

Issue 1 2020

Developing sustainable nations

Anatol Lieven argues that nationalism is key to tackling global crises

Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac make the case for optimism

Nikesh Shukla takes on British values

RSA JOURNAL

21st century enlightenment



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Tim Eyles



“The Fellowship aims to be a network for support and motivation, as well as an engine for change”

In times of crisis, the temptation can be to focus entirely on the present. It can be difficult to look to the future. With the current unprecedented uncertainty comes doubt over our well-laid plans, hopes and expectations; responding with long-term ambition as well as urgency – an imperative that RSA Chief Executive Matthew Taylor discusses later in this edition – becomes harder yet more important.

This edition of *RSA Journal* was originally commissioned with sustainability as its focus before the Covid-19 pandemic had taken hold. Where possible, we have adapted some pieces within this edition to respond to the evolving situation, but the theme of sustainability remains apt.

The pandemic has brought into sharper focus many of the feelings already evoked by the climate crisis as another indivisibly complex global challenge. Many of us will feel wrong-footed, anxious and perhaps even despairing in the face of the large-scale disruption and uncertainty that Covid-19 has brought, and the underlying vulnerabilities it has exposed. But in managing the virus outbreak, as with fighting climate change, it is human action, ingenuity and courage – political and otherwise – that will carry us through.

As several of our contributors explore here, the efforts against coronavirus and climate change have plenty to teach one another. In his article, Matthew discusses how the Covid-19 crisis could strengthen the impetus for governments to focus policy and planning on the longer term, which will be crucial to the success of climate action. In their piece on sustainability, Robbie Bates, Rebecca Ford and Josie Warden emphasise that complex challenges demand a diversity of perspectives and expertise; to embrace this we must have the humility to acknowledge our interconnectedness and the generosity to support others’ successes.

In response to the Covid-19 crisis, the RSA is exploring some of the major changes this period is revealing to be necessary; asking how we can act with

urgency and scale while ‘building bridges’ to the future we need to shape. Change is needed across economics, innovation, state craft and beyond. As the variety of the pieces in this edition makes clear, this will mean action at every level, from the local to the global. In his article, Anatol Lieven urges unified action on climate change through exploring the nation-state as a crucial unit for change and the potential of progressive nationalism.

Other institutions and organisations besides national governments will play a vital role in securing a sustainable, secure future beyond the Covid-19 crisis. Tom Rippin explores how organisations can find their true purpose, a key question given the transformative role that organisations of all sorts will need to play in building a better world. As Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac discuss with Matthew, we tend to forget – though the RSA is a wonderful example – that institutions are composites of individual people with passionate values and visions, and can thus be brilliant organising mechanisms for our collective goals and causes. At the forefront of our minds during this crisis and beyond will be the NHS, whose mission and values are realised through the aggregate actions of thousands of dedicated individuals and teams every day.

This pandemic has put a strain on organisations across the board, and the RSA is no exception. While we work to ensure that we can continue to have much-needed impact in the world, it is more heartening than ever to see the projects and networks at work every day throughout the RSA Fellowship. As Christiana Figueres reminds us, moments of fear and despair can be transformed into conviction and become a source of energy for change. The RSA is committed to providing a place where that can happen, and the Fellowship aims to be a network for support and motivation, as well as an engine for the change the world needs. As ever, thank you for supporting the RSA’s important mission, and I wish you and your loved ones a safe passage through this uncertain time. ■

Tim Eyles is
Chair of the RSA

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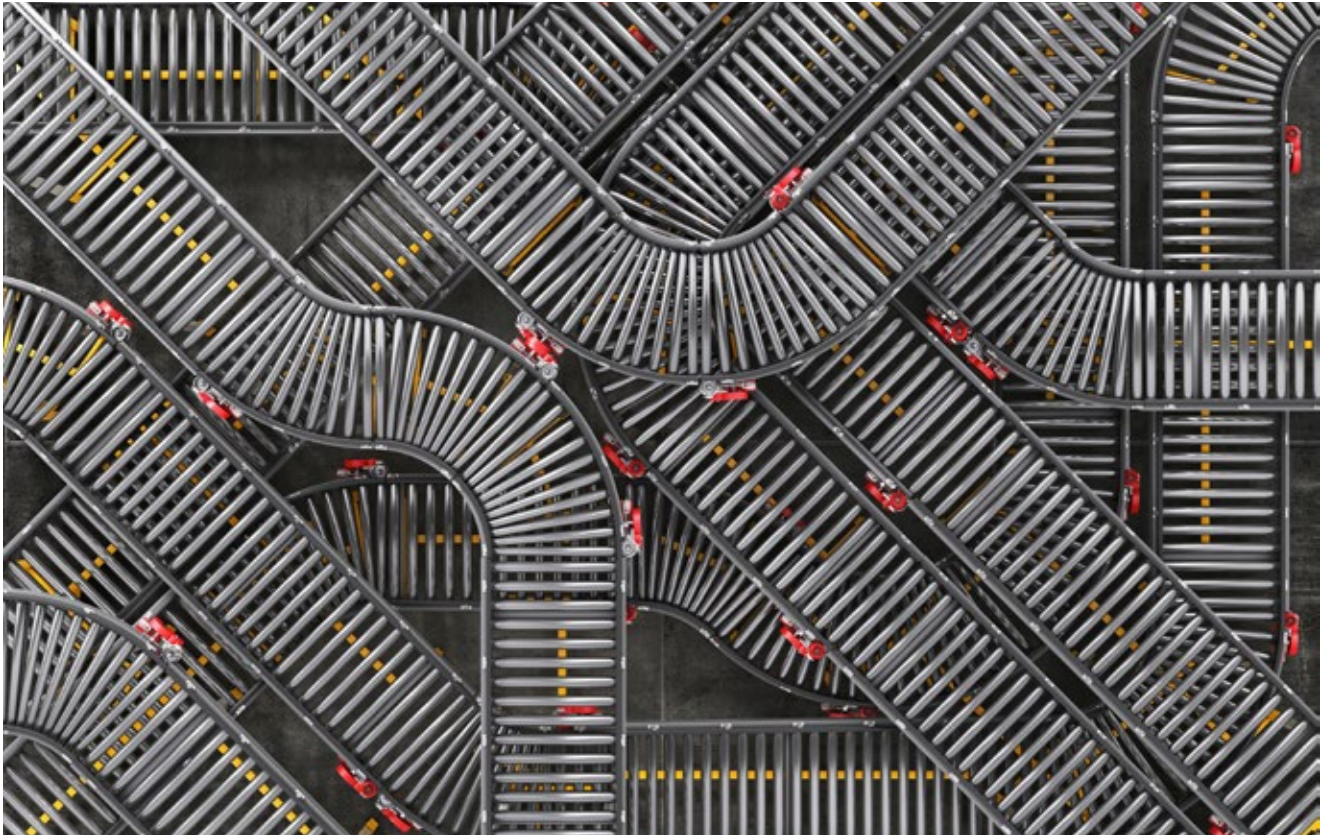
50 LAST WORD

We need to rethink our approach to rubbish; the Victorian mindset might be a good starting point, writes Emily Cockayne

Periscope

- 1 Civic nationalism, or national “ego strength”, as US geographer Jared Diamond defines it, will be essential to tackling global crises (page 14).
- 2 History suggests that if 3.5% of a population engage in protests, change will happen (page 19).
- 3 Microsoft has pledged that by 2050 it will have removed enough carbon from the atmosphere to account for all its emissions since its founding in 1975 (page 21).
- 4 In 2017, insurance group AXA said it would cut investment and underwriting support for fossil fuel businesses (page 35).
- 5 In a 2016 YouGov poll, 43% of respondents said that they thought the British Empire was a good thing (page 37).
- 6 Many of those arrested in last year’s Extinction Rebellion protests in London relied on the defence of “necessity” when on trial (page 40).
- 7 Due to global warming, by mid-century nearly half the previous Winter Olympics hosts will be unlikely to be able to host the games again (page 41).
- 8 The NHS has a carbon footprint equivalent to 20m tonnes of CO₂ per year – the same as Bolivia (page 42).
- 9 Last year, over 100 UK citizens were selected by sortition to take part in a Climate Assembly (page 47).
- 10 The first fully synthetic plastic, Bakelite, was invented in 1907 (page 50).

Work



GOOD WORK AND PRODUCTIVITY

Seeking to eradicate bad work should be a priority, but tech solutions should be implemented with care

The correlation between ‘good’ work and productivity is much stronger at the bottom end of the labour market, according to analysis undertaken by the Warwick Institute for Employment Research (IER). Its findings were published in January as part of *Can Good Work Solve the Productivity Problem?*, a collection of essays commissioned by the RSA in collaboration with the Carnegie UK Trust.

The IER’s finding reinforces the need to prioritise tackling bad work; initiatives should focus more on lifting poor-quality work closer to the average level.

The RSA collection draws together new research, opinion and analysis from experts from across the UK, including trade unions, businesses and academics.

The RSA’s Future Work Centre conducted two in-depth site visits to a franchised restaurant chain and an NHS hospital, speaking

with workers, managers and HR representatives to learn first-hand how technology is transforming their organisations and their employees’ working lives. “New tech can be a double-edged sword when it comes to job quality. One worker we spoke to told us how automated systems had made her job easier and more enjoyable, but others warned how they could place them under excessive strain,” said Fabian Wallace-Stephens, a senior researcher at the RSA.

■ To download the report, visit www.thersa.org/productivitypuzzle

Arts

HEARTS AND MINDS

Past RSA projects, including purchasing and restoring an entire village, encouraging the planting of more than 60 million trees and seeking technological alternatives to child labour, are explored in a new history of the RSA.

Arts and Minds: How the Royal Society of Arts Changed a Nation, written by the historian Dr Anton Howes, charts how for almost three centuries, public-spirited individuals from across the political spectrum used the RSA to improve Britain in a huge variety of ways, drawing vital lessons from their triumphs and failures for all would-be reformers today.

“The RSA simply defies categorisation. Its members had a major, lasting impact on so many radically different areas, that I’d pull on one thread and discover 20 more,” said Anton. “I ended up uncovering a whole hidden side to British history, which I hope will inspire today’s Fellows all over the world.”

■ Arts and Minds: How the Royal Society of Arts Changed a Nation will be published by Princeton University Press on 12 May. Readers of RSA Journal can get a 25% discount and free shipping, for a print copy, by ordering direct from Princeton University Press (press.princeton.edu) and using the code AAM20. Offer available until 31 December 2020

RSA insights



MULTI-AGENCY TEAMS

The government should invest in multi-agency teams to support work by headteachers to prevent school exclusions, according to RSA research. It sets out proposals for area-based teams of mental health, social care, youth work, education and criminal justice professionals. It recommends that these should be fully funded through increases to government funding aimed at supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities, and those in alternative provision. The teams would work with headteachers and meet regularly, designing and delivering interventions.

■ To find out more, download the RSA’s latest Pinball Kids report at www.thersa.org/preventingexclusions

41%

Some 41% of UK workers say that money worries created by the Covid-19 outbreak have had an impact on their mental health. New polling on economic security carried out by the RSA in March 2020 shows that the economic impact of the virus is hitting insecure workers hardest.

■ To find out more, visit www.thersa.org/bridgesfuture

18%

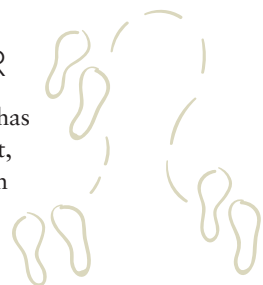
Just 18% of people in England agree that the balance between local and national government is “about right”, according to a recent survey by Populus for the RSA. It concludes that public support for devolution is continuing to grow, with over half of respondents (54%) supporting their area having a mayor.

■ To find out more, visit www.thersa.org/democracymdesign. The RSA will be publishing a report on rebalancing England later in the year

TANGO TOGETHER

Olga Betko FRSA has developed a project, in cooperation with organisations such as Croydon Voluntary Action, to explore how tango can help to promote dialogue, build communities, and reduce loneliness and social isolation. At the current moment, when many are physically isolated, Olga is running online tango-inspired exercise classes to bring people together. She said: “Tango is all about communication and listening to others; it is a non-verbal conversation that can promote understanding.”

■ To find out more about the project, contact Olga on wetangotogether@gmail.com. You can join the online tango classes at <https://bit.ly/2RgKH7q>



Agenda

INNOVATION IN POLITICS AWARDS



The RSA is joining the Innovation in Politics Awards this year as its UK representative. Set up by the Innovation in Politics Institute in 2017, the Awards promote policies that improve democracy in Europe, with finalists chosen by 1,000 jurors from across the continent. Individuals who have broken new ground, found creative solutions and achieved real change are all recognised. The RSA will be scouting a longlist of potential UK entrants and giving guidance on how to submit their applications.

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

CITIES OF LEARNING

Two boroughs, Waltham Forest and Westminster, and the Culture Mile Learning partnership – which brings together cultural heritage and arts organisations from across London – won the RSA's London Cities of Learning competition this April. Chosen by the RSA for their strength of vision, the winners will have their plans – to increase young people's cultural engagement and open up access to opportunities in the creative sectors – developed further.

■ *To find out more about Cities of Learning, contact Olivia Finn at olivia.finn@rsa.org.uk or visit www.thersa.org/cities-of-learning*

Fellowship

New Fellows

Director of City Strategy for the City of Melbourne, **Kate Dundas's** work centres on creating great places through policy and design. A landscape architect and urban designer, Kate has twice won the people's choice award at the Chelsea Flower Show. She is a Director at 3000acres, a project that aims to get more people growing more food in more places.

Gavin McLeod Little is Professor of Environmental and Public Law at the University of Stirling. As a member of the Royal Society of Edinburgh Energy Inquiry Committee, he is informing, challenging and encouraging public policy debate on the governance of Scotland's energy transition. He believes that an interdisciplinary approach is essential to successfully tackling the biggest issues facing society.

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*

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

Events

CATCH UP ON THE CONVERSATION

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

Whether in New York, Nairobi or Nottingham, the RSA's online events mean 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 to a screen near you.

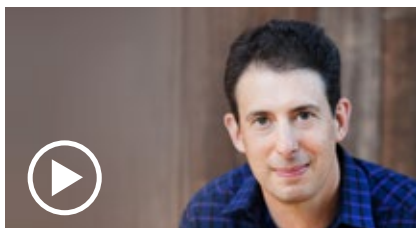
 youtube.com/theRSAorg

 facebook.com/rsaeventsofficial



To launch our online event series, author and broadcaster **Helen Lewis** explores 11 'fights' that defined feminism, from the vote to the right to divorce. In conversation with Sam Smethers of the Fawcett Society, she looks at the lessons that today's campaigners can learn from one of the most successful social movements in history.

Watch now: youtu.be/vE4cfOZ7ZRk
#RSAFeminist



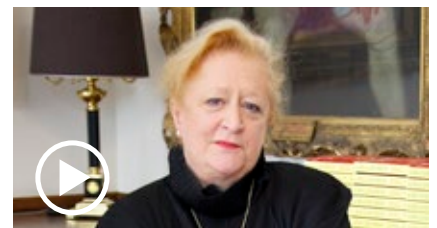
Eric Klinenberg, professor of social science at New York University, argues that policies that promote social solidarity and invest in social infrastructure are critical to effective crisis response, and to building more equal and united societies beyond immediate emergency.

Watch now:
youtu.be/DunpwyXM9i4
#RSAKlinenberg



Nicholas Christakis is a physician, sociologist and network scientist at Yale University who studies human nature and the organisation of societies. The key to a successful public health response to Covid-19, he argues, is to be found in our innate social natures; our impulses towards cooperation, teaching and learning.

