they have on people: loneliness anxiety and existential loneliness. He suggested that the former was the negative affective experience that followed feeling 'alienated', whereas the latter was a normal part of the human experience that offered the opportunity for personal reflection and growth. However, most current research persists in examining the link between loneliness and negative consequences, such as the link between loneliness and depression.

Loneliness and depression

Loneliness can be thought of as a phenomenon that has social roots but a psychological presentation. Negative emotions commonly associated with feeling lonely include feeling unloved, unwanted, worthless, helpless, desperate, panicked, hopeless, abandoned, vulnerable, rejected and depressed. It therefore may not be surprising that there is an overlap between the presentation of loneliness and depression: up to 50% of people who are lonely also report that they feel depressed.

It is possible that loneliness may lead to depression – some point to the fundamental need we have for meaningful connections with others. However, other experts propose that people who are lonely are more likely to develop a negative view of themselves and ▶

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"For some, being lonely can be a transformative and overall positive experience"

the world, which can lead to depression. On the other hand, depression may lead to loneliness: those who become depressed can isolate themselves from people around them, and hold more negative perceptions about their relationships. It is also possible that the relationship may exist because loneliness and depression share common risk factors such as social anxiety, attributional styles, attachment styles, low self-esteem and negative life events.

The relationship between loneliness and depression may be even more enmeshed than longitudinal studies suggest. Screening tools for symptoms of depression, such as the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale, include items that ask people how lonely they feel. Thus, loneliness is sometimes measured as a possible symptom of depression. However, identifying loneliness within oneself, and differentiating it from related affective states such as depression, can be difficult. It is possible that some people label themselves as lonely when they are actually depressed, and vice versa.

Despite the role of psychological processes in loneliness, many people persist in thinking of loneliness as the direct result of being alone or socially isolated. To unpick loneliness from related constructs it is worth using the typologies of phenomenologist Rubin Gotesky, who differentiates the subjective experience of loneliness from physical aloneness, solitude and being socially isolated.

Physical aloneness and solitude
Loneliness and being alone are often conflated as being the same; however, as we have seen, feeling lonely is not always due to being alone. The difference between these states is articulated by people experiencing loneliness, as reflected in this quote from a research paper by social gerontologist Mary Pat Sullivan:

"It's not being alone because you can be alone and not lonely… it's when you feel your soul is alone." Gotesky differentiated between physical aloneness (a physical separation from others) and solitude (a state of being alone where one does not feel lonely or isolated). Physical aloneness can be thought of as the objective form of being alone, whereas solitude represents being alone without distress.

Both states can also be differentiated from living alone, which many use as a proxy to define loneliness. While living alone can be a risk factor, not everyone who lives alone will feel lonely; in work undertaken by myself and Professor Christina Victor, we found a group of older adults who experienced all the risk factors for loneliness and lived alone, but were not lonely.

Loneliness, being alone and solitude continue to be confused for a number of reasons. Loneliness affects all of us at some point, and many of us will draw on our personal experiences when thinking about what loneliness means more broadly. The social narrative of loneliness is also focused around a person who is alone and the media, in discussing loneliness, use the terms alone, solitude and loneliness interchangeably.

Social isolation
Social isolation is commonly conflated with loneliness, but it is actually different. It is defined by some researchers as the objective state of being alone, whereas loneliness is the subjective state of being alone. Yet this definition is arguably too simplistic to capture what it means to be socially isolated. Some researchers define social isolation as a lack of meaningful contact and/or communication with family and the wider community. Social isolation is a risk factor for loneliness, but not all people who are socially isolated will feel lonely. Social gerontologist

Lars Andersson and colleagues propose a fourfold typology of loneliness and social isolation: neither lonely nor isolated; lonely but not isolated; isolated but not lonely; and both lonely and socially isolated. In my work with Christina Victor, we showed that those people who were both lonely and socially isolated were more likely to have poorer health and psychological wellbeing. This indicates that, while loneliness and social isolation are distinct, their co-occurrence may have important implications.

