

Tony Kendle

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Too Rough to Go Slow

To have a plausible understanding of what the world will look like in ten years a useful starting point would be a good understanding of the present. Unfortunately, we aren't always successful at recognising the major forces that are already in play. It is often said that one of the core problems of sustainable development is the need to get people to make changes today to support the well-being and equity of future generations. This is becoming a redundant issue. Global change is happening at such a pace that generations alive today will see major consequences unfold, and could directly benefit from action.

Take climate change for example. It's almost certain that the first deaths from climate change have already happened – even in the UK. The difficulty in recognising them is understandable against the background noise of normal weather-related deaths. If we follow the slightly paradoxical step of ignoring the weather for the moment and see what other impacts climate change is having, there is no doubt that we are already living in a new world. Things are moving faster than many of us have noticed. From central government down there is a new vibrancy and interest in localisation and domestic resource security that will in itself create new patterns of living and working. The interface between climate change and human rights is starting to bring difficult issues such as environmental refugees more into focus. The Climate Change Act was one of the most radical pieces of legislation to be passed in recent history. The commitment to reduce UK carbon emissions by 80% in 40 years means an absolute transformation in the way that we live, and yet it attracted almost no public debate.

Some of the critics of the Act complained that, in passing it, the government had little idea of actually how to deliver what it required. This is bound to be true, but in many ways that makes the legislation even more remarkable as a commitment. The government will not have all of the answers because nobody has them. A dependence on cheap and freely available fossil fuels is so deeply woven into our society that we probably can't even imagine the diversity of impacts this will have. It will be such a transformative change that any distinction between mitigation and adaptation becomes meaningless – we have to re-imagine and rebuild a world. Forty years to do this is no time at all – it's within the working lifetime of anyone in their 20s today.

So, even if the inevitable big weather changes turn out to be decades away, political changes – including to the way that money flows – have begun already and more will come rapidly. Mechanisms such as carbon budgeting and carbon reduction commitments are already impacting on public and private sector behaviour. And

as with any major change there will be victims, but also winners – the first climate change billionaires are already emerging.

This is also a situation full of uncertainty and unpredictable change. The interaction of climate change, energy costs and a host of other issues such as global political shifts, financial crises and demographic change add up to a wild picture. Anyone who thinks they know how this will play out is likely to be proved fabulously wrong. The challenge to policy makers in the public sector (and elsewhere) is to plan for a radical change, but without certainty of the detail, and in the sure knowledge that the policies themselves will have major, and sometimes unintended, consequences. These will be times when the rules of the past may no longer be the successful rules of the future.

It's hard not to wonder whether a commitment to 'evidence based government' will become a hindrance in such circumstances, or become corrupted into an excuse for inaction. We will also have to revisit our models of risk, especially in the public sector, and frame them more around the risks of inaction as well as the risks of action. The risks of failing to achieve carbon reduction are frightening, but also unknown and hard to deal with. Action itself also carries risks, but these are easier ones to predict and to address.

Uncertain times do not mean that there is no way of deciding how to move forward. New concepts are emerging amongst policy thinkers in response. Philosophies of 'sustainability' always seemed to carry an undertone of trying to achieve some sort of balanced, perfect state where the wild destructive forces that threaten us are finally tamed. This increasingly does not feel like a credible vision for the century we face, if it ever was. More and more often we hear reference to 'resilience' strategies, exploring how we make our society less vulnerable to sudden shocks and change. More relevant still are the 'transition' ideas, because they make explicit the understanding that, in order to survive change, transformation is not avoidable. Any perceived choice between mitigation and adaptation is meaningless. Society is an ongoing journey of adventure, not a destination to be reached.

So how can we strengthen the ability of our communities and organisations to respond to such an unknown future? We need to have more to say than simply to list the things we may need to give up. We need to do everything we can to foster trust and mutual support. We have to examine our commitment to ideas of creativity, innovation and entrepreneurial behaviour and be honest about what it really means to foster these qualities. We can't promote creativity whilst simultaneously demanding predictable

outcomes or rigid curricula in education. We can't support entrepreneurial behaviour in the public sector whilst simultaneously demanding no risk with public money. It's not as if our current systems always work well anyway. Whilst auditors chased pennies across the country in the name of probity, most of the money in the country evaporated because of the financial crisis.

Hardest to deal with will be the 'soft' issues that come with time of major change – the loss of identity, purpose and confidence at both individual and community levels. We have a society where most people define success by the ownership of stuff, and we need to fill the vacuum if having things is no longer the cornerstone. For some people these issues may sound less important than questions of economic recession or energy prices, but they lie at the heart of extremism. There is no question that climate change sows the seeds of dangerous politics.

At the moment, the public sector policies for public engagement are pretty woeful. They exhibit an obsession with 'behaviour change' as if change were unavoidable. They betray also a fascination with the idea of individual, domestic, action. It's as if the government itself has developed a blind spot about the things that people can do only by acting together, and the need to build a constituency for change to act on the hard questions such as international forest protection.

Perhaps most challenging of all will be the need to find hope to enable us to move forward. Hope is a powerful thing because it provides the motor for action. Without it we become paralysed and can't act. It's not the same as a naïve belief that things will turn out okay, but it hinges on recognising that uncertainty also means there will be upsides and opportunities we currently can't predict. As Rebecca Solnit says in *Hope in the Dark* 'there are always cracks in the obvious and the inevitable'.

The not-for-profit world is well used to finding those cracks and building narratives of hope. Arguably, the public sector is less used to this. One of the most important factors for re-making our world will be the ability to forge successful partnerships. These need a new vision and a framework for collaboration that goes beyond a 'service delivery' model or a gesture to volunteerism. We need visions for working together that are founded on common visions of social change and collaborative work but that also recognise the strengths of diversity.

Collective action means more than adding up the actions of individuals. If we don't understand that, we don't understand even the basics, and we will be the victims of the next ten years rather than the shapers of it.