Watch now:
youtu.be/mVp7YYUkOYg
#RSAChristakis



The current crisis shows that uncertainty is now an ineradicable fact of life. CEO and entrepreneur **Margaret Heffernan** has studied the organisations that adapt most successfully to change. She discusses the skills and qualities that are vital to navigating our age of complexity and building a resilient future.

Watch now:
youtu.be/KZBbiM5UDw4
#RSAHeffernan

UNITING NATIONS

Could a turn inwards provide us with the weapons we need to combat global threats?

by Anatol Lieven

If the economic crisis resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic does indeed turn out to be the worst in peacetime since the Great Depression of the 1930s, then we need to start thinking very hard about what will make it possible for western liberal democracies to survive it. After all, for anyone with the slightest historical awareness, there never really was any excuse for the ‘end of history’ belief that wealthy liberal democracies are immortal and invincible.

In the 1930s, the New Deal pulled the US through the crash with the social basis of its democracy strengthened. In France, democracy fell into a state of embittered polarisation, paralysis and cynicism that paved the way for the collapse of 1940. And in Germany and elsewhere, the combination of mass impoverishment with deep social, cultural, economic and political faultlines resulted in fascism.

If we can pull ourselves together to meet the current crisis successfully then, terrible though it is, the pandemic may even be seen by future historians as having had a longer-term positive effect. For in recent years, it has become increasingly clear that, if left unchecked, climate change on its current trajectory will produce a global catastrophe in the next century. And, long before that, the effects of climate change in certain parts of the world (often places that are already struggling due to a number of factors) will

produce economic change and subsequent mass migration that will result in life-threatening crises for all states, including western democracies. Our response to the pandemic can and should prepare us better to meet these future scenarios.

The end of laissez faire?

In Europe at least, the pandemic is already bringing about a return to ideologies and programmes of social solidarity (especially support for the unemployed and semi-employed) and moves away from the laissez-faire capitalist ideological consensus that has reigned for the past 40 years. Even before the crisis, debate was growing about the possible future introduction of systems of state-funded Universal Basic Income (UBI), because of the threat that automation and artificial intelligence will destroy huge numbers of jobs or turn them into part time and insecure ones. The pandemic is likely to intensify this process, as firms discover that they do not need so many people in the office. What governments also need to look at (as in the New Deal) is massive programmes of state-supported job creation to rebuild infrastructure and transform cities along ecological lines.

Without such programmes, enormous numbers of people will sink into economic misery and despair, leading to political upheaval. Who would have ►

Anatol Lieven teaches at Georgetown University in Qatar. His latest book, *Climate Change and the Nation State: The Realist Case*, has just been published by Allen Lane





thought at the start of 2020 that only three months later a British Conservative Party dominated by heirs of Margaret Thatcher would take responsibility for paying the wages of millions of British workers? In this sense, the Covid-19 crisis resembles the Second World War, the aftermath of which converted many former free market liberals to a form of social democracy.

However, for these new measures of social solidarity to be effective in strengthening our societies against inevitable future disasters, they need both to be made permanent and to be linked to two other things: a massive programme of infrastructural renewal and technological development, and a national aspect focused on the mutual responsibilities of common citizenship and commitment to the collective interest. The US New Deal is an important source of inspiration in both regards.

This time around, the programme should be directed above all at reducing carbon emissions and weakening the extent and threat of climate change. It should also involve the promotion of energy conservation throughout the construction sector. Along with programmes that promote social solidarity, this has been dubbed the Green

New Deal, and it has been gaining traction in both the US – where it was the core of Senator Elizabeth Warren’s campaign for the Democratic Party nomination in 2020 – and Europe, where several Green political parties are trying to develop a similar programme.

State interests

The pandemic has also reminded us that it is only strong nation-states that have either the physical power or political legitimacy to demand great sacrifices from people. International institutions have at best been able to play only a coordinating and advisory role. International agreements like the Paris Agreement on climate change are vital, but it is states that have to implement their provisions – or not. The same is true of international protest movements like Extinction Rebellion. They are necessary, but necessary in order to pressure states to act.

And states act principally in their own interests (or rather in some combination of collective and elite interest). It has long been miserably apparent that populations and governments simply will not engage in massive transfers of resources to other states

“The pandemic has reminded us that it is only strong nation-states that have either the physical power or political legitimacy to demand great sacrifices from people”

unless they perceive their own national security to be immediately and vitally involved (as with the US's Lend-Lease policy and its Marshall Plan).

The EU, the only international body with quasi-governmental powers, failed in this regard during the economic crisis that followed the 2008 financial crash and is failing again now. Germans and Dutch will not help Italians and Spanish in the way that they are willing to help poorer sections of their own populations. All efforts to get western states to radically increase their economic aid to poorer parts of the world have failed (in part because of a well-founded belief that a great part of any aid would be stolen by corrupt elites in the recipient countries).

Fortunately, in the struggle to limit climate change, by far the most useful thing that western states can do is in their own hands. By moving to carbon-free energy, wealthier states will not only help save the world overall from runaway climate change, but can also promote their own technological and economic development.

Collective effort

But even with new measures of social protection, the pandemic will probably mean that the greater part of most societies are likely to experience a sudden and steep decline in their material wellbeing. Such economic crises have a proven tendency to increase social, political and ethnic tensions. It is therefore of both moral and political importance that sacrifices are seen to be shared. It will be politically and financially essential to restore high levels of progressive taxation, coupled with introducing rigorous and punitive measures against tax avoidance and money laundering. The well-founded perception that the financial elites who caused the financial crisis of 2008 did not pay any share of its costs and continued to prosper immoderately afterwards compared with the rest of society was as politically damaging as the crisis itself.

Everyone is going to have to get used to austerity. And this, by the way, only anticipates by a generation or so what we were going to experience anyway once the effects of climate change really began to kick in.

Are western societies and political orders still capable of this kind of collective effort? Much

evidence from recent years would suggest not. There are frightening indications, especially in the US, but also in parts of Europe, that we are approaching a situation where large sections of populations have such radically opposed ideas of the fundamental national identities of their countries that, in the short term, the state becomes largely paralysed, and in the longer term truly free electoral democracy becomes impossible. For how can the basic identity and nature of a state swing to and fro every few years depending on the result of an election? This is the syndrome that helped to wreck hopes of Middle Eastern democracy after the Arab Spring.

As in Iran or Turkey today, a qualified form of democracy is possible in these circumstances, but it is one where a permanent authority lays down strict limits and absolutely prohibits any changes to the basic cultural and ethnic foundations of the state.

In the UK, the centre right and centre left both share responsibility for the decay of the national consensus that after the Second World War created welfare states and guaranteed two generations of democratic stability. Taking its cue from Margaret Thatcher's grotesque statement that “there is no such thing as society” (grotesque because she herself was the product of a very specific form of English provincial society), the centre right abandoned truly conservative positions in favour of a wild free market capitalism stripped of morality, social responsibility and national allegiance.

The centre left accepted much of this package, but gave it a progressive colouring with empty fantasies of international governance. Both came together in blind adulation of globalisation, open borders and mass migration. The disenchantment of large sections of the electorate with this programme, and the sense of having been ignored and abandoned by both sides of the political establishment, have already produced a string of electoral disasters. As worked upon by economic disaster now and climate change later, they have the potential to kill off liberal democracy altogether.

In recent decades, progressive opinion in the west has turned the promotion of ‘diversity’ into an intellectual and political dogma that ignores much of the evidence of history. The experience of the US suggests that diversity can contribute immensely to the vitality of a society, but only if it is combined with a strong civic nationalist ideology and a sense of common citizenship and common national purpose. Where diverse societies have split into clashing identities without a sense of common allegiance and citizenship, the results have all too often been paralysis, dictatorship, or civil war. ▶

“Nationalism’s ability to project its thinking into the future is closely related to its ability to draw upon the past”

Strength in nationalism

As historian Prasenjit Duara has written, “no movement of major social change has succeeded without a compelling symbology and affective power”. The strengthening of national identities and civic nationalisms is necessary both for practical reform and for wider national resilience. In democracies, the kind of changes that will be required to withstand the effects of Covid-19 in the short term and to reduce the danger of climate change in the longer term cannot be achieved by narrow ideological parties with small electoral majorities. Sufficiently strong senses of common national purpose will be required; civic nationalism (or patriotism, which comes to the same thing) is needed. This is what American geographer Jared Diamond, in *Upheaval: How Nations Cope with Crisis and Change*, defines as national “ego strength”.

Like the creation of the New Deal in the US and welfare states in Europe, for these changes to be effected and sustained will require not just sweeping electoral majorities, but a new consensus that will be shared by all the major political parties; just as Republican administrations from the 1950s to the 1970s continued New Deal policies, and Conservative and Christian Democratic parties in Europe continued and extended the welfare state. A situation in which every election leads to a reversal of the previous government’s policies will doom any effective reform programme. As environmentalist Jon Rynn, one of the Green New Deal’s supporters, has said, successfully combating climate change will require long-term projects that do not show results immediately.

More broadly, a sense of common national identity and purpose is necessary if the immediate strains of the pandemic crisis and the longer-term pressures of climate change are not to lead to increasingly bitter competition from different parts of divided societies for their share of a shrinking pie. This scenario could lead to societies eventually accepting authoritarian rule not out of positive cultural identification with authoritarianism but because it seems the only way to end political paralysis and allow the government to actually get things done. There is nothing fantastical about such a scenario. It would continue a pattern of democratic collapse observable since the city-states of ancient Greece.

Tread carefully

Of course, one should be fully and constantly aware of the dreadful forms that nationalism can assume and be careful to guard against them through the promotion of civic not ethnic nationalism. But then, every human ideology is more or less Janus-faced. Religion can take the form of the Inquisition or Islamic State. Socialism can become Stalinism or Maoism. Liberalism can become a cover for elitist egotism, exploitation and kleptocracy. Conservatism can become a cover for stupidity and wilful ignorance. No reasonably objective person would say that these possibilities in themselves invalidate entirely the good parts of these ideologies, or their capacity to learn from each other for the common good.

As a journalist in the Caucasus in the 1990s I witnessed the dreadful side of ethnic nationalism and its capacity to cause conflicts and atrocities. As a journalist and researcher in Pakistan and Afghanistan, however, I have also witnessed how the absence of strong state nationalism cripples the ability of a country to pursue successful development; and in the worst case can destroy a state altogether. As Paul Collier writes in *The Future of Capitalism*, there are no prosperous societies in weak or failed states. I am in agreement, and this perception has been strengthened further still by recent years spent in the Middle East, watching (this time from a safe distance) the collapse of Syria, Libya and Yemen, all of them torn apart by competing tribal and ethno-religious identities.

The greatest source of a state’s strength is not its economy or the size of its armed forces, but legitimacy in the eyes of its population; a general recognition of the state’s moral right to authority, to have its laws and rules obeyed, and to be able to call on its people for sacrifices in the form of taxes and, when necessary, conscription. Without legitimacy, a state is doomed either to weakness and eventual failure, or to becoming a ‘fierce’ state, ruling by fear. Such states have the appearance of strength, but are inherently brittle, and liable to collapse if people cease even for a day to be afraid of them; as several Middle Eastern rulers discovered in 2011. The basic weakness of the EU compared with its member nations is that it has never achieved real legitimacy as a quasi-state authority in the eyes of most Europeans.

Over the past 70 years, democracy has been an important source of legitimacy, leading to the toleration of failures by elected governments and the acceptance by minorities of majority votes (or, remarkably, in the US, the acceptance by majorities of minority electoral victories). But, as a whole



range of democratic and semi-democratic states have discovered over the past century, democracy alone will not preserve a given state over time if that state is deeply divided internally and fails to achieve what the population sees as vital goals. For this, a deeper source of legitimacy is necessary, rooted in a common sense of national belonging. In the modern world, the greatest and most enduring source of this feeling and this state legitimacy has been one form or another of nationalism.

Nationalism's ability to project its thinking into the future is closely related to its ability to draw upon the past (whether real or re-imagined); what British historical sociologist Anthony Smith called the "national myth-symbol complex". This is, in turn, largely responsible for nationalism's ability to inspire effort and sacrifice. This aspect of nationalism – in an entirely positive and unaggressive way – was vividly displayed in the Queen's speech to the British nation in response to the pandemic, in which Her Majesty's appeal for resilience, solidarity and optimism was permeated with indirect references to the experience of the Second World War. It is interesting that this speech drew great admiration from certain Russian liberal

intellectuals of my acquaintance; partly because the sacrifices of the war remain an immensely powerful image in Russia, and partly perhaps because this was a powerful nationalist appeal free of the aggressive chauvinism and cynical political manipulation which have too often characterised such appeals by Russian governments.

In the longer context of the struggle to mitigate climate change, nationalism is the only force (other than direct personal concern for children and grandchildren) that can overcome one of the greatest obstacles to serious action: namely that it requires sacrifices by present generations on behalf of future generations. In the words of author Milan Kundera, "A man knows that he is mortal, but he takes it for granted that his nation possesses a kind of eternal life." The central purpose of nationalism is to prolong that life as far as possible into the future. Sacrifices to ensure the future survival of the nation are legitimised, indeed, demanded, by the fact that previous generations have sacrificed themselves for this purpose. That is the spirit on which western democracies will need to draw if they are to survive this and future crises. ■

“Our fates are intertwined and either we move forward with all of us winning or we will all definitively lose”

Matthew Taylor talks with Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac about what we can do to tackle the climate emergency

Matthew Taylor: I want to start with the core idea of your book. How do we situate ourselves in relation to hope and despair at this particular moment?

Christiana Figueres: We argue that there is abundant proof of the disastrous effects of climate change and environmental destruction on humanity. Looking back at just the last 12 months you can see fires in the Amazon, California and Siberia, and then of course the devastating bush fires in Australia. In the UK there have been disastrous floods. We are convinced that if that evidence leads us only to despair, pessimism and hopelessness, then we declare ourselves condemned as the victims of something we have caused. Whatever we have done in the past has been done. The future is unwritten. Just as we have been actively causing climate change, we can actively engage in the solutions.

We are pained about the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis, for which we were totally unprepared, and

we are in grief about the impacts of the longer-term climate crisis. Global health will eventually return to some semblance of normal. But the climate will never revert to a ‘normal’ state. We take that pain and understanding as a centre of energy to be transformed into a conviction. We have everything it takes to tackle the health and climate crises: we have the capital, the technologies and the communication systems; we know what the policies are. What is required is a choice, to address them with our deepest commitment and collective wisdom. We don’t need to wait until Covid-19 is solved. Many of the transformational solutions and financial support packages can achieve what we need to take care of our health and make the world more liveable for the long term.

Taylor: How important was it to your success at the Paris climate conference that you decided you were not going to think about the intractability of the situation?

Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac are the architects of the Paris climate agreement. Their book, *The Future We Choose: Surviving the Climate Crisis*, is out now



Tom Rivett-Carnac: We found that everybody knew with absolute certainty that what we were trying to achieve – a unanimous agreement with 195 sovereign states – was impossible. This was particularly Christiana’s story in 2010, after the complete breakdown post-Copenhagen. Her refusal to collude with that narrative of impossibility was a deliberate strategy for creating an outcome.

In the book we use the term “stubborn optimism”, which combines looking at the reality of what’s there, while holding onto a gritty determination that we can engage with that narrative arc and improve it. History tells us that there are lots of dark moments where stubborn optimism has been relevant. Movements like the Suffragettes in the UK, or the end of colonialism, or the civil rights movement in the US, had to contend with really difficult moments where success was far from guaranteed. But enough people are prepared to stand up and hold a sense of optimism and possibility

like a torch in the darkness to create a new possibility for others to embrace.