Social isolation can lead to loneliness for some, but others find that it instead provides them with solitude. The extent to which social isolation results in negative impacts is probably influenced by the extent to which it is voluntary or involuntary. When people are involuntarily forced into social isolation, for example because of a serious health issue, this has more of a negative impact than when someone makes the deliberate choice to isolate themselves.

Complexity in loneliness
When thinking about what loneliness is, it is important to remember that every person is different; they will perceive and evaluate relationships differently and may respond in a range of ways. Furthermore, underlying causes of loneliness will differ from person to person, although various risk factors for loneliness have been identified. These can include individual factors, such as personality, self-identity and relationship with parents when growing up. Major life events and transitions, such as developing a health issue, retirement or bereavement, are all linked to a greater risk of experiencing loneliness.

In addition, social relationships can have an impact on loneliness, ranging from feeling as though we lack the quality of relationships that we desire through to issues such as bullying and discrimination. We need to bear in mind wider social and cultural influences; when we evaluate our social relationships, we do so in relation to our own social norms and the expectations we have of what makes a good-quality relationship. We can also identify broader social and structural factors that influence feelings of loneliness, such as household composition, where we live, financial difficulties, community engagement and access to transport.

There is no single risk factor that always leads to loneliness; many people experience several of the issues listed above and never become lonely. Psychological reactions to risk factors and underlying resilience and coping strategies have been identified as factors that can help protect against negative affectivity. For some, being lonely can be a transformative and overall positive experience, as it can act as a motivator to reach out and develop new social connections.

How do we tackle loneliness?
Many of the interventions that have been developed to help people feel less lonely are focused on increasing social network size and building connections with others. In short, many loneliness interventions focus on the idea that to help people feel less lonely we need to make sure they are not alone or isolated.

Yet as we have seen, loneliness is far more complex. It may not be surprising then to learn that a recent report from the What Works Centre for Wellbeing concluded that there is no evidence that any of the existing loneliness interventions actually work. Could part of the reason for this be that these interventions have been designed for physical aloneness or social isolation rather than loneliness? In order to intervene, it seems that we need to identify the type of loneliness that a person might be experiencing, and then tailor an intervention accordingly.

When looking to find a solution to loneliness, we need to think more about what loneliness is to that individual, rather than assuming that a one-size-fits-all approach will work for everyone in the same way. ∎

RSA Fellowship in action
Tottenham in Common
Last year, David McEwen FRSA set up Tottenham in Common in north London after being involved for several years with the local Latin American community that trades in the Seven Sisters indoor market. The market is the subject of a planned redevelopment that would involve demolishing the current space and the forced relocation of the sellers. David runs the project with colleagues Ben Beach and Jamie Hignett.

Tottenham in Common received an RSA Catalyst Seed Grant of £2,000 to support consultation events with the affected community, with the aim of coordinating and mobilising opposition to the council's plans for the market, which is a hub for the Latin American immigrant community in the area. "It's about maintaining and protecting social and cultural spaces," says David. "Independent migrant spaces such as markets like this have tangible and intangible benefits that aren't being recognised. We need more of them rather than getting rid of them." Working with the affected traders, Tottenham in Common hopes to produce an alternative regeneration plan that would benefit the local economy and ensure the traders retain their livelihoods. David hopes to link Tottenham in Common with similar projects elsewhere. "Now is the perfect time to demonstrate different forms of urban development," he said.

▬ *To find out more about Tottenham in Common, contact David on david@unit38.org*

COMMON GROUND

When debating how to tackle employment challenges and skills shortages, the focus tends to be on urban centres, but the experience of rural economies can teach us a lot

by Tom MacMillan

🐦 @FFCC_Commission

trends previously seen mainly in the countryside are now making their way to the urban services sector. We might find more clues to solving the challenges they bring by talking to farmers than to futurologists.

The gig economy is at the frontline of debate about employment policy. Seasonal labour demands and the pressure on farms to diversify beyond food production have long made gigging the norm for many agricultural workers and business owners. According to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), there are 466,000 workers in UK agriculture; of these, the House of Commons Library estimates 64,000–77,000 (14–17%) are seasonal, casual or gang workers. Successive efforts to enforce standards for gang work have failed to win these workers a reliably fair deal, and illegal conditions remain a problem 15 years after the Gangmasters (Licensing) Act 2004. The drivers and riders of the new gig economy should take heed. Securing decent terms throughout the gig economy could be a long haul, and efforts to stamp out modern slavery in other parts of the economy will take more substantial and consistent resources than have been afforded to agriculture.

Employment across the whole economy, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), is growing almost 10 times faster in small businesses than in large ones. Again, the countryside is ahead of the curve. In England, according to Defra, 70% of rural workers are already in small or micro-enterprises, compared with 40% in urban areas. Their jobs range from start-ups to age-old farming partnerships.

That autonomy can come at a cost has long been clear in rural communities, particularly for farmers, who often work in extreme isolation. Research reveals that many city-dwellers who work for themselves or for small businesses also feel lonely and are at risk of burnout. The lesson from farming, which has evolved extensive support networks but has stubbornly high rates of suicide, is to take this seriously and act soon.

A rural perspective takes some shine off the new gig economy. It looks less like worker empowerment and more like the service sector adjusting to the lower margins and lower pay that primary production has had to cope with for decades.

It is a similar story with automation, where developments in the use of AI have prompted head-scratching about the purpose of work. What do we do when machines take our jobs? AI has fired up these debates not because the question is new – communities built on primary production have grappled with it for generations – but because the service sector, which until recently had provided an answer, is now affected.

U rbanisation is so central to our idea of progress that it is hard to think of the countryside ever setting a trend. Everywhere, from broadband to fashion, it feels inevitable that cities thrust ahead, leaving the provinces to lag behind.

Yet, when it comes to employment, the reverse might be closer to the truth. Some trends that are only now gripping cities – such as the growth of the 'gig' economy and small businesses, and the rise of automation – have been happening in the countryside for decades. As our working practices have shifted,

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Populus poll of 1,006 16-24-year-olds across the UK

We asked rural-dwellers and city-dwellers where they would prefer to work

RURAL
Country 53%
City 47%

URBAN
Country 26%
City 74%
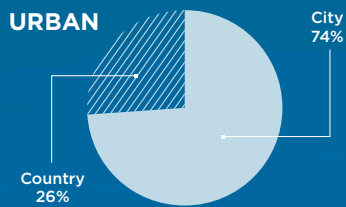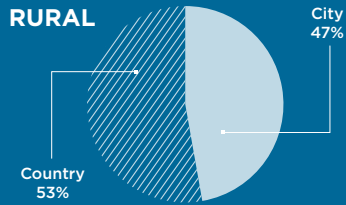
In an ideal working situation, how important are the following?

- I have a secure job
- I gain a rich variety of experience
- I can develop specialist professional or technical skills
- My work makes a positive difference to society
- My work stretches me mentally
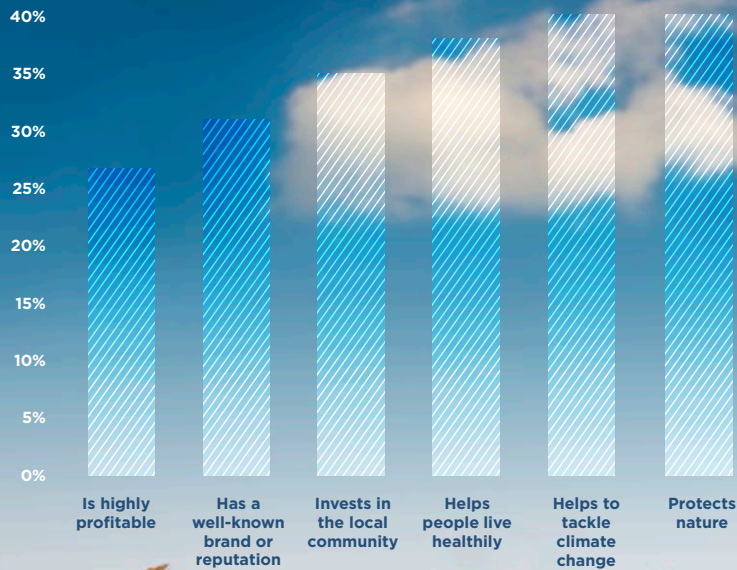- My work challenges me physically