Taylor: You’ve described one of the three mindsets – stubborn optimism – that you argue are necessary for us to respond to the climate emergency. Let’s move on to the second. What do you mean by endless abundance?

Figueres: We invite readers to question whether we truly are in a world of scarcity. This is a concept we have all grown up with and that we think is unmovable. The immediate reaction to the pandemic was to stockpile household goods; this is symbolic of the mentality with which we’ve been trained to react. But it turns out this was unnecessary and it could easily be replaced with kindness, consideration and collaboration to survive a truly difficult moment. We are seeing those traits take over now. ▶



“We need to become more regenerative. That’s the purpose of humanity on this planet”

We invite people to reframe ‘zero sum’ and to understand that it actually has no place anymore. Our fates are intertwined and either we move forward with all of us winning or we will all definitively lose. It is in our mutual, even self-enlightened, interest to understand that we need to support each other and to move out of a competitive mode of thinking and move much more into collaboration, into cooperation and into creating abundance.

Taylor: You’re inviting people to see the climate emergency as having the potential to more fully express ourselves and be a better society.

Rivett-Carnac: Along with a new understanding of zero sum, radical regeneration is the antidote to our extractive mindset. We extract what we can from the land, from energy, from natural capital systems and we convert that into economic value. This has become habitual for many of us. Sometimes, we have an extractive relationship with the places we work, with the communities we live in, even with friends and family. We need to become more regenerative. That’s the purpose of humanity on this planet for the next 100 years: to restore the coral reefs, replant the forests, rebuild biodiversity and support the

oceans to recover. We’ve been able to regenerate our understanding of collective survival through the tragedy that is unfolding now. We can and must perpetuate it to tackle the much larger existential crisis of climate change.

Taylor: Within the environmental movement there’s an ambivalence about technology. On the one hand, any rational account says we need to use technological innovation to solve this problem; on the other hand, technology won’t solve the problem on its own.

Figueres: Technology is necessary but it is not sufficient to address climate change. Once you start understanding the system behind fossil fuels, you find that their particular characteristics are embedded in so many of our structures and our logic. We need – and fortunately, it’s already starting – a technological revolution that allows us to jump over fossil fuels, especially in developing countries that do not need to follow the path of industrialised countries.

We need a new way of promoting economic growth in developing countries, accompanied by a much broader perspective on what kind of society we’re moving toward. We want to bring about not just a more stable environment, which is at the

basis of a stable economy, but a fairer society that has less extreme poverty and less vulnerability. Our vulnerabilities are currently being highlighted. Governments around the world are responding in unprecedented ways: preparing stimulus packages to boost their immediate healthcare capacity, and to provide a safety net to millions of people.

This order of priorities is critical. Adequate medical capacity is now urgent as we find ourselves in the midst of unbearable suffering and loss of life resulting from Covid-19. Meanwhile, pressing pause on all 'non-essential' business and travel is pushing us into what is expected to be the most painful recession humanity has ever faced.

We need governments to take another step: the trillions-of-dollars packages currently under consideration that will set the contours of the global economy for years to come. With the oil price at a historic low, there is no excuse not to use this stimulus to invest in clean energy and green technologies, which will create millions of jobs. But if this funding does not fully incorporate the deep nexus between health, energy and the climate crisis, we will immediately fall back into the status quo that condemns us.

Taylor: What is it that we as individuals can do?

Rivett-Carnac: We have 10 years in which we have the opportunity to reduce emissions by 50% to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. That is a 7.6% annual reduction between now and 2030. This exceeds anything humanity has ever achieved. It's only going to happen with deep commitment at all levels, including individuals. We encourage people to think about a 10-year timeframe; we tend to overestimate what we can do in a year and underestimate what we can do in 10.

How we engage with power is important. This includes voting; everyone should vote at every level, engaging with elected representatives and with corporations and demanding they behave responsibly and in the interests of humanity. But it also means getting on the streets, or, for now, getting online together. We're seeing a generational resurgence of civil disobedience now. History suggests that once 3.5% of any population take up the mantle of change, then it's successful in general and societal norms follow.

Taylor: We have a phrase at the RSA for how we think about change: think like a system, but act like an entrepreneur. Does that chime with your experience of change?

Figueres: We have a rather – perhaps unusual – broad definition of who an individual is. We recognise that

each of us has many different roles and sometimes we play a role just at the individual level, but we also have various roles in corporations, NGOs, thinktanks, city and government. We tend to think of those organisations as amorphous beasts. They're not. They're composites of individual human beings. So yes we must think systemically; it is only individuals that can bring about systemic change.

Rivett-Carnac: We talk about 'surround sound'; how do we get all the stakeholders moving, and then government can step in and move after that? Because government really struggles to go ahead of other stakeholders. Once you have them on board, you can go to the G20 and say: we know you guys need to step up further, because you've created the context in which you're able to do that.

Taylor: This is a progressive book. One critique would be: isn't this in danger of sending a signal that if you're not progressive, you're not really fit for the environmental movement?

Figueres: You're the first person to accuse us of being progressive! Climate change is such a vexed, complex issue that if it is not approached from a comprehensive perspective that includes everyone, we're not going to get there. We are definitely not going to address climate change without the market and without corporations doing what they do best, which is investing in new technologies and selling those technologies at a profit.

Taylor: In the book you have said: "If we don't address this, the consequences will lead to more extreme politics." Talk a little bit more about that dynamic.

Figueres: Instability could be caused by measures instituted to address climate change, but it could also be caused by inaction, which will lead to further inequality as people at the bottom of the pyramid, who are not responsible for climate change whatsoever, are the ones that are going to be hit worst. They will likely have to leave their homelands because their land will not have enough food or water, or a decent temperature to be habitable.

I'm from a developing country, so I'm always thinking of development issues. If we can stabilise homelands so that people have enough water and fertile land, then they can stay where they are and help to create abundance at home as opposed to being pushed out into other areas that have nothing to do with their past, culture, history, politics or language. It is amazing that addressing climate change in a timely fashion can really help to take the edge off inequality. ■

ON PURPOSE

Self-actualisation is not the answer to fulfilment; it is self-transcendence that businesses and individuals should aim for

by Tom Rippin
 @OnPurposeUK

Over the past couple of decades, purpose has been elevated to the highest level of discourse in private sector business. Its new-found currency is cause for celebration, but also caution. We imbue purpose with moral merit, but we often side-step the dilemmas it exposes. We want to have our cake and eat it. In its 2016 *People on a Mission* report, management consultancy Korn Ferry stated: “Doing good means doing well”; management literature is strewn with paeans to purpose of similar persuasion.

At On Purpose, the company I established in 2010, we help people and organisations find their professional purpose. Our one-year, full-time programme helps emerging leaders switch to a more purposive career; the programme not only builds skills and experience, but also facilitates deep, values-based change. Describing this change is challenging, as it emerges from a mix of dedicating time, contemplation, immersion in a new community and a true sense of belonging to something greater than yourself. We do not believe in shortcuts to purpose.

The highest good

In the fourth century BCE, Aristotle grappled long and hard with the “highest good”, as he called it. This, he contended, had three characteristics: it is desirable for itself, it is not desirable for the sake of any other good and all other goods are in service of it.

The first hurdle at which so much of our discourse falls is the need to justify purpose with (sometimes conflicting) benefits, whether this is shareholder returns, employee retention or customer loyalty. This betrays a mind trapped in the false promises of 20th-century economics. If you are making a business case for purpose you have fundamentally misunderstood

what purpose is about. You must take purpose for what it is, not for what it can do for you. Purpose has no ‘why’; it is the ‘why’.

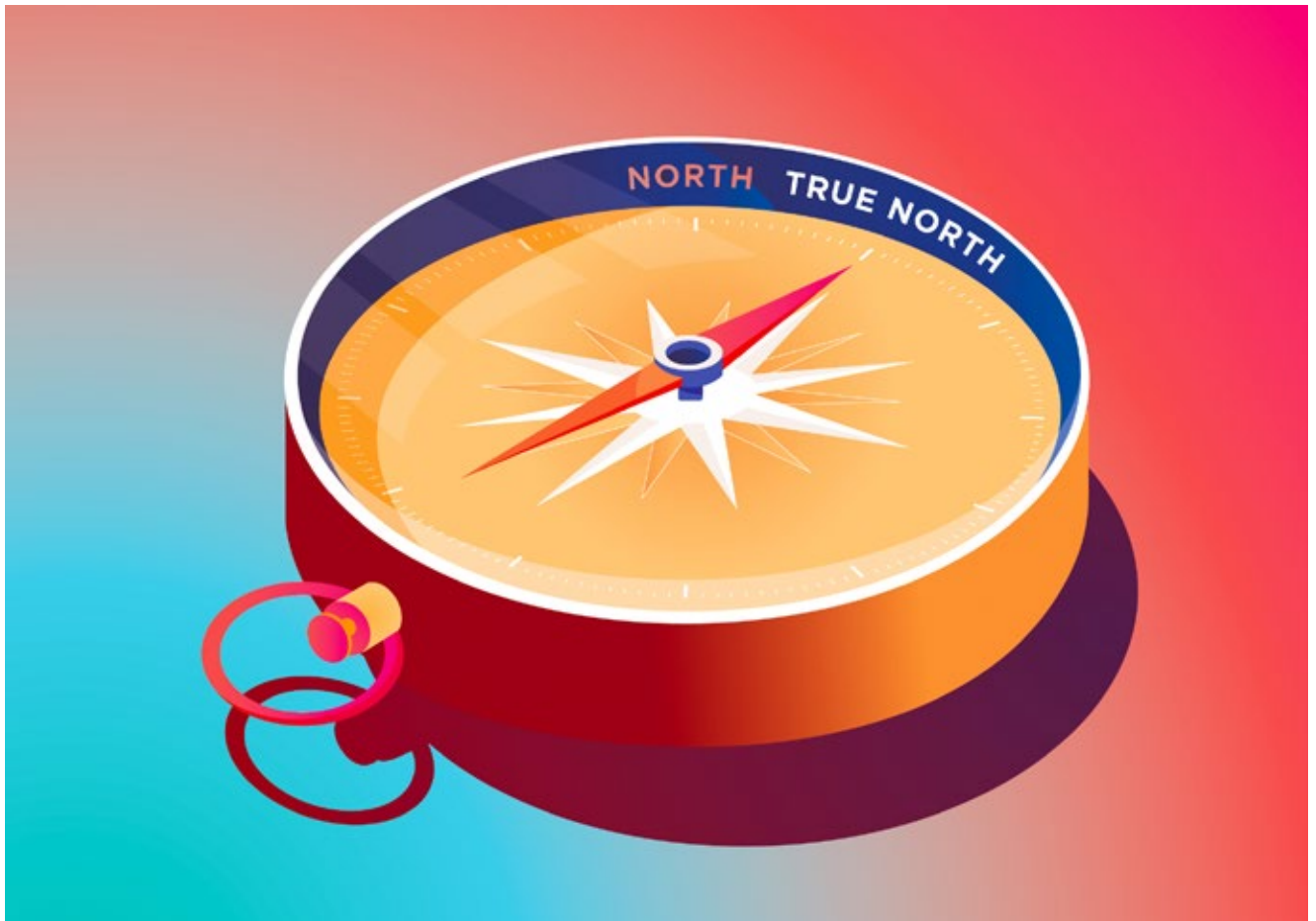
Some 2,000 years after Aristotle, Viktor Frankl, the Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, brought his experience to bear on understanding purpose. For Frankl, purpose was not about self-actualisation (as his contemporary, US psychologist Abraham Maslow, set out in his famous hierarchy of needs), it was about having a cause to serve or another person to love. It was about having something that took you beyond yourself, which Frankl termed self-transcendence. His insight went further: self-actualisation is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more you strive for it, the less likely it is that it will occur. Self-actualisation is only ever a side-effect of self-transcendence. This is worth repeating: the more you strive for fulfilment, the less likely it is you will achieve it; the more you focus beyond yourself, the more likely you will be fulfilled.

But how does this apply to organisations? The first sober truth comes from Aristotle: organisational purpose and profit need not correlate. Win-wins will not save the world. True purpose exposes the trade-offs we must face. The measure of true leadership is how we navigate them.

The second truth is that we need to understand organisational self-transcendence. What lies beyond the organisation; for what should organisations strive? Stakeholder wellbeing? Should employees, shareholders, customers and suppliers be prioritised? This, though, is transcendence limited to your extended family.

The mature approach to organisational self-transcendence is to understand that beyond every

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organisation lie the systems in which it is embedded – its ecosystems – and an organisation’s purpose is to play its part in keeping these ecosystems healthy. Just as every cell in your body plays its part in keeping you alive and well, every organisation needs to play its part in generating and sustaining the health of the communities, industries, economies, societies and the planet of which it is part.

Some organisations have already come to this realisation. Interface (a global carpet manufacturer) and Microsoft, for example, have recognised the need not just to avoid harming the environment but to help regenerate it. Interface has committed that “it’s no longer enough to limit the damage we do. [...] We want to restore our planet and leave a positive impact.” Microsoft recently pledged that by 2050 it will have removed more carbon from the atmosphere (and will presumably continue to do so) than it will have caused since its founding in 1975.

Evolving the economy

Focusing on self-transcendence changes everything because it means that how we measure success changes on every level – from the individual to the organisation and the wider economy – and therefore

so do our solutions. These inter-dependent changes constitute nothing less than a paradigm shift.

Bringing about a purposive economy is easily said but will be difficult to do, not least because most organisations are currently conditioned to self-actualise. Some do so in relatively innocuous ways – I am sceptical, for instance, of Hatchimals’ contribution to global wellbeing – and maybe we can afford some of these. Some face genuine dilemmas. I’m sure agrichemical companies genuinely believe that we cannot feed the world without pesticides, but the planet’s boundary for reactive nitrogen has already been overshot; in these situations we will need radical changes to business models and whole value chains. Some companies knowingly harm others for profit; I doubt that even tobacco firms themselves believe they have a net positive impact on the world. In these instances, we will need to evolve our economy so that this is no longer possible. It can feel like bringing about an economy of self-transcendence in the time we need to is impossible. But if we put in a fraction of the effort we have spent on building a self-actualising economy, change will happen more quickly than we think possible. ■

BUILD BRIDGES TO THE FUTURE

The way in which we respond to crises depends on our desire and capacity to change, the nature of the threat and the alliances we build

by Matthew Taylor

🐦 @RSAMatthew

I am writing this in the first days of April. With our awareness of the scale, nature and impact of the virus changing daily, I am acutely aware that the world may look very different by the time this edition of *RSA Journal* lands on the doormats of Fellows. As RSA Chair Tim Eyles explains in his introduction, this is one aspect of the challenge the virus poses to the Society. Somehow, we have to respond to the crisis and the immediate pressures it creates; at the same time, we must think imaginatively and hopefully about the future beyond the pandemic.

History tells us that only some crises lead to long-term, positive change. An obvious contrast is between the responses to the First and Second World Wars. After the former, the treatment of the defeated nations hampered reconstruction and fostered resentment, while the conditions were laid for economic boom and subsequent depression. By contrast, the post-Second World War period saw the vanquished nations supported to rebuild, while the west enjoyed three decades of rising living standards, falling inequality, greater freedom and expanding welfare provision; a period the French refer to as *les trente glorieuses*.