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

I would be proud to work for a business that...

40%
35%
30%
25%
20%
15%
10%
5%
0%

- Is highly profitable
- Has a well-known brand or reputation
- Invests in the local community
- Helps people live healthily
- Helps to tackle climate change
- Protects nature

The experience in farming suggests the real question may be different. The effect of mechanisation has not simply been to lower employment. In fact, even as the sector has shed people and labour productivity has risen, it has struggled with an ever-growing recruitment problem: how to attract people into demanding, low-paid jobs in a low-margin sector.

That is where the casualisation of farm labour and farming's gig economy have kicked in, with farmers juggling other jobs to pay the bills. Gig work in farming has not been employment of choice: ONS data shows that, of the sixth of workers in the sector in seasonal or casual jobs, some 98% are from elsewhere in the EU.

The acute risk this dependence on migrant workers represents in the event of Brexit has put a rocket under long-running industry efforts to make working in farming more attractive and rewarding. The current focus is on professionalising the sector, formalising career paths and recognising agriculture as a STEM subject.

Meaningful work

But taking the long view raises bigger questions, and suggests different solutions to the recruitment challenge in agriculture and beyond. Science writer and broadcaster Colin Tudge, for example, asks why losing jobs in agriculture is seen as progress, when more labour-intensive types and methods of farming can provide greater social and environmental benefits, whether comparing horticulture to arable cropping, or agroecology to monoculture. To this thinking, a policy focus on driving labour productivity is misplaced, at least unless productivity is radically redefined.

Research shows that young people want work that has a social or environmental purpose, and recent polling by the RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (see facing page) bears this out. This suggests that farm businesses and other rural employers should put purpose front and centre.

According to a recent project by the Soil Association, engaging with the younger generations' values will be vital for farms to become employers of choice. This could include more creative thinking about roles, for example combining desk work with activities outdoors.

The restoration economy

Beyond the core business of food production, an emerging 'regenerative' or 'restoration' economy is redefining productivity in land-based sectors. Financed by an increasingly explicit demand for ecological services, ranging from clean water to camping, this offers further scope to attract young people into primary production.

Farming reminds us that nature matters to the future of work. It is highly exposed to environmental change such as flooding, water shortages, volatile weather patterns and collapsing pollinator populations. These will reverberate across the global economy and should also be central to scenarios for work in cities.

The restoration economy illustrates a wider phenomenon described by Professor Tim Jackson, one of the RSA Food, Farming and Countryside commissioners. With increasing automation, the balance of human work shifts towards the parts machines find hard to reach, notably our growing need for care and repair.

"Beyond the core business of food production, an emerging 'regenerative' or 'restoration' economy is redefining productivity in land-based sectors"

The implication is not only that cities can learn from farming and the countryside when it comes to employment, but that rural and urban sectors could team up to create good work: valued by the economy and by those doing it. This could be year-to-year, with employers across sectors working together to balance seasonal needs, or it could be longer-term. For example, this could include gap year work schemes helping the restoration economy and giving young people the opportunity to develop varied skill sets.