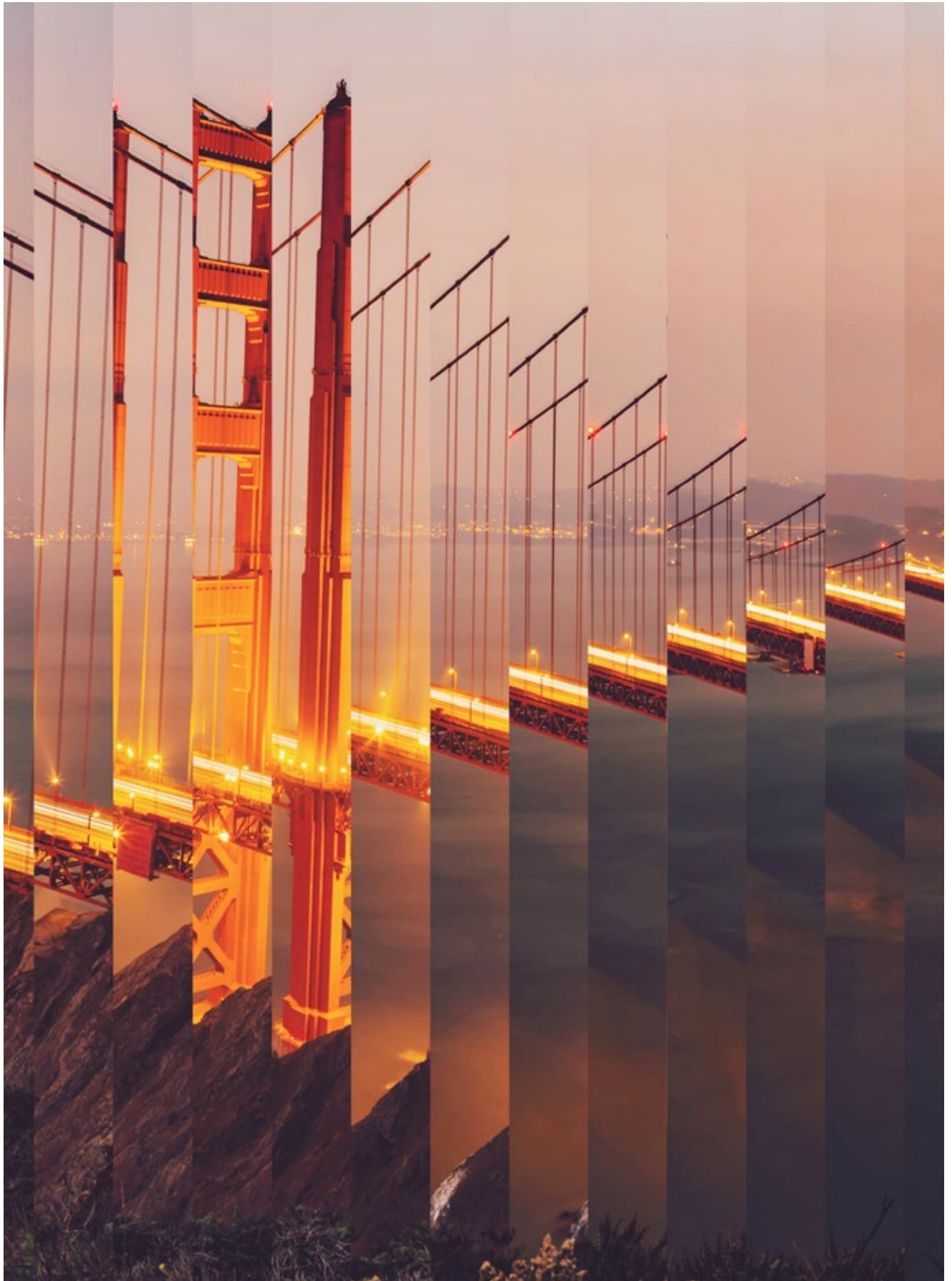
In the case of the 1940s, the capacity of leaders to learn from the mistakes of their predecessors was clearly a significant factor. More generally, whether a crisis leads to change seems to depend on three key areas. First, *latent potential*: is there an underlying desire and capacity for things to be different? Second, *precipitating factors*: aspects of the crisis that reinforce

the case for change, but also practices and attitudes that prefigure a changed world. Third, *alliances and solutions*: the political will and the policies, innovations and institutions brought to bear to turn potential into reality.

Take two more recent examples: the AIDS epidemic of the late 1980s and the financial crisis of 2007–08. In the former case, an existing gay rights movement plus wider social liberalism provided the background potential. The scale of the crisis forced the most affected communities and public health authorities to make a choice: they could hide away, cover up and stigmatise, or come out, demand action and fight stigma. Eventually, they firmly chose the latter. Finally, the crisis pointed to clear and achievable reforms, whether investment in treatment and cure, behaviour change, or action to counter homophobia and discrimination.

The financial crisis was very different. First, the momentum for change in either the way markets operated or their outcomes was weaker. Second, people derived different messages from the crisis itself. For some, it was all about the behaviour of rogue bankers; for others it showed the negligence and irresponsibility of governments; and for yet others, it revealed the inherent failings of globalised finance.

While these arguments are not totally incompatible, they tend to lead to different policy prescriptions. The prospects of turning the crisis into an agenda for lasting change was hamstrung not only by a lack





“To make change real and positive, we need new and broader alliances”

of consensus, and the tensions between short-term imperatives and long-term shifts, but by the failure of reformers to create alliances or develop popular reform programmes. Most fatefully for progressive change, reformers split between the radicalism of the Occupy movement and the unsuccessful attempts of incumbent liberal and social democrat leaders to adapt and renew. The beneficiaries of the crisis were not progressives, but nationalist populists.

The Covid-19 pandemic is a global tragedy; the RSA also sees it as an obligation to try to create a better world. We need to think clearly about where the three conditions above could apply and respond both with urgency and long-term ambition.

Resolving inequality

Let's start with inequality and insecurity. Overall, there has for some time been a strong public feeling that current levels of inequality are excessive. Even politicians on the right have accepted that there is a problem of real and perceived unfairness. The pandemic doubly amplifies the inequality story, both nationally and globally. On the one hand, it reminds us of our common humanity and vulnerability. On the other, it brings into sharper relief how much more vulnerable some citizens are: casual workers, children in poorer families, isolated older people and prisoners.

The first two change conditions apply but the hardest and most contested is the third. The right and

left might agree that inequality is a problem, but they have very different ways of responding. This is why the time for exploring Universal Basic Income (UBI) may have come. Remember that UBI (or its close relation, 'negative income tax') has historically had as many supporters on the right (including Milton Friedman) as the left.

Recent developments are creating the conditions for change. We now effectively have a minimum income guarantee. Even before the crisis, the government, through Jobcentre Plus, had started to scale down punitive conditionality in the benefit system; Universal Credit has already moved away from a sole focus on getting into work.

Of course, there remain lots of disagreements between people who support UBI. There are different views on how to make the case for and implement it. If we are to progress the argument, we need to make the right case. This is what the RSA has been doing for some time: arguing for a modest UBI that is not about the fantasy that everyone can have a comfortable life without working. It is a practical argument that everyone except the very well off could have a baseline that offers them greater security, strengthens work incentives and gives them the chance to change their lives, for example through retraining or pursuing self-employment.

Opponents of UBI may argue that, on its own, it does little to address inequality. In part, this depends

on how it is funded, with wealth taxes being the obvious source. Some critiques also fail to appreciate that people feel society is unequal based not just on their bank balances, but on how secure they feel. Security – and dignity – would be significantly enhanced if every citizen had the means to basic subsistence as a right. In case this sounds unrealistic, as I sit at my desk writing, the Spanish Government is announcing a basic income scheme, and not just for the crisis, but as a commitment beyond.

Reassessing working lives?

A second, related, opportunity for change concerns working lives. Ever since I published my report on modern employment for then Prime Minister Theresa May in July 2017, I have been struck by how almost everyone signs up to the goal I laid out on the first page of the report: that every job should be “fair and decent with scope for development and fulfillment”.

The crisis has led us to recognise the vital importance of jobs that might previously have been seen as low status as well as low paid: social carers, supermarket workers, delivery drivers. We have seen the wide variation in how employers have responded to the crisis, from those who have engaged staff and gone out of their way to be fair, to those who have acted unilaterally and ruthlessly. And we have been made aware of the profound insecurity of those who are on low incomes and self-employed or in casual work. If the crisis deepens an existing commitment to the principle of good work, what are the means to embed change?

The government could recommit to the objectives of my Good Work plan. For example, it could get behind and strengthen changes implemented on 1 April, which make it much easier for employees to demand independent representation and rights to information and consultation at work. Ministers could also be bold in their forthcoming Employment Bill in areas such as employment status and enhancing the protections for casual workers. They could commit to adequate funding and enhanced powers for the proposed single enforcement body and could take forward the idea of a single employability framework to boost transferability of skills and the ideal of every job being a learning job.

The government is finding it difficult to respond to the plight of casual workers and the self-employed. I am told that in developing the package to help the self-employed, the Chancellor was surprised and concerned by the scale of this problem and how the growth of non-standard work has embedded insecurity. So perhaps the door may be open to an idea that seemed too bold to be more than hinted at in my 2017 plan.

For almost entirely historical reasons, we continue to tax labour very differently depending on whether it is provided by employees (in which case we pay for employers’ National Insurance) or the self-employed. Labour provided by a self-employed person is taxed less, which creates incentives for bogus self-employment and a loss of tax revenues. Meanwhile, the self-employed (and to a lesser extent casual workers) lack the entitlements that come with conventional employment.

The simple solution is to move (over time) towards all labour being taxed at the same level, with the additional revenue raised being used to provide the self-employed with sickness insurance as well as incentives to save for retirement or to train. This could be part of the new social contract that we are exploring through our Future of Work programme.

Rethinking public services

A third broad area of possibility is health and social care. Public support for the NHS is unwavering. There ▶

RSA Fellowship in action

Upstream Battle

Upstream Battle, an award-winning campaign that has been raising awareness and trying to tackle marine litter in the Clyde Valley, has received a £10,000 RSA Catalyst Scaling Grant to expand its work into other parts of Scotland.

Run by Keep Scotland Beautiful, the campaign educates and empowers community groups so that they can take action in their local area. Some 80% of marine litter comes from the land, and the campaign focuses on the pathway of marine litter from its source to sea.

Although the RSA Fellow who applied for the grant has since left the organisation, the Catalyst team is now working with Paul Wallace, the charity’s Campaigns and Social Innovation Manager.

A core strand of Upstream Battle focuses on providing training and support to local anchor groups to monitor and tackle the problem in their area. These groups commit to carrying out at least four surveys a year on their section of the River Clyde and its tributaries. The data they collect provides insight into the amount and types of litter turning up along the waterway.

“You have to engage with local groups in their community in a way that works for them, helping them to find their own way to address local issues,” said Paul. “The anchor groups enable communities to take practical action at the local level, and hopefully sets them on a journey to get involved in wider action around climate change and sustainability.”

■ To find out more about Upstream Battle, contact Paul Wallace on 01786 468797 or paul.wallace@keepsotlandbeautiful.org.

has for some time been widespread recognition that the crisis in social care is not only a scandal in itself but a source of pressure on the health service. Beyond this, experts, professionals and concerned citizens recognise the need and scope for a deeper rethink of our systems. This should reflect the importance of public behaviour and expectations, on the one hand, and technological innovation on the other.

The Covid-19 crisis has amplified all these sentiments but also provoked other responses. There is the willingness of both individuals and communities to do the right thing in supporting the system, whether that is self-isolating, coming out of retirement to work in the NHS or establishing community support networks for vulnerable local people. The weekly community applause for the NHS and health workers is merely the symbolic expression of this deeper commitment. What could we do to turn this energy into lasting change?

First, vivid evidence of the frailty of our social care system should, at long last, provide the impetus for a fair and sustainable funding solution; one that will almost certainly involve better-off people insuring themselves. Second, could the crisis enable a more

profound rethink of our model of public services? Can we start to see them not as goods to be delivered but as relationships to be nurtured? This model puts the empowerment of individuals and the building of community capacity at the forefront of service design and delivery. It changes how we think about productivity and speaks to the shining light that has been cast on the importance of 'high-touch' as well as high-tech work.

Third, given the surprise many people trying to support the NHS have expressed about its fragmented structure of decision-making, can we be more ambitious in developing and enacting system-wide solutions that exploit the transformative potential of big data and technology?

A fourth broad area of concern refers to both the climate emergency and the way government leads us. The pandemic is likely to eventually result in a greater emphasis on foresight and planning in government. These are already important functions, but they have rarely been seen as politically salient or a priority for spending. As the public is poignantly reminded of the many people and institutions that predicted a pandemic of this sort and argued – largely in vain – for adequate precautionary investment, the role of government in preparing for possible futures will be strongly reinforced. In prime ministerial adviser Dominic Cummings, there is someone at the centre of power who apparently needs little convincing. He has, for example, described Philip Tetlock and Dan Gardner's book on 'superforecasting' as essential reading for the kind of "weirdos" he wants to recruit to the Downing Street staff.

Thinking long term

Perhaps the crisis will better enable politicians and officials to achieve something they have been frequently admonished to do by a variety of experts: focus policy on the longer term. If so, an important concept may be that of resilience. For example, the Rockefeller Foundation has already set up a major funding programme that has developed and tested resilience projects in cities across the world, in its 100 Resilient Cities work. Many commentators have already pointed out that the largely ignored warnings of pandemic experts have an eerie similarity to those of climatologists.

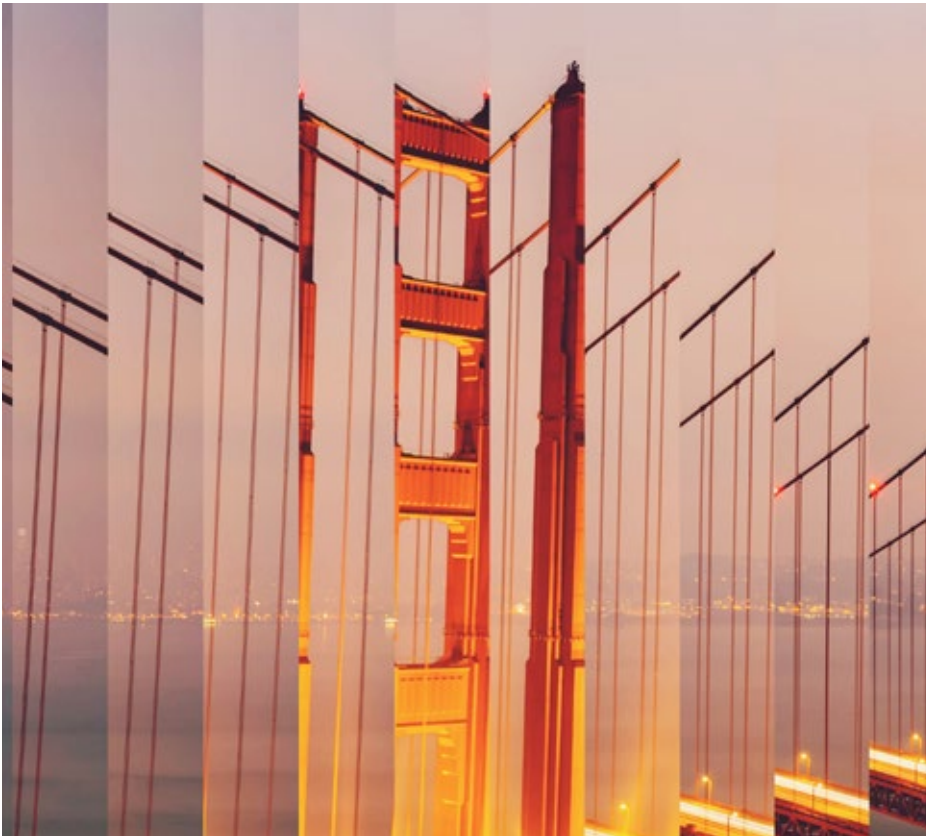
But long-term planning in areas like carbon reduction and climate change mitigation means making difficult, and sometimes unpopular, choices, a challenge that will be exacerbated by the bleak fiscal position the UK is likely to face after the crisis. The adversarial, sound-bite-oriented bear-pit of conventional politics is not the place to win

Build Bridges to the Future

The RSA is hosting online public events and podcasts and publishing a series of Fellows' blogs and long-read essays – *Coronavirus: Respond at Scale, Build Bridges to the Future* – responding to some of the short-, medium- and longer-term implications of the pandemic. The aim is to add a distinct RSA voice, focused on the Society's areas of expertise and approach to public engagement, while also addressing the appetite for practical ideas about how we respond to the 'new normal'.