A final lesson from farming is the power of the state to make or break opportunities for good work. For an industry that has never (in the UK) been nationalised, the structure, practices and current viability of farming are profoundly shaped by subsidy. Government's influence on employment in the sector goes far further than the reported hopes of the Department for Work and Pensions to get unemployed Brits picking strawberries. The bigger factor for most farms will be how Defra changes farm payments, from being based largely on farm size to paying for public benefits.

The mantra of 'public money for public goods' resounds through Defra's current thinking, putting the emphasis on benefits that are 'non-rival and non-excludable', such as wildlife and clean rivers. This should help some aspects of the emerging restoration economy. Yet it risks ignoring the huge social and economic impact of changing payments, and misses the extent to which the viability of farming and the restoration economy depends on other connected sectors and public services.

As the RSA Commission toured the UK, we heard story after story of poor access to schools, transport and other basics exacerbating recruitment problems or blighting rural lives. A more rounded goal for designing future payments would be 'public value', as defined by the Barber Review and accepted across government in 2017. Barber's framework, reasserted by the Treasury in its latest spring statement, gives Defra a mandate to balance environmental public goods with social benefits, investing more strategically in building thriving, sustainable communities, including meaningful work. With imagination and ambition from Defra, in collaboration with other colleagues across government, farming and rural communities could lead the way in designing the good work the country needs, as well as trailblazing the innovations that deal with many of the challenges it will face. ∎

A SECURE FUTURE?

Whatever happens in the coming months and years, Britain and the European Union would benefit from retaining a close working relationship on international security

by Lord Mandelson

Following the referendum result in June 2016, Britain will not be the same again. It will take our political system and both main parties decades to come to terms with the shock of Brexit and its consequences. What is true for our politics and economy applies equally to our international security.

Once the UK is outside the EU, there is no reason for Europe automatically to oppose or ignore British views, but nor will there be an obligation to accommodate them. The key difference that should make it easier to work together in foreign rather than economic policy is that the latter is largely rules-based and deeply institutional, whereas the former is inter-governmental and more flexible, and likely to remain so.

International security should therefore be the area where Brexit matters least. But will it?

At the moment, Britain's international influence and security cooperation are greatly enhanced by the EU. The question is whether there is the potential for retaining a closer bond in this sphere. Both sides would certainly benefit from it.

Mutual assurance
I have experienced how the EU and the UK gain from each other and how well this relationship has been transacted day-to-day, both as a UK Cabinet minister and an EU Commissioner. The public perception is different. Britain took ages to join Europe's construction (my pro-European grandfather, Herbert Morrison, as acting prime minister in the post-war Labour government, rejected initial membership of the new European Coal and Steel Community because he thought the Durham miners would not wear it). Once in the European Economic Community, we then spent four decades finding ways to opt out of its ever-deepening integration (ironic, given that now we are heading out we want to devise ways to opt in again where we will benefit).

Despite this chequered history, our European partners have grown to value us. Our economic size has contributed to Europe's weight in international trade and the global economy. Britain has been a driving force in opening up Europe's internal markets for goods, services, capital and labour, and in pushing for market-based reforms. In reality, there has never been as big a gap between Britain's more laissez-faire views and the continent's dirigiste preferences as imagined.

By the same token, the UK has been a significant force in some of the most important steps to fight crime and terrorism. Without the UK, unless links are strenuously maintained, the ability of other member states to tackle cross-border organised crime and international terrorism will be reduced. This will also have knock-on effects on the UK. Similarly, the EU has benefitted from UK diplomatic and military capabilities, just as the EU has acted as a foreign policy multiplier and tool for Britain. We have helped each other project our values and protect our interests globally.

The former Conservative foreign secretary, William Hague, has said that, post-Brexit, Britain will have less influence in crafting the EU's international approach, and as a result less influence in the world. It is already hard to call to mind a major foreign policy matter on which the UK has had decisive influence since the 2016 referendum.

An unpredictable future
The French president, Emmanuel Macron, has called for foreign and security policy to be taken forward by a newly formed EU Council. It is not hard to understand why. Rapid shifts of political and economic power are happening across the world, China's economic and military capacity is growing, and the geopolitical scene is more unpredictable. The post-war liberal international system, if not crumbling, is certainly on the back foot. As the world moves towards more 'great power' deal-making, the EU and UK need each other for scale and muscle to influence events.

Peter Mandelson is Chairman of Global Counsel. He was a UK Cabinet minister between 1997 and 2010, and has held the positions of European Commissioner for Trade and First Secretary of State

This is why on security the EU and the UK need to raise their eyes beyond the current Brexit stasis. The UK needs to reassure its allies that it is not checking out of its international responsibilities and the EU should swallow its pride and acknowledge that it needs Britain's military heft and international networks.

In my experience, it is across Europe's more ad hoc structures – consisting of key national officials, where information is efficiently shared and consensus built to pave the way for political decisions – that the UK's absence will be most keenly felt by everyone. This is where the more risky, resource-intensive policy decisions are made about security issues and where the Europeans get most purchase on the direction of US policy. It is desirable to maintain these inter-governmental caucuses, such as the EU three (France, Germany and the UK) and the 'quad' (the EU three plus the US). The underlying reality is that – just at the moment the US president thinks he is leading the country in a more unilateralist approach – America is actually becoming more reliant on its alliances to maintain its longer-term edge. Historically, the US has looked to technology to offset its multiple potential adversaries. Looking forward, it is friends who will provide balance and coalitions to keep China, for example, in check.

For Europe to hold together and influence global issues with the US, it cannot afford to allow Brexit to

"In reality, there has never been as big a gap between Britain's more laissez-faire views and the continent's dirigiste preferences as imagined"

make its internal limitations worse. Take, for example, the use of sanctions as an international weapon. Europe has some way to go before it develops the unity of action and intelligence infrastructure needed to become a serious sanctions 'player'. The UK provides real grit in this particular oyster.

Along with a shared role with France in providing serious high-value defence equipment, the UK is the European superpower on intelligence. High-tech munitions currently rely on guidance systems linked to the American GPS, and in future will rely on the European Galileo global navigation system. No other European country rivals the UK as France's industrial partner in providing this sophisticated equipment. Yet, following Brexit, Britain is to be excluded from Galileo. It is self-defeating. The UK cannot be expected to be part of high-tech European defence manufacturing unless it is part of the crucial guidance system.

Leaving the EU involves such an intensely complex set of issues and decisions that perhaps Brexit will eventually defeat Brexit. In the meantime, there is a duty not to destroy completely what has been such a good and useful relationship, at so many levels. ∎
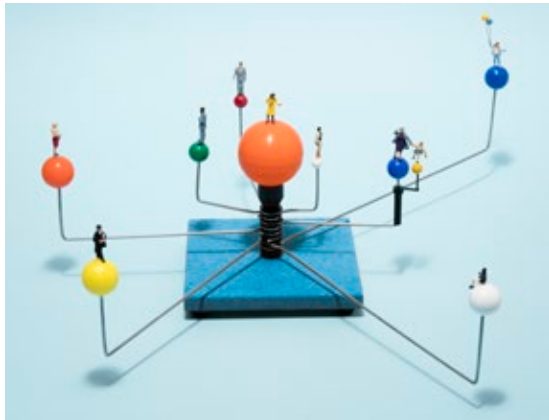
NAVIGATION SKILLS

In order to meet the rapidly changing needs of the global economy, we should look to how other countries are equipping their citizens with a wide range of skills

by Adanna Shallowe
🐦 @AShallowe

The RSA is working with WorldSkills UK and the Further Education Trust for Leadership to explore innovative approaches to workforce skills around the globe and to identify their potential for application in the UK. Led by RSA Senior Researcher Atif Shafique, the project is developing a set of design principles to support innovation and reform of UK skills systems and has drawn on the experiences of Singapore, Switzerland, Russia and the city of Shanghai.