The long-read essays cover a range of issues, from leadership in central and local government to the long-term challenges facing the NHS, schools and the planet. The aim is for all pieces to address four central questions. First, what genuinely new challenges have been presented and to what extent will the new normal require a paradigm shift, and at what levels? Second, how are the norms, practices and aspirations that have developed in the crisis able to adapt and continue post-crisis? Third, how can these changes and innovations be embedded and institutionalised? Finally, the series aims to explore the need for proper engagement and structured deliberation, which will be critical to winning public consent as we move from contingent measures to permanent shifts.

■ *Fellows' blogs can be found at www.thersa.org/coronavirus*



complex arguments. Perhaps, then, we should reinforce the already strong case for the greater use of deliberative democratic methods of engagement and policymaking.

Unlike representative democracy, dominated by our profoundly unrepresentative and deeply dysfunctional political parties, deliberative processes can strengthen trust between governing politicians and the public.

And this points to a final post-pandemic imperative. As Professor Geoff Mulgan (the former Chief Executive of Nesta) explained to me in the first of the RSA's *Bridges to the Future* podcast series, a noticeable characteristic of the countries that seem to be handling the pandemic best without reverting to authoritarianism – for example, South Korea and Taiwan – is relatively high trust between rulers and citizens. This has meant the public have been willing to accept quite intrusive approaches to personal data, on-the-spot testing and behaviour modification as a price worth paying to rulers they trust to act effectively.

To enhance its limited reserves of trust and to try to mobilise a divided nation, the UK government has relied strongly on public health experts as messengers. As Michael Gove gratefully redirected difficult media questions to NHS managers at Downing Street press conferences, the idea that we have had enough of experts was exposed as a tendentious myth. Yet, in many areas – such as testing and equipment – the

government was seen to have overclaimed and tragically underperformed.

The crisis will eventually pass. But whether it is preparing for the long term or exploiting the incredible potential for public good of data and technology, restoring trust in our governmental institutions is vital, not just to the health of our democracy but to our livelihoods, wellbeing and, perhaps, survival.

There are many other changes that could be hastened by the crisis: from greater home working to confronting the terrible state of social care and our prisons. But those hoping for progressive outcomes from the crisis need to learn from 2008 that these are only possibilities. People may come through the pandemic more determined to repair society and avoid the risks of climate change, but they could equally feel exhausted with talk of existential risk. Facing financial pressures, they may focus on the short term, even perhaps preferring austerity to tax increases. And, of course, there will be those seeking to use the crisis and its aftermath to drive even greater polarisation.

To make change real and positive, we need new and broader alliances, to co-design practical solutions and realistic models of implementation, and to aim to mould but not go against, or too far beyond, the tide of public sentiment.

This time the RSA will be doing all it can to avoid this terrible crisis going to waste. ■

CHANGING OUR NATURE

We are facing serious nature and climate emergencies.
To prevent further system shocks, we need system change

by Sue Pritchard

🐦 @suepritch

It is February 2020, and I am sitting in a barn at Fir Farm in the Cotswolds with local farmers, talking about short supply chains and fair food systems. Being a ‘local farmer’ here can mean a variety of things; the group includes deep green environmentalists, organic farming campaigners, old landed gentry, retired rock stars and celebrities, and more traditional farmers. But they share at least one concern: how can they develop a more sustainable food and farming system that serves their community better and is in harmony with nature?

A couple of weeks later I am on a Cumbrian hillside in the Lake District, far from the Cotswolds. Another iconic version of UK countryside, this area has become a hotbed of arguments between local farmers and environmentalists about how to protect it for generations to come, as if these concerns are mutually exclusive. James Rebanks, aka the Herdwick Shepherd, shows me his beloved sheep, hefted to these hills, just as he is. He is proud of his tree planting and his river ‘rewigging’ projects, practical demonstrations of landscape regeneration that work hand-in-hand with his farming.

System shock

And now it is April, and I write this amid the Covid-19 lockdown, in what is likely to be the biggest public health and economic crisis that the world has seen for decades.

Yet it is not the only crisis we face. When the RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission published its report, *Our Future in the Land*, in July 2019 (which seems like a lifetime ago), we set out, as clearly as we could, the full extent of the nature

and climate emergencies and the public health crisis currently facing us. From the globalised, industrialised, intensive agriculture that has poisoned water, depleted soils and destroyed wildlife, to the massive rise in diet-related ill health that ruins lives and burdens the NHS, the case for change was already overwhelming.

Now, thanks to Covid-19, the fragilities in the food system have been shown up in stark relief. The concentration of capacity in fewer businesses, making them more vulnerable to sudden shocks; the reliance on transient labour for our fruit and veg to be picked; and the food workers in shops and takeaways who we have so often taken for granted, and who are often on low-pay, zero-hours and precarious contracts, but who we have now realised deserve to be described as key workers. Just-in-time and long supply chains are severely disrupted when these often invisible links – pickers, packers, processors, packaging companies, truckers and air freighters – start to struggle.

Yet in communities around the UK, inspirational and resourceful stories are emerging. Neighbourhoods are mobilising and using their on-the-ground knowledge to identify and respond to the needs of the most vulnerable. But for all the stories of creative and heroic effort, the whole system of food and farming needs radical reimagining. It has to be better for people, better for the planet and more resilient to systemic shocks; Covid-19 has shown us all too clearly the weaknesses inherent in our current systems.

Moving to an agroecological system

Thinking in whole systems can be overwhelming. The antidote to potential paralysis is to start with the grounded, the real and the practical. And there ▶

Sue Pritchard is Director of the RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission





“At its heart, agroecology applies ecological and socially just principles to the whole food system”

is nothing more so than the basic human need for nutritious, affordable, available food. With this at the forefront of our minds, in *Our Future in the Land* we call for a transition to agroecology by 2030.

Agroecological principles, like all systems-thinking principles, work together in a coherent and integrated whole. At its heart, agroecology applies ecological and socially just principles to the whole food system, from methods of production to fair rewards for workers. It combines science with traditional, practical and indigenous knowledge, respecting and empowering producers. It is also place-based, responding to local conditions with contextualised solutions. And it enhances the adaptive capacity of people and communities to build their resilience for the long term. Its 10 interconnected components (see box-out) build on each other; our work in the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission has convinced us that a transition to agroecology is the future we need.

It is too early to learn lessons from the current health crisis. Premature evaluation is always risky. But it is the right time to start thinking about what really matters to us in our communities. As a matter of urgency, the Commission is gathering evidence and stories from communities around the UK to ensure that all voices are heard in the policy discussions beyond this crisis. We are also working with our partners IDDRI, the French institute that produced *Ten Years for Agroecology in Europe*, to model the impacts of introducing agroecology in the UK.

Agroecology is more than just an approach to food and farming; it is the shift to radical systems thinking and grounded action that the world needs right now. ■

An agroecological future

1. Diversity

Diversity is at the heart of the transition to agroecology, in the same way that diversity is central to all systems thinking. Diversity is manifest in practices like agroforestry (in which trees or shrubs are grown around or among crops or pasture in vertically layered systems), intercropping (growing complementary crops together) and rotational grazing with ruminants (where sheep and cows are grazed between arable crop cycles to improve organic matter in soils or conserve grassland and other habitats). Diversity improves soil and water quality, recovers wildlife, strengthens crop resilience and reduces reliance on synthetic fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides. Diversified business models are more resilient to economic shocks, enabling farmers to balance income streams. And more diversity in the food we eat strengthens the human microbiome, improving health and wellbeing.

2. Co-creation and sharing local knowledge

Peer-to-peer, context-specific knowledge is about sharing what works. We know farmers tend to learn best from each other, in practical and grounded ways, and this is especially true when microclimates and local ecosystems need highly tailored approaches. For example, in the Cotswolds, I learned about the Fir Farm mobile abattoir project. With the closure of small abattoirs around the country, it is becoming increasingly difficult – in some places impossible – to produce high-quality meat for a local market. Fir Farm takes the abattoir to farms, enabling small and medium-sized farm businesses to ‘home kill’ under high standards and sell locally; with the added benefit that there is also much less stress to the animals, too. Farmers were enthusiastic about this project, showing how farmer-led innovation via sharing knowledge and resources can create systems that work for them.

3. Synergies

Agroecological systems design for multiple benefits, for environment and people, through partnerships and cooperation. Agroforestry supports vertically integrated production systems, layers of fruit and nut trees, bushes and intercropping. Thinking about synergies also means rethinking scale. The ubiquitous call to scale up has led to consolidation and concentration in food systems, creating critical ecosystem vulnerabilities. Synergies are

best understood at the scales appropriate to their ecological resilience, and instead of scaling up they emphasise joining up, through partnerships and collaborations.

4. Efficiency

Managing diversity to create synergies enables agroecological systems to improve resource-use efficiencies. Reducing reliance on external inputs increases the autonomy and profitability of producers. It also exposes some misplaced assumptions about productivity in our current agricultural practices, where, perversely, the need for more external inputs reduces profitability. At Nethergill Farm, in the Yorkshire Dales, Chris Clark discovered – contrary to received wisdom – that by reducing the number of sheep he kept, his profit margins rose, and flora, fauna and mosses increased in number and in species.

5. Recycling

Waste is a human concept. In agroecological systems, biological processes recycle nutrients and materials that would otherwise be lost and encourage innovation to use by-products. For example, a Scottish farmers' co-operative, East of Scotland Growers, found a whole new product line when they made broccoli crisps out of the otherwise 'wasted' stems.

6. Resilience

Diverse agroecological systems are more resilient to external shocks. Farming with the natural contours of the land, using methods like cover cropping (in which a crop is grown for the benefit of the soil rather than because of its yield), prevents soil erosion and water loss. Companion planting, in which certain plants are placed close together in order to benefit from naturally occurring pest control, reduces the need for pesticide use. At the country scale, resilience means thinking carefully about how much food we need to grow in the UK in order to provide nutritious, safe, affordable food for people, fairly, while remaining within our ecological limits.

7. Human and social values

Placing equal emphasis on dignity, equity, inclusion and justice, agroecology puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce our food at the heart of a fair food system. The right to nutritious food

and care for the environment go hand-in-hand, so that the non-human world and future generations can prosper. It seeks to improve gender inequalities: women make up half the global farming workforce yet own less than 15% of land. Young people, meanwhile, struggle to find meaningful work and access to land.

8. Culture and food traditions

Our human heritage is built on food and agriculture. Yet western societies have become disconnected from food production. Food insecurity, malnutrition and obesity exist side by side. Around the world, some 2 billion people suffer from nutrient deficiencies and 2 billion are overweight or obese. Agroecology aims to rebalance traditional and modern food systems in order to return to a healthier relationship between people and food. Countries that are successfully improving their food systems are emphasising their cultural traditions.

9. Responsible governance

Unfettered markets will not rebalance the system when they are often the beneficiaries of that imbalance. We need to level the playing field for a fair food system. The UK's Environmental Land Management scheme, the planned replacement for the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, will be designed to incentivise farmers to deploy nature-based solutions to the climate and nature crisis. Campaigns such as Food for Life, for instance, work with schools and hospitals, reconnecting people with where their food comes from, teaching them how it's grown and cooked, and championing the importance of well-sourced ingredients. And at the Commission, we have proposed a land use framework to enable transparent, responsible, participative and fair decision-making about how the UK uses this critical natural resource.

10. Circular and solidarity economy

Agroecology prioritises localising and equitable economics. Imaginative innovations are based on local needs, assets and capacity. It emphasises developing short supply chains, incentivising local collaboration and community schemes, and improves incomes for primary producers, while still maintaining fair prices for consumers. It ensures that citizens are not paying the hidden costs of polluting methods elsewhere in society. ■

RISKY BUSINESS

The insurance industry could be a vital actor in tackling climate change, but it needs our support in taking the necessary action

by Ian Kearns and Peter Kingsley

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Aerial images of pollution-free cities and clean water in Venice during the pandemic give us a glimpse of another, possible world. Even so, the environmental crisis will not go away; we all know that not enough is being done to limit global warming. Scientists are warning of the danger of biosphere collapse and, unless we change course, the consequences will be catastrophic. The pandemic may or may not alter the trajectory.

Pressure for action is growing, manifest in recent YouGov surveys showing concern about the environment at record levels, particularly – but by no means only – among the young. Although direct action, from the school strike for climate to the actions of Extinction Rebellion, is on the rise, it is not clear that pressure will turn into urgent, systematic transformation. *The Guardian* has reported in recent months on vested interests, from fossil fuel companies to right-wing thinktanks, collaborating to fight a rear-guard action, while others remain passive, accepting the status quo. A political backlash against sometimes ill-conceived measures to address environmental concerns is developing, illustrated in movements like the *gilet jaunes* in France and the People’s Action No to More Road Tolls party in Norway.

Some people brand environmental activism as eco-terrorism. And we may see deeper political polarisation on environmental issues and widespread social unrest, despite the lessons learned from the coronavirus pandemic about early action on possible extreme events.

Against this backdrop, the story that the business community will step up and show leadership has gained momentum. Investors and fund managers, such as BlackRock, say they will withhold investments from companies that fail to act on climate risk and

wider environmental concerns. A cultural shift is under way; increasing numbers of investors make the case for long-term thinking and stewardship for future generations. There has been much talk, not least from Davos and the US Business Roundtable, that businesses must look beyond short-term shareholder value to wider environmental, social and governance purposes. Paul Polman, the former CEO of Unilever – which has committed to 100% recyclable plastics by 2025 – recently warned that businesses must learn not to destroy biodiversity and natural capital or risk further Covid-19s. At the same time, recent Deloitte Global Millennial Surveys show increasing numbers of the Millennial and Generation Z cohorts wishing to express their concerns about the environment through their choices as consumers, employees and entrepreneurs. The pandemic may accelerate structural change.

Critics will argue that what is needed is not discretionary action by business leaders under pressure from investors and consumers but action driven by regulators and the law. The two are not mutually exclusive. Business has a vital role to play. To put this in context, in 2019, the Bank of England introduced frameworks for banking and insurance that call for scenarios and strategic plans that look decades ahead, to 2050. Similar rules will follow for listed companies. The business community is a critical part of the solution, and one of the pivotal sectors is insurance. The insurance industry usually penetrates the public consciousness only after high-profile losses from extreme events, or when insurers withhold cover from high-risk areas. Both have been in the news of late as a result of wildfires in California and Australia and as a consequence of the suffering of the uninsured in flood-hit parts of the UK. ▶

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“The ability of the insurance industry to grapple with complex risks is crucial”

The industry is a vital actor on environmental issues for two other reasons. First, it is one of the largest investors in financial markets, with long-term obligations through life and health insurance and pensions. This means it is central to efforts to green the financial system and industry sectors. Second, the industry acts as an informal regulator. Insurers can demand changes in corporate, personal and even government behaviour in return for lower premiums and novel approaches to underwriting risks. They can demand better climate change mitigation and adaptation measures.