The approach in Switzerland exemplifies the '*no dead ends*' design principle where government strategies seek to ensure that every citizen has a clear pathway to job progression and can readily undertake retraining and upskilling opportunities. It does so by offering high-quality career guidance and support, and by taking a holistic case management approach that supports those struggling within the education system.

Switzerland also best illustrates the '*stakeholder-led governance*' design principle where different actors including central government, cantons and employers play a key role in the vocational education and training system, all contributing to long-term planning and strategic coordination. In particular, the robust links with industry groups ensures that the system reflects the country's economic needs and promotes mobility.

In terms of a third design principle of '*vision-setting and movement-building*', much can be learnt from Singapore. The government has long sought to ensure that the population is equipped with the skills to take advantage of economic change. With a strong heritage in long-term planning, the government redesigned its skills sector, mobilised key actors to prioritise workforce development and, in 2014, launched Skills Future Singapore as a 'movement', seeking to reframe learning as a lifelong journey. Supported by international benchmarking, its programme included a range of opportunities from middle school to adulthood. In addition, the SkillsFuture Credit (a £250 credit to every citizen aged 25 and over) emphasised the role of individuals in seeking training opportunities.

The Russian system best illustrates the design principle of '*learn and innovate*'. Skills competitions are used to embed global standards, transform the vocational education system, and to gauge and test what skills will be needed to remain competitive in the global economy.

We found that it was not enough for the skills systems in these countries to meet pre-determined targets; it was equally important for governments to invest in quality, elevating the status of vocational education and training. In all cases, particularly Singapore, Switzerland and Shanghai, there was a focus on the final design principle of '*high status, high quality*'. Combined with aligning skills to economic development and meeting the needs of the economy, this enhances learner esteem and professional identity in their skills and their contribution to society.

In the next stage of the project, the RSA will present these design principles to UK stakeholders, with a view to testing and exploring what is applicable in the UK context.

The final report for the global innovation in skills project is due out in May. ∎

To find out more about the project, contact adanna.shallowe@rsa.org.uk

Adanna Shallowe is the RSA's Senior Global Manager

Photography by Franck Allais

" There was a great appetite among Fellows to challenge existing thinking and explore radical approaches

The RSA has recently launched its Change Stories project, which showcases the ways in which Fellows are making change happen across the country

by Andrew Staines

Norfolk County Council's Further Afield project looks at the trends and drivers of change that could have an impact on Norfolk over the next 20 years. We want to make sure the council is in the best place to support our county in the face of complex, interrelated challenges such as automation, low social mobility and an ageing population. If we do not understand these changes and the impact they may have, we cannot respond.

My personal motivation for the project is to make Norfolk a sustainable place to live, so that when my children grow up, they feel there are opportunities for them if they remain in the area, rather than feeling they have to move away, as I did 20 years ago.

I have also been inspired by the RSA's Future of Work programme, and by its ideas for a 21st century enlightenment. The RSA fundamentally changed the project for me by being so open to my ask for help so early on in my Fellowship. The Fellowship team gave me the space and time to explore ideas and the opportunity to work with local Fellows who provide brilliant cross-sector input and insights, which we would not get so easily in other forums.

I worked with the RSA Norwich and Norfolk network to test out our ideas. There was great appetite among Fellows to challenge existing thinking and explore radical approaches such as universal basic income, new models of affordable housing, four-day working weeks, deliberative democracy, and how to harness tech and support young people's aspirations.

Fellows also pointed us to the value of presenting more people-focused narratives and stories, rather than just hard data.

The input of Fellows and RSA staff prompted us to look to other sectors and develop our systems thinking. By using our findings in day-to-day projects, we are bringing future planning into our everyday actions, which is essential for longevity. Every finding has an action, from basing our new business plan around inclusive growth, to developing innovative e-democracy projects.