A new approach

How might the insurance industry play its hand? The answer is far from clear, but the core challenge is to reinvent the industry’s approach to risk. While some risk assessment is routine, other risks are large scale, complex and involve interactions across multiple systems over time. This is reflected in the changing structure of the industry, which is beginning to polarise.

Routine risks are being automated by large-scale insurers that rely on volume and efficiency. At the other end of the spectrum, specialists in complex risks are emerging to meet the fundamental methodological challenges facing insurers, banks, corporate leaders and governments alike. In stable worlds, the limitations of current methods are not obvious. In crises and radically uncertain worlds, the weaknesses are mercilessly

exposed, with sometimes tragic consequences. Covid-19 offers one example. It was not, as some have suggested, a ‘black swan’ event. It was predictable and predicted, the only unknowns being the timing of the pandemic and its severity. If it is to be seen as a black swan, the surprise is in the secondary, systemic impacts resulting from policy failures best characterised as ‘too little, too late’. There are dozens of similar wild card events laying in wait.

The roots of the pandemic appear to lie in increasing urban sprawl close to biodiversity hotspots, and in the trade in wild animals in food markets on the outskirts of cities. From there, the disease has spread through global travel networks. It has triggered a shutdown in everyday activity, generating economic collapse that may lead to millions of casualties and long-term economic depression. The pandemic will affect the entire world, transforming the risk landscape.

The underlying problem for insurers is that there is no historical data set from which to extrapolate predictions about when the next pandemic might happen, because we are in an entirely new era of human-biodiversity interaction. Epidemics involving new diseases may occur with greater frequency. While lessons can be learned about how to limit the impact of any similar event in future, insurers face a risk assessment challenge that cannot be met by models based on projections from historical data. The past will not be repeated.

Look closely at major events and the phrase ‘failure of imagination’ runs through every post-event inquiry, from the attacks on 9/11 to the financial crisis of 2008. This points to the limitations of decision-making about emerging risks. It also reflects a widespread shortage of experts capable of developing imaginative scenarios and hedging strategies based on exploring possible – distinct from probable – future worlds. Long-term ‘open futures’ thinking across fields as diverse as geopolitics, trade, international security, science, public health, finance, technology, cultural mood and politics is vital.

Changing attitudes

The challenge of interpreting cultural and public mood raises acute questions because, contrary to widespread opinion, in time of crisis, culture changes rapidly, with potentially seismic consequences.

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, the aviation industry worried that it faced a growing threat from the ‘flight-shaming’ movement that gathered momentum throughout 2019. The risk to the industry was rooted in the fact that a re-imagined long-term future of climate catastrophe had started to change short-term attitudes to flying. Passenger numbers fell. In Europe, international rail found new momentum. The airline industry feared existential risk even before the pandemic began. The reality is that commercially viable clean aircraft are at least a decade away and new carbon-offset programmes did little to help shore up reputations and revenues.

This illustrates that shifts in public narratives around climate change can impact the risk profile of entire industries and the value of long-dated assets, years before the physical impacts are felt. For an industry such as insurance, which specialises in understanding, underwriting and helping its clients to manage risk, this raises the question of how best to spot early signs of emerging narratives and changes in public sentiment.

The challenge is that these risks are not about extrapolating from historical trends, or logic and probabilistic, forward-looking modelling, but about emotion, psychology and cultural mood. The stories protagonists tell are better guides to the future landscape than statistical models.

As we move beyond the first wave of the pandemic, this will be vitally important. One of the uncertainties now revolves around how Covid-19 will change cultural and political attitudes. Will people understand the need to live within planetary boundaries and, if so, what does that imply for economic activity? Which industries are future-ready? Which sectors will collapse through lack of support from investors,

governments, or both? Will people crave a return to life, and business, as usual?

The ability of the insurance industry to grapple with complex risks is crucial. This goes beyond the interests of the industry itself; insurance is vital to the bloodstream of the economy. If there is no confidence that risk can be accurately assessed, priced or hedged, then cover will not be made available. Investors and banks will not back corporate or city infrastructure renewal projects without confidence in long-term climate risk strategies.

Without insurance, much economic activity will grind to a halt. Investors, including those in the industry itself, will pursue conservative strategies, underinvesting in otherwise viable opportunities and reinforcing the downward spiral. Much innovation, which itself comes with risks and is badly needed to address the world’s most pressing problems, will also fall short.

At a crossroads

The industry is at a crossroads. What it does next is of both private and public interest. Insurers must decide whether to retreat in the face of the challenges and focus only on the more straightforward risks they can understand, or embrace the full implications of their wider social role, positioning themselves as part of the solution.

This will not be easy. It implies a willingness to explore entirely new ways of thinking about and hedging risk. It implies divesting from the fossil fuel economy and investing in the green economy in a way that does not trigger a stampede that could itself cause a deeper financial crisis. Some signs are there. In 2017, AXA announced it would cut both investment and underwriting support for fossil fuel businesses, accepting large-scale short-term losses in income in the interests of long-term stewardship.

This illustrates that the industry can play a direct role, as well as educating both the public and public policymakers on the real risks our society is running and the price of doing something about them. It implies a willingness not to run for the hills in defence of the industry’s own short-term interests but to work in partnership with individuals, communities and governments to regulate behaviour while trying to find the answers upon which all our futures depend.

Whether we, or the industry, like it or not, the path insurers choose to take will be central to our collective chances of meeting the environmental challenges in a post-pandemic world. The sooner everyone realises that, and finds ways to encourage insurers to do the right thing, the better. ■

ARE YOU BRITISH ENOUGH?

‘British values’ are often bandied about, but a closer look shows them not to be quite as robust as we might think

by Nikesh Shukla

🐦 @nikeshshukla

In 1997, Conservative politician Norman Tebbit declared that “multiculturalism is a divisive force [...] Youngsters of all races born here should be taught that British history is their history”. There is a heavy irony in that his comments themselves are divisive; but I think he was, in some respects, right (and agreeing with Norman Tebbit is not something I thought I would ever do). British history is the history of all those born in this country, no matter their race; the trouble is that we are not taught an honest version of this history. The blood of colonialism runs through all of our streets. Multiculturalism is a divisive term; but that is mostly because it is pitted against the idea of those much-touted ‘British values’. And British values are the issue.

For decades, the very idea of Britishness and multiculturalism have seemingly been at war with each other, supposed opposites with fixed ideologies and irreconcilable differences. When we weaponise British values to be about what sort of country we all wish to be in, we are talking nonsense. British values are generic at best.

Who, and what, is ‘British’?

I think a lot about what it means to be British these days. Born in this country, to parents with roots in India, via East Africa and the Middle East, I spent my teenage years feeling like I had to make a choice

between where I’m from and where I’m at, as the old rap adage goes. There was never any deep understanding of this confusion. The choice became as binary as choosing a cricket team to decide where your allegiances lie.

And yet, whenever we spoke of Britishness and what it meant, there was nothing much more critical than queuing, railways, tea and stiff upper lips. British values, according to OFSTED, and as taught to Year Sevens, are: democracy; the rule of law; individual liberty; and mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and for those without faith. Let’s think about this for second. These are the five key values of Britain, what we are told make the British British. But even looking with just the slightest of a critical eye shows these to be the basic tenets of most countries that are not dictatorships. These are soft values; there is nothing specific to Britain in there. How they were decided and how it was justified that these values set Britain apart from other countries (who probably hold similar values) is beyond me.

When we think about how British values ‘other’ those from immigrant communities, often it is about learning English. But where in the OFSTED guidelines does it say that learning English is a British value? British values have become about the conflation of integration and assimilation. If you wish to live here, you have to learn about British values and integrate.

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In reality, integration is about assimilation. It is about taking off the hat of your heritage and wearing an English top hat or flat cap. It is about hiding your heritage and adopting the outer markers of Britishness. But integration should not be about an opposing force demanding another capitulate.

I grew up so anxious about fitting in. Split. I was othered on either side of the binary scale. Because in the 1990s, multiculturalism was touted as sarees, steel bands and samosas; a surface-level attempt to understand cultural nuance in a way that integrated with a British way of life. The extent of our leaning into multiculturalism was pop culture. At school, we were never taught the histories or socioeconomic factors that led to what the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry in 1999 described as “institutional racism”. More recently, where is the learning that links the government’s approach to people from immigrant backgrounds, the creation of the hostile environment and the scandal around the Windrush generation?

Towards a more accurate idea of Britishness

We are not taught accurate British history, which has resulted in the confusion around what British values actually are. Modern Britain was created on the blood of its Empire. Dead bodies in Jallianwala Bagh. Dead bodies in the Bengal famine. Partition. Transatlantic slave routes.

But instead, we were taught about Great Britain. The land of hope and glory and the railways that transported chattel and goods and resources, and ‘civilisation’. And oh how we became civilised. From the pre-Empire fixed position of savage to the post-Empire fixed position of civil. If you wish to know about the lies Britain tells itself, just look to a 2016 YouGov poll in which 43% of respondents said that the British Empire was a good thing, and 44% said Britain’s history of colonialism was something to be proud of. This is a fallacy built on railways and civilisation that masks the asset-stripping, resource-mining and citizen-enslaving.

Integration is about us standing together, in our individuality, observing what we have in common and how that makes us stronger, and what makes us different and how that makes life more delicious. Integration is not a zero-sum boot camp for zombies; it is more like the A-Team, where people with different skills come together for the greater good. As Britain tells itself to keep calm and carry on during the Covid-19 pandemic, we are seeing what we can achieve as an integrated group more than ever. Yet in spite of this unity, certain sections of society are being affected to a greater degree than others. Now more than ever might be the time to take stock of how immigrant communities contribute so much to the wellbeing of Britain, often at the expense of their own. ■

REBELS WITH A CAUSE

Climate activism is not going away. We need to protect and adapt the institutions that provide that safety valve of freedom of expression

by Laura O'Brien and Raj Chada

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A sustainable and healthy democracy is anything but simple. It does not derive its legitimacy solely from citizens exercising their right to vote once every four or five years. A democratic society is one with complex and interlocking facets: a free press, a vibrant civic society, an independent judiciary and public bodies that are both accountable and representative of society in all its forms. Yet one of the keys to democracy remains our commitment to our individual fundamental human rights, such as the right to free speech. It means that we can choose our elected representatives in the market place of ideas; the right to free speech has often been described as the 'lifeblood of democracy'.

Protest as a form of free speech has always played an important role. Where this can be most significant is in relation to causes where there is not yet widespread public pressure for change or where no consensus exists. Change is most hard fought when it both poses a threat to the power structure and vested interests and where new voices emerge in the public sphere. Female suffrage came about following a brave marginal movement that challenged the social and political patriarchy.

As the High Court judgment in the case of Ziegler reiterated: "History teaches that what may begin as a heresy (for example the idea that the earth revolves around the sun) may end up as accepted fact and indeed the orthodoxy... [Freedom of expression] helps to maintain social peace by permitting people a 'safety valve' to let off steam. In this way it is hoped

that peaceful and orderly change will take place in a democratic society, thus eliminating, or at least reducing, the risk of violence and disorder."

The existential threat of climate crisis, hardly a cause that is heresy. Yet there are few campaigns that threaten current vested interests or power structures more. The response of the government has been anaemic. In recognition of this, one group, Extinction Rebellion (XR), has sought to challenge the inaction in spectacular fashion. XR is a global environmental movement that has sought to use the right to free speech creatively. Its stated aim is to use non-violent civil disobedience to compel government action to avoid tipping points in the climate crisis. It is unique in its reach and scale, its ability to cross borders and permeate every walk of life.

Politicians and policymakers have been on notice for years about the devastation that the climate crisis is causing, from biodiversity loss to societal collapse. This crisis presents a clear and present danger to the lives of millions, yet change from individual behaviour to legislation has been painfully slow. The climate crisis cannot be addressed without national governments and the international community taking a lead.

While impartiality is its critical feature, the law and its application are inevitably normative and informed by ethical considerations. Whether we like it or not, the law influences the most personal aspects of our lives, as well as shaping the corporate world. It drives and reacts to cultural, political and economic change, and can be used to respond to societal shocks. ▶

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However, most of the time, the political and legislative wheels turn slowly. History is littered with examples where changes in legislation have been woefully, sometimes tragically, behind the curve of public opinion. It is hard to believe that it took until 1991, for example, for the law to be clear that marital rape was a criminal offence.

We may be running out of time for such a leisurely approach when it comes to the climate crisis. Following a number of initial demonstrations in late 2018, in April 2019, XR protesters assembled at a number of locations in London, with the stated aim of holding these sites for two weeks or until their demands were met. The Metropolitan Police responded by putting in place conditions restricting the protest to a single site in Marble Arch; over a thousand people were arrested at different locations and on different days across London. Most were arrested for breaching the conditions placed on the protests by refusing to move on so they could hold the sites across London.

Hundreds of those who were prosecuted pleaded not guilty and went to trial in the magistrates' court. Many relied on the defence of "necessity". These defendants argued that their actions were undertaken to prevent the risk of death or serious injury arising from the climate crisis and the inaction of the government. They pointed to the deaths that have already occurred as a result of air pollution, flooding, wildfires, food shortages and crop failures. They cited a body of scientific opinion that shows action must be taken before a tipping point is reached, at which point it will be too late to halt the climate collapse that risks mass extinction.

Compelling evidence. But the defence of necessity did not succeed in any of these trials. In rejecting defence arguments, many judges stated that there was no nexus between the actions of the protesters and the risks they claimed that they were trying to prevent. Some judges also argued that the threat was not imminent. In our view, the courts have failed to grasp the magnitude of the crisis and the ambition of the solutions. Many protests in the past have concentrated on specific goals, often in terms of civil and political rights. For example, the anti-apartheid protests or the Northern Irish civil movements had clear defined objectives that affected a defined number of people.

The climate crisis, on the other hand, is present in the way we shop, eat, farm, move around and plan for a sustainable future. It is not about civil, political or economic rights, it is about the very survival of humanity. When the crisis is that all-encompassing, it is too glib to say that there was no nexus or the threat is not imminent. People have died, are dying and will

die as a result of the climate crisis. The evidence shows that the point of no return is much closer than many think; we are fast approaching the time when it will be too late to mitigate or halt further death and destruction.

This different type of threat has inspired a different type of action. It created the biggest campaign of mass civil disobedience in mainland UK for over 100 years. There was something extraordinary about the sight of 1,000 individuals, many of whom had never been arrested before, attending week after week at City of London Magistrates Court. Whether they pleaded guilty or not guilty, their testimony as to what drove them to take action was compelling, emotional and often inspirational. The range of individuals involved was unprecedented – pensioners, teachers, doctors, students and many others. This was a movement not based on the same old activist, but something that had reached every part of the country and every level of society.

Those that decided to have a trial invariably did not succeed on a "necessity" defence. Higher courts have stripped away at the necessity defence, imposing limits on the nature of evidence that can be heard in criminal proceedings and adding further difficult obstacles for the defence to succeed. There is an inherent conservatism or fear from some in the court system that agreeing to such defences would lead to protesters "acting as a sheriff in town", instead citing that such arguments should be had at the ballot box.

Yet when successive governments have been unwilling or unable to act on this crisis, it is perhaps incumbent on citizens to take up the challenge and for the judiciary to protect their actions that are reasonable and proportionate.

Climate activism is here to stay. As we wake up to the critical importance of sustainability and resilience, not just of the planet, but our way of living, we need to protect and adapt the institutions that provide that safety valve of freedom of expression. Once the envy of the world, while our criminal justice system may never garner the level of public support of the NHS, we need to recognise the critical role that UK law and its processes play in delivering justice, testing, challenging, poking and prodding how a democratic society responds to shifts in public expectation and societal shocks.