Our work has shown that county councils can be equal to other bodies in their ability to think and act strategically. We are not helpless. We are showing that rural areas can thrive even in the face of significant change and challenge.

RSA Fellows remain integral to the project, and I am in conversation with Fellows, our local network and the Action and Research Centre on the next steps. Being a Fellow has shown me how diverse groups of people can get together to discuss common challenges with respect. It gives me great hope for collective action in the future.

I would love to see if the RSA could use Norfolk as a test bed for its work on the future of democratic approaches and, more generally, if the organisation can consider rural settings as much as urban in its thinking. "

Andrew Staines FRSA is Head of Strategy, Innovation and Performance at Norfolk County Council

Top tips
- At a local level, people are up for change and for a debate about it. You should give it a go – you might be surprised.
- Good evidence and good intentions lead to positive results.
- Don't be afraid to start small: we can make tangible differences using small building blocks for bigger changes.
- Bringing people on board can be tough; be prepared for initial cynicism. As projects start to show results, the way becomes smoother.
- Make your project a learning journey; allow yourself time to make mistakes and learn from them along the way.

MP

Political events of the past few years have made the lot of an MP even harder; who would want to take on such a job?

by Tom Hamilton
🐦 @thhamilton

Would you want a job where you could guarantee, whatever you do, that a substantial minority of people will hate you? Where everyone – including the people who hate you – has not only an opinion on your performance but a say on whether you get to keep your job? Where promotion is as much a matter of loyalty and luck as talent and ability? Where you have to express opinions on complex issues you know little about, and defend decisions you think are disastrous? Where every week you have to travel hundreds of miles and spend days away from your family? Where you can, if you are unlucky, spend years being part of a team that loses, and loses, and loses again? Where the highest-profile moments of your job involve grown adults yelling abuse at each other in a confined space?

Some of these ambitions can be fulfilled by becoming a professional footballer. But if you want them all, you should try getting elected as a member of parliament.

Being an MP is not an entirely thankless task. It is well paid. It offers real opportunities to make your voice heard, to serve your community, to influence policy and to change people's lives for the better. It is, in practice, the only route – although by no means a guaranteed one – to a job in the Cabinet or even as prime minister, where you can decisively shape the direction of the country and earn a place in history. And it takes place in a workplace in a prime central London location with several cheap bars on site. There are worse ways to spend your life, and some MPs find it so congenial that they spend their whole working lives doing it: Labour's Dennis Skinner and the Conservatives' Ken Clarke have both been in the House of Commons since 1970, long before I was born.

Most MPs are aware of their privilege, and equally aware of their responsibility to their constituents and the country. Most of them think deeply, if not always well, about big public policy challenges. But Brexit has made the job harder. It has put MPs under new pressure because the issues it raises do not divide easily down party political lines. Usually, MPs can happily follow the party whip on the grounds that their view of the national interest, their party's interest and their personal interest in being re-elected coincide. On Brexit, suddenly, this convenient coincidence has vanished.

MPs who sincerely believe that leaving the EU is a terrible idea may simultaneously think that blocking it will destroy their party, or that voting against it will be seen by their own constituents as a betrayal. MPs who support Brexit in principle may still find it impossible to back a particular deal. Indeed, if all pro-Leave MPs had voted for Theresa May's deal, we would certainly have left as planned on 29 March. It is no wonder that Brexit has caused so many resignations, not only from ministerial and shadow ministerial jobs, but even from parties.

MPs do not often ask for our sympathy and when they do, few people are sympathetic. All of them deserve some criticism, and some of them deserve plenty. But when parliament breaks down, perhaps we should spare at least a brief thought for the MPs stuck inside it trying, and failing, to get it working again. ∎

Tom Hamilton is the co-author of *Punch and Judy Politics: An Insiders' Guide to Prime Minister's Questions*. He was formerly Head of Research for the Labour Party

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