These issues, being played out in our police stations and courts, go to the heart of our democracy. While our justice system is under threat and undermined, so is our democracy. ■

CAN GLOBAL SPORTS BOUNCE BACK?

The Covid-19 pandemic has hit sporting events worldwide, but maybe the lessons learned can be applied to the challenges of climate change

by David Goldblatt
 @Davidsgoldblatt

Global sport has been brought to a shuddering halt by the Covid-19 pandemic. Leagues and competitions are in suspended animation, mega events from the Tokyo Olympics to Euro 2020 have been postponed, and the suspension of ticket sales and broadcasting deals has placed many institutions and their staff in penury. Yet devastating as this is, something more problematic is waiting in the wings.

Climate change touches every aspect of human life, and global sport is no exception: in 2019, the Rugby World Cup was disrupted by unprecedented Pacific typhoons, and in early 2020, the Australian Open was disrupted by the smoke blowing in from devastating bush fires. Before it was postponed for a year, the Tokyo 2020 Olympics had been forced to move long-distance running events north of the capital, as the sweltering summer weather now makes them impossible to run in Tokyo itself.

By mid-century, nearly half of the previous hosts of the Winter Olympics will be unlikely to be able to host it again because of sharply rising temperatures. On current projections, one in six of the golf courses that have hosted the British Open will be lost to sea-level rises before the end of the century. The same goes for the innumerable stadiums in the low-lying coastal cities of the world.

Sport is not just a victim of change, however, but also an important contributor. The International Olympic Committee has a carbon footprint close to that of a small nation-state, and global football's is even larger. Sporting events are responsible for massive levels of aviation, carbon-heavy stadium construction and mountains of unrecycled garbage.

Coronavirus is not climate change, but there are clear lessons from the current crisis that we should pay heed to. Believe the science; assume the worst-case scenario can happen; act now not later; and act radically. Use sport's unique position in popular culture to lead. What kind of changes would this mean in practice?

First, every international sporting institution should sign up to the UN's Sports for Climate Action Framework. Those that do not should not receive public monies or be permitted to stage international events. National organisations that fail to follow suit should be debarred from international competition by the governing bodies, and professional clubs should be excluded from their local competitions. Second, annual environmental audits should then follow; those that do not comply should be fined by their governing bodies, or as in the case of football, docked points as they are now for financial irregularities.

Third, all future international sporting events – from the Olympics to the football World Cup – that are not certified carbon zero should be abandoned until they comply. Fourth, the legions of fossil fuel companies sponsoring sport need to be excluded from the sector.

Finally, the sports world needs to take a leaf out of Forest Green Rovers' book; the first UN-certified carbon zero football club has an organic pitch, vegan food, no single-use plastics and plans to build a zero-carbon wooden stadium.

Harsh maybe, but if the sports world is confounded by the consequences of a pandemic it will be shattered by the consequences of climate catastrophe. ■



David Goldblatt is a writer, academic and broadcaster. His most recent book is *The Age of Football: The Global Game in the Twenty-First Century*

CLEAN BILL OF HEALTH

In order to create a more resilient, sustainable healthcare system, we need to look at what we truly value

by Rachel Stancliffe

 @SusHealthcare

The turning point in the response to Covid-19 in the UK was perhaps the stories from doctors on the frontline in Lombardy in northern Italy who reported starkly that they were having to decide who to save. With limited resources, decisions about rationing healthcare always have to be made, but this truth is usually much more hidden from the public.

To this rationing of healthcare resources, the climate emergency has added the urgency of reducing carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions. If we are to reach net zero carbon emissions within 10 years (as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says we must if we are to mitigate the worst effects of climate change), we will have to, very quickly, make hard decisions about how we choose to use our resources. In the UK, for example, the NHS has a carbon footprint of about 20m tonnes of CO₂ per year, the same as Bolivia. It is clear that this needs to be reduced.

What do we value?

In sustainable healthcare practices, we look at what we mean by resources and how we understand value. Value takes into account not only outputs – how many hip operations are carried out, for example – but also outcomes; such as how many patients have full mobility restored. It also looks beyond individuals to populations. Financial cost is extended to consider

inputs including the use of environmental resources and social capital (the networks that people can draw upon within their family or wider community).

We need to initiate discussions about the outcomes we want as a society and how we collectively use our resources, so that we can decide how to allocate our remaining carbon budget over the next 10 years. The charity I founded, the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare (CSH), has pioneered the greening of healthcare for over a decade, working with healthcare professionals to understand what can change in the system to reduce environmental impact without negatively affecting patient outcomes.

A key challenge is the assumption that, just as organic vegetables cost more to the consumer (though less to the planet), sustainable healthcare practices will cost more. But we have shown that sustainable healthcare costs less than typical healthcare within a one-year timeframe. In 2014, independent economists analysed our work with the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges and estimated that £2bn could be saved by switching to proven sustainable measures.

Principles of sustainable healthcare

At CSH, we have set out four principles of sustainable healthcare; these are all relevant to the current pandemic. The first is prevention. Many of the diseases we spend most money on treating, such as

Rachel Stancliffe is the founder and Director of the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare



diabetes and the complications that come with it, are largely preventable, as we understand the risk factors well. What is needed is work across sectors to prevent underlying risk factors (such as obesity), as well as a system change within healthcare to treat problems early once they start to show ill health effects.

Second, there is patient-centred care. This could involve patients with chronic conditions taking a more active role in their own disease management. Mutual peer networks and other online help could provide some of the support needed, and these produce less carbon and are often more convenient. During the Covid-19 crisis we are seeing healthcare move not only online, but into local communities, and this is unlikely to be fully reversed once things have returned to 'normal'. GPs and pharmacists could, for example, be empowered and educated to give alternative options to drugs, such as physical exercise and lifestyle changes.

Third, we need to create 'lean' care pathways, by removing low-value activity. An example of this might be to de-prescribe some medicines. According to *The BMJ*, among others, over-treatment can cause significant harm to patients as well as waste resources.

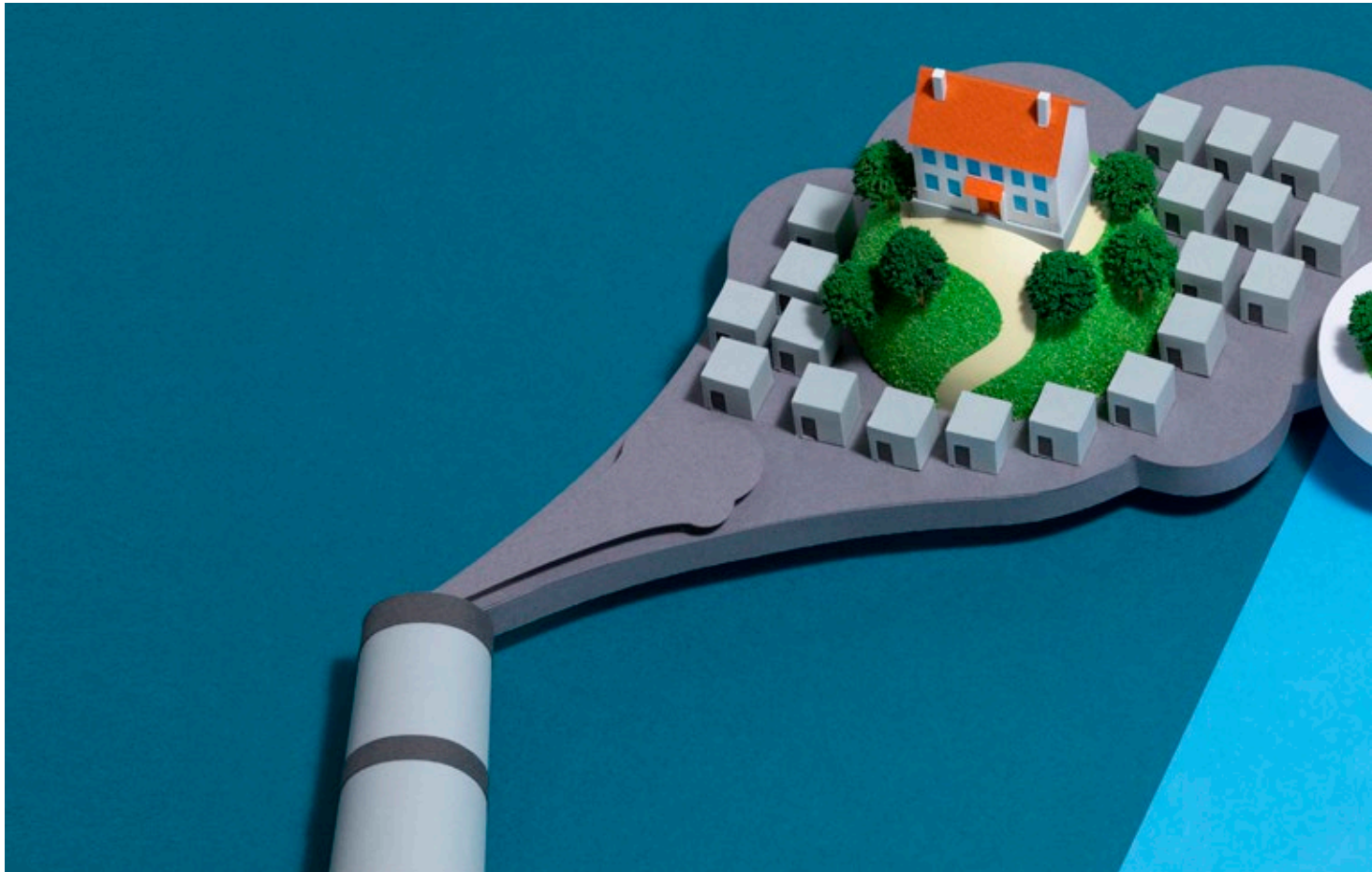
The fourth principle is to focus on lower-carbon alternatives. In some ways, this is the most simple principle, as it means making changes that often do not directly affect patients' care. One impactful change, for example, could be switching from MDI

personal inhalers to dry powder alternatives (which do not require gas to propel the medicine into the lungs) that are just as clinically effective.

Developing resilient systems

The crisis provides many lessons in terms of resilience. A resilient supply chain might be one that is not dependent on just one supplier of any particular item. It might also mean spending more on better quality, longer-lasting items such as reusable, sterilisable gowns, masks and surgical instruments. These are not reliant on a supply chain in times of emergency, and are better for the environment. There is a perception that single-use instruments are always safer; in fact there have been studies showing that even single-use 'sterile' wrapped instruments are not fully clean.

Covid-19 has brought into sharp relief the value that we place on health and demonstrated that we can act decisively as a society when we see the need. Already our healthcare systems are changing to adopt practices that are more sustainable. And, of course, healthcare is just one example of broader lessons for public-sector services. We should use these changes as a jumping-off point to continue to transform healthcare so that it can have a sustainable future based on resilience, health equity and climate justice. In order to seize this opportunity, we must engage with the key question: what do we really value in our lives? ■



SPACE TO REGENERATE

As we ramp up efforts to protect our planet, we need to adopt approaches that work with the inescapable complexity of these issues

by Robbie Bates, Rebecca Ford and Josie Warden

🐦 @robbie_bates, @RebeccaPFord, @Josie_Warden

Robbie Bates is the Interim Director of Design and Innovation at the RSA, Rebecca Ford is Head of Design Innovation and Josie Warden is an Associate Director in the same team

The Covid-19 pandemic has run a neon highlighter through structural weaknesses already present in our society and economy, adding urgency and saliency to other concerns about our future. It is a highly anxious time. However, there is hope; emerging from the huge disruption caused by the pandemic is a desire to build a different future. How we act in the coming months (as individuals, communities and organisations) matters now more than ever. But, as we face the intractable challenges of a changing climate, persistent inequality and declining biodiversity, which can feel overwhelming and unmanageable, we must avoid the tendency to simplify or separate these things, placing nature in one corner and people in another.

We need to work with the interconnections between and complexity within these systems. This means recognising that what may appear to be social



challenges, or environmental challenges, or economic challenges, are not so neatly divided, but are part of a larger and interdependent whole. We may measure the impacts of climate change on temperature or ice sheets, but its effects bring huge social and economic challenges, such as displacement of people or supply chain disruptions. Climate change is not a problem of ‘nature’. With this in mind, the RSA is developing work around these challenges that emphasises experimentation, shifting patterns and embracing multiple perspectives.

From planning to experimenting

With complex challenges, there is no manual or blueprint to follow. Instead of planning and then acting, we need to experiment our way forward, trying things and adapting as a result of what we learn. Take the fashion industry, which is at present riddled with problems, creating huge volumes of waste and pollution and driving poor labour conditions for many workers. Some believe that in tackling this, automation could improve conditions. Others argue that higher wages are the way forward, while some think that the solution is to dramatically reduce the amount of clothes we buy. It is of course possible that

all these ideas have a role to play; what is certain is that there is no one perfect fashion system out there for us to find. We need to figure out what works by testing and developing ways forward.

One way to do this is to prototype, or test ideas practically, early and often, gathering feedback about what is working and what is not, so improving each iteration. This approach was used by recipients of RSA Catalyst funding, the Library of Things, to develop their tool and equipment library in south London. Their initial aim was to provide a cheaper, less wasteful alternative to lots of families buying the same tools. The Fellows involved had a hunch that creating a service like this might also boost community relationships. Rather than planning the whole venture from start to finish, they did a series of experiments, starting with trialling the service from a high-street pop-up shop. The feedback they received from people using the service helped them to develop the next phase of the project, which saw it being run from a redesigned shipping container. They have also been able to test what people want to borrow and to hone their list of equipment. Today, the Library of Things is a self-service model housed in a public library. The team has continued to learn, share insights in the UK ▶



and further afield, and a second site has now opened in East London.

Large challenges are unlikely to be resolved through a single intervention, so a response to issues of scale is to take a portfolio approach to experimentation, where a handful of interventions are trialled together, each aiming towards a shared goal or outcome. For example, the issues that underpinned the Library of Things could inspire a host of different interventions, from enabling local people to hold neighbourhood clothes swaps to the council running a marketing campaign. Trialling a range of initiatives together can result in not just more evidence of the impact of individual projects, but can also help to spot where changes have a dynamic impact, working well in combination. This approach is akin to the investment world, where a venture capitalist knows that only some of her investments will pay off. The difference here is that the returns sought are insight and impact, so dedication to building in impact measures and learning is critical.

The RSA has experiments running in the fashion system, to better understand how we might move away from the current incredibly damaging linear ‘take, make, waste model’. In partnership with the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, our Student Design Awards programme is encouraging the next generation of designers to apply their skills to the challenge through a ‘Make Fashion Circular’ design brief, and we are

in the process of developing a programme of support for pioneering creatives that connects them with institutions and businesses that want to make change. With the support of the JJ Charitable Trust, the RSA is also creating a new project aimed at understanding how communities can be supported to drive local change in fashion consumption. These projects take different approaches to understanding how to create a more regenerative fashion system, increasing our opportunities for learning and for identifying further innovations.

From problem solving to pattern shifting

Humans have an affinity for spotting and solving problems, and this is important. But it is even more valuable to recognise patterns, as they provide information that can help prevent new problems emerging and tackle root causes. Again, the fashion industry provides a useful example. As the problems with the industry have become more evident, people have set out to solve them, and in recent years we have seen a proliferation of brands making tweaks to their collections, from using organic cotton to recycled polyester. These are important responses, but they are insufficient and do little to address the issues of waste or labour conditions. We need to shift our focus to look at the deeper patterns; questioning the function of the industry, addressing consumption patterns and the values that link human worth to what we look like, and tackling the economic structures that incentivise businesses to make more.

The Boundless Roots Community, led by RSA Fellow Leila Hoballah, is encouraging this shift in thinking. People from organisations such as the UN Environment Programme and Transition Network are leading action inquiries into sustainable living and exploring the deeper patterns underpinning our lives, such as privilege and power dynamics.

In their paper, *Earth Logic: Fashion Action Research Plan*, fashion academics Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham are encouraging us to shift our thinking from what they call “growth logic” – where the focus is on driving economic growth at all costs – to “Earth logic”, where the focus is on planetary and human wellbeing.

When spotting patterns, what you choose to notice and what you choose to ignore matters greatly. Within discussion of the circular economy, for example, less attention has been paid to what it might mean for social rather than environmental impacts. What might it mean for us to rent rather than own some products? Would it encourage consolidation of power in the hands of the better off or some businesses? Or might we find sharing and rental models which

instead build community cohesion? Choosing what information is noticed, and who is involved in spotting and shifting patterns, brings us to the third shift in mindset needed.

From single to multiple perspectives

Collectively, we often seek out specific expertise to solve problems. This can work well for challenges where domain expertise is critical. But for complex problems that require systemic change, a diversity of ideas is needed. Complex problems look different from different perspectives; no one person can see the full picture. To have the best chance of creating a more equitable and sustainable future, it is important to proactively embrace different perspectives, experiences and ways of seeing the world.

Consider the UK government's commitment for the country to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. How should we do this? Climate scientists can tell us how global temperatures are changing, engineers can tell us how renewable energy can be created and architects can tell us the energy efficiency of the housing stock. But none of them alone can tell us how we should become net zero. They can only bring their specific expertise to bear. For the commitment to be realised, we need the behaviours of a whole country to change. Individuals, companies and communities need to see the role they can play and commit to that role. In the UK, it is reassuring then to see six parliamentary select committees addressing these issues, not only asking for evidence and advice from experts, but also commissioning a citizens' Climate Assembly. Over 100 citizens were selected via sortition and met at the start of this year to hear from a range of speakers, discuss the challenges and reach conclusions. The outputs from these discussions will form the basis of the select committees' future work. Rather than mandating hierarchical change, this form of leadership creates a space for discussion among a group with diverse perspectives.

Leadership in complexity

Understanding what kind of leadership we need will be critical to managing the tension between getting back to business as usual and stepping into a different future. Where there is the threat of chaos, hierarchical and centralised leadership can create stability and enact change at scale. Although it is too early to judge how effective governments' responses have been to the Covid-19 crisis, we know that we depend on strong, clear government action informed by scientific expertise.

But government action alone will not steer a course through complex, challenging periods. The challenges

posed by Covid-19 have been met by inspirational leadership from many areas outside of government: fashion designers altering production lines to create open source masks, various manufacturers repurposing their factories to provide vital goods, thousands of communities establishing mutual aid groups, and more. This emergent, responsive and context-based leadership is key. The opportunity for working with complexity and enabling participation, pattern-spotting and experimentation is enormous. It should be nurtured, so we can react to the most extreme of circumstances in a way that knits together diverse perspectives and produces a nuanced, effective way forward.

Complexity brings us together. This can make problem solving seem overwhelming, but by approaching this complexity in a way that encourages experimentation and the thoughtful analysis of patterns, and allows room for the embrace of other perspectives, we can find ways to create a better future. ■

■ *An expanded version of this article can be found at medium.com/rsa-journal*

RSA Fellowship in action

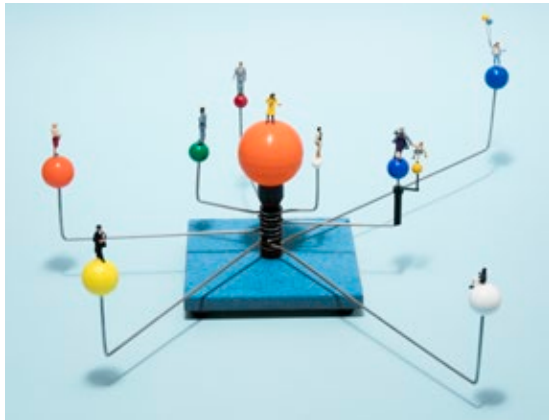
SwopItUp

Gayle Cajee FRSA was inspired to help lead the development of SwopItUp by her daughter, Zaqiya, who, then 15, wanted to support her peers in taking action against climate change by accessing the 'pre-loved' clothes market. Zaqiya found that clothes swaps and charity shops were primarily aimed at an older audience so Gayle, who is a circular economy and marketing consultant, decided to see if she could help SwopItUp to realise its full potential.

Working with students from the first trial school, together they developed SwopItUp, which brings clothes exchanges into secondaries, with the first event held at Zaqiya's school in February last year. Since then, two further secondary schools have got involved in the scheme.

The programme has received a £10,000 RSA Catalyst Scaling Grant to help it expand into other schools, and to ensure the model can work at a national level. SwopItUp provides schools with the framework for students to be able to organise and run clothes swaps without requiring significant input from teachers. "At first schools were resistant to climate action for this age group. But in the past 12 months the amount of action has been quite impressive," said Gayle. The aim is that SwopItUp becomes an established part of the school year, with parents and students able to plan ahead for the next clothes swap.

■ *To find out more about SwopItUp, contact Gayle at gayle@swopitup.org, or visit www.swopitup.org*



DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

The RSA held the first International Week for Democratic Innovation event in January this year, where participants discussed best practice in deliberative democracy

by Riley Thorold
 @riley_thorold

Beneath the surface noise of day-to-day politics, a different kind of tune is picking up volume. Deliberative democracy sounds very distinct from everyday democracy, valuing lengthy deliberation and informed negotiation over grandstanding speeches and point-scoring debates, and around the world people are increasingly choosing it to counteract the cacophony of business-as-usual politics. The OECD calls this trend a “deliberative wave”, which became the unofficial motto of the first ever International Week for Democratic Innovation (IWDI), hosted and led by the RSA at the end of January in Manchester.

Over the week, attendees had the opportunity to learn about developments in deliberative democracy around the world. The Innovating Local Democracy conference heard from international pioneers in this field. This included practitioners in Gdansk who have led legally binding citizens’ assemblies on a number of topics, and experts from Madrid who successfully instituted a rotating ‘observatory’ of randomly selected citizens in the city council.

We were also able to share lessons about local projects that have come out of the Innovation in Democracy programme, a government-funded experiment in deliberative democracy co-delivered by the RSA. The programme involved three UK local authorities running citizens’ assemblies on a variety of topics. The results of the independent evaluation are yet to be released but the headline takeaway is encouraging: citizens’ assemblies can not only support good decision-making at the local level, but can also help to restore participants’ trust in political institutions and their sense of civic duty.

One of the key events of the week was the Democracy R&D Annual Convention. This is supported by a network of academics, practitioners, journalists and campaigners driving deliberative reform around the world. Since last year’s meeting, members of the Democracy R&D Network have been busy; in Ostbelgien (the tiny German-speaking region of Belgium) a group of members drew up plans for a new permanent chamber of randomly selected citizens, which will set the agenda each year for further citizens’ assemblies. Since their meeting, this has become a reality.

Throughout the week, two key themes were raised again and again: standards for public deliberation, and deliberation and climate change. Deliberative democracy may be in vogue, but it is important that new converts appreciate the meticulous planning and substantial cost that goes into running a successful citizens’ assembly. Attendees discussed the need for well-defined standards that did not preclude flexibility, dynamism or innovation, all of which remain vital.

Thanks to Extinction Rebellion and its call for a national citizens’ assembly on climate and ecological justice, deliberative democracy in the UK is closely identified with the climate crisis. We discussed how deliberative democracy can generate the kind of policymaking we need to tackle the climate emergency. Insulated from the pressures of party and money, deliberation helps citizens to confront complex issues and to arrive at coherent and nuanced responses. Over the next year, we will continue to explore and interrogate deliberative democracy processes; who knows what we will achieve next? ■

Riley Thorold is an Assistant Researcher in the Public Services and Communities team at the RSA

Photography by Franck Allais

CREATING LOW-CARBON COMMUNITIES

Fellows in Warwickshire are bringing people together to take climate action in rural areas

by Bob Sherman and Hugh Tottle



Wanting to respond to the climate challenge, in 2010 we set up Harbury Energy Initiative, a village volunteer-run group that aims to save energy, reduce household costs and cut carbon within our community.

Looking to share our experiences and connect with others, we went to Making Places Last in Birmingham, a sustainability conference organised by another Fellow, David Middleton. This inspired us to hold our own event to bring people together in exploring how to nurture low-carbon rural communities.

Six months later, in April 2019, our event – How Low-Carbon is Your Community – took place. We filled Harbury Village Hall and attendees included local councillors, representatives of community groups and businesses. A number of Fellows also took part, among them Jacqueline McGlade, a former chief scientist to the UN Environment Programme, who lives locally. We have since remained in touch with Jacqueline, using what we have learned in Harbury to support her work developing a low-carbon community centre in Sekenani in the Maasai Mara, Kenya.

Soon after, two Fellows, Jacky Lawrence and John Stott, hosted events in neighbouring villages, Napton and Henley. These have generated wider interest and we are supporting the development of more events, both virtual and face-to-face in the future.

At these events, experts present their insights and attendees discuss issues and ideas and vote on which future actions should be prioritised. Climate action groups have been formed to turn those ideas into reality. In Napton, the group inspired the local primary school to set up an eco-club and plant a wild-flower meadow.

A local hub is now evolving to pool resources and make it easier for other rural communities to access information and connect. Ideas that have emerged include: mobilising young people to organise sessions with local leaders, where they inform them of their ideas and concerns; and creating a network of ‘demonstration’ low-carbon homes and buildings.

The Fellowship network has been a great support. We took part in an RSA Sustainability Network online event, which helped us learn from other Fellows’ projects. And we have had support from Henry Greenwood FRSA and the Green Schools Project as we continue to try to engage with local schools.

In March 2020, we took part in a three-tier local government event on waste and energy. There was a lot of interest in what we are doing and Warwickshire County Council now seems keen to support our future activity, which is fantastic.

Connecting local communities for mutual encouragement and support is such a simple idea, but it also feels so powerful. We are helping people to effect local change in the face of a global challenge that can otherwise seem overwhelming. ■

Top tips

- The RSA exists for rural communities as much as cities. Reach out and see how you can engage
- Connect with the Fellowship network. Most of the RSA’s events are online
- Engage your local councillors and keep them in the loop about what you are doing. It might take some time, but it’s worth persisting

Bob Sherman is former Chief Horticultural Officer at Garden Organic, and founder and Chair of Harbury Energy Initiative, Harbury e-Wheels and the Low Carbon Warwickshire Network. Hugh Tottle is a photographer and co-founder of Harbury e-Wheels



The Victorian approach to waste products could teach us a thing or two about sustainability

by Emily Cockayne
 @Rummage_work

Eurythenes plasticus might sound like a mid-80s pop duo, but in fact it is a recently discovered tiny sea creature, named for the plastic microfibrils found in its digestive tract. The problematic interaction of plastic and nature has a long and surprising history. Bakelite, the first fully synthetic plastic, was invented in 1907. Before then, there had been many different non-synthetic plastics, made using recycled materials. A surge of plastic ingenuity followed the Great Exhibition of 1851; indeed, many Victorian men connected with the RSA helped to develop and promote these new substances, all made in imitation of natural materials such as tortoiseshell, ivory, horn, oak and ebony.

The production of these new plastics involved recycling waste products; *bois durci* was made from sawdust and slaughterhouse blood. In Birmingham in the 1850s, Alexander Parkes invented Parkesine, the first proper plastic. It used cotton waste dissolved in acids and solvents, with oils added to improve malleability. Later products were similar – xylonite was a tweaked version of Parkes’s recipe, and ivoride was made using formaldehyde and sour milk.

Dyes also utilised waste products, such as coal tar left behind during gasification, and dye-makers and plastic producers worked together. Parkesine won a prize medal at the International Exhibition of 1862 (the same exhibition showcased William Henry Perkin’s new dye, ‘mauveine’). New plastics were made ready-dyed, to look like the materials they replaced. The trademark device adopted by the British Xylonite Company – a tortoise and an elephant walking out together – reflected this marvellous mimicry of natural, sometimes dwindling, raw materials.

Hordes of low-paid women worked in the initial production stages of each material, processing the recycled matter. Because plastics could be moulded, they permitted novel mass production of some items, including artificial teeth, combs, buttons and chessmen. Imitation wood handles for umbrellas combined ground sawdust with glue (itself made using animal by-products); xylonite collars became best-sellers. Rubbish was turned into shiny new, wipe-clean items. A veritable horticultural show of plastics was on display at exhibitions, using root vegetables subjected to sulphuric soakings; for example, you could see artificial horn made from turnips and “an excellent coral” from carrots. Billiard balls made from peeled potatoes were exhibited at the Paris International Exhibition in 1867, alongside a piano made from papier-mâché.

In the early 20th century, synthetic plastics replaced the earlier concoctions that had incorporated waste products. New plastics created growing demand for raw materials, impatience with old things and leftovers, and problems of disposability and durability we now recognise as part of an ecological crisis. There is now a slight but perceptible movement back to non-synthetic hard products. Students from the Royal College of Art and Imperial College London have developed a biodegradable plastic using lobster shells, and many Victorian recipes could be brought back or adapted.

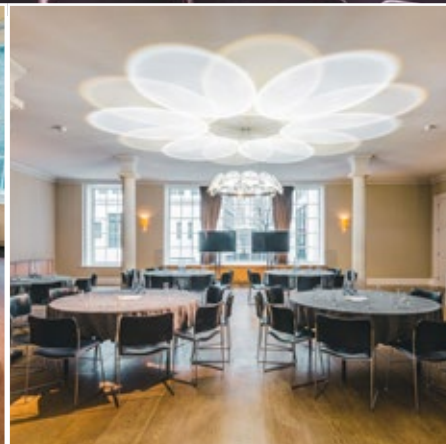
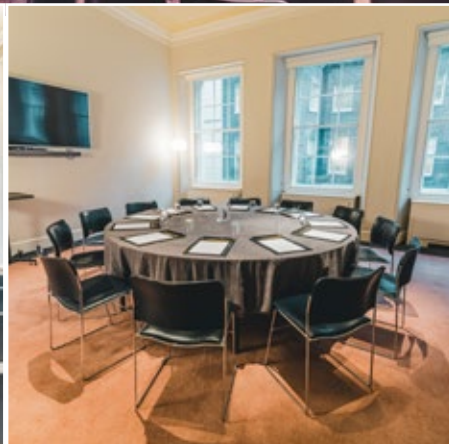
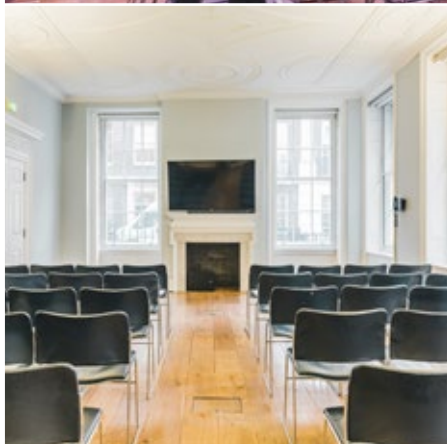
Inevitably, a move to make more sustainable plastics using animal by-products will not be welcomed with universally open arms. Maybe we could tap our own ingenuity to overcome this. Alternatives are already in production: cutlery made from avocado or olive stones, and polystyrene substitutes made from mushrooms. ■

Emily Cockayne is a senior lecturer in early modern history at the University of East Anglia. Her book, *Rummage: A History of the Things We Have Reused, Recycled and Refused to Let Go*, is out now

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Find out more www.thersa.org/coffeehouse