

## Resurgence: Resilience and Climate Change

### Politicians as Leaders and Role Models

#### Introduction

I don't know how many of you have seen the wonderful film, **The Age of Stupid**. For those of you who haven't, it's based in 2050, and stars the actor Pete Postlethwaite, who is the lone survivor of some terrible catastrophe, caused by climate change. I'm haunted by some words from that film, and those words are these: Pete Postlethwaite's character in 2050, looking back to 2008 and 2009, and saying "**Why, knowing what they knew then, didn't they act, when there was still time?**"

And that question, why don't people act, and particularly, why don't politicians act with the urgency and ambition which the impending crisis requires, is one which we desperately need to find an answer to.

Why have we so far failed to galvanise sufficient political will?

Civil society campaigns like the 10:10 campaign are fantastically important – **but they have to be matched by real political leadership and commitment** – and it's still conspicuous by its absence.

It's salutary to compare the government's response to the climate crisis with its response to the economic crisis.

**Why is it that politicians can find the political will and resources to spend billions bailing out the banks – but can't find either the will or the resources to tackle the climate crisis?**

Have our imaginations really become so impoverished that we can't see that **while economic collapse is painful, environmental collapse is utterly unbearable** - the collapse of the planet's support systems, on which we depend for survival?

In trying to answer that question, one of the conclusions I've come to is that politicians are terrified of this agenda, **because they think that the action that's required to genuinely avoid the worst of climate change is too far-reaching**, too ambitious and – particularly – too negative in terms of its impact on our lifestyles, that they quite simply daren't propose it.

Of course there are other reasons too:

- **the power of corporate vested interest** – the power of lobbying in Brussels (never been lobbied to improve standards, to be more ambitious, to be more far-reaching – it's always about delaying timetables, diluting targets, diminishing ambition.
- The fact that **they're wedded to the capitalist paradigm** of pursuing ever more economic growth (cf bicycle – fall off if you stop)

Those reasons are important.

But maybe not so important as the basic fear of proposing radical change. **To me the psychology of climate change is every bit as relevant as the science of climate change.**

Unless we can understand the barriers to people's actions, we're never going to be successful.

Because essentially, up until now, politicians have lied to us.

They've pretended that they have the problem under control.

That a few low energy light-bulbs here, a bit of lagging on your loft there, and the problem is solved.

And that to do anything more is either unnecessary or involves too much "sacrifice".

We've got news for them: a transition to a post-carbon world doesn't have to be about sacrifice.

It's about jobs, it's about a more equal society, and it's about a way of life with the potential to be far more fulfilling than the turbo-charged consumerism which is peddled by politicians today.

**And that's why we say that our government's inaction is nothing less than a political crime.**

A crime not only because it's leading to the deaths, already, today, of around 300,000 people every year from causes associated with

climate change, according to the UN. But a crime because the changes that need to happen are precisely changes which are likely to increase our collective wellbeing, not destroy it.

From the work of NEF through to President Sarkozy's recent report on measurements of economic progress, written by Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen, it is clear that, beyond a certain level, extra GDP growth doesn't contribute to wellbeing – to the contrary, it is more likely to undermine wellbeing, through stress, community breakdown, loss of time with friends and family.

Graphs show that while GDP has more than doubled in the last 30 years, our assessment of our wellbeing has not increased at all – in fact, in many respects, it's actually gone down.

Indeed, so-called “economic growth” has already become “uneconomic”. The growth economy is failing. In other words, the quantitative expansion of the economic subsystem increases environmental and social costs faster than production benefits, making us poorer not richer, at least in high consumption countries.

We have to get this message out more effectively. We have to be much better at painting a compelling picture of a post carbon world which is positive and attractive.

And that's why I think all the work that people like George Marshall has done on the importance of communicating differently about climate change is so important.

If the climate debate continues to be framed in terms of “giving things up”, in terms of hair shirts, in terms of shivering around a candle in a cave, it’s not an appealing message, and it’s not going to work. (example of radio studios etc)

It’s hard to feel motivated by dread, or to feel excited about something when we’re forced to do it.

But we can feel excited about a zero carbon lifestyle if we recognise that it leads the way to a world that could be better for everyone – that climate change can be a catalyst for a positive transformation in our society that might otherwise never have happened.

Politicians need to get much better about talking about the positives – the huge increase in green jobs, the better public transport, the more vibrant local economies, the stronger local communities, the lower fuel bills, the kids playing in the streets again, the freedom to work less and spend more time with friends and family.

When people are lying on their death beds, they don’t often think, “I wish I’d spent more time in the office” – they’re more likely to wish they’d spent time doing the things they really wanted to do.

This isn’t an idle fantasy. The only thing that stops it is the lack of political will. And fortunately, political will is a renewable resource.

Politicians need to treat climate change not as another environmental issue, but as the greatest threat to our global security we've ever faced. We need the kind of war-time mentality that turned whole industries on their heads in a matter of months, not years – that brought about a complete change in our behaviour.

So what does our government need to do?

1, Well first, to recognise that the financial crisis, hugely painful as it is, ought to be seen as a wake-up call to the unsustainable model of deregulation, laissez-faire, and endless growth. This ought to be an opportunity to stand back and do things differently. But although there is some different thinking – sometimes in unexpected quarters – eg Adair Turner (former CBI, chair of FSA) and Tobin Tax – overall, the message from Gordon Brown is that we need to get back to business as usual as soon as possible. I think we need to be very clear that it's precisely business as usual that caused this crisis.

2. Second, we ought to be following the policies of the Green New Deal – a massive investment in energy efficiency and renewable energy, not only to address the climate crisis, but also to create hundreds of thousands of new jobs. Green energy is far more labour intensive than fossil fuels. It's been estimated that only 0.6% of Brown's £20 billion recovery plan was made up of new money for green measures – much less than in other countries.

3. Government needs to leave nuclear power and carbon capture and storage out of this equation – they're simply a distraction, since even if they were Green, neither could deliver big enough emission reductions fast enough, and both would deliver far too few jobs, too late to affect the current recession.

4. As well as renewables, we should be focussing on energy efficiency and conservation – not very glamorous, but by far the fastest way of creating new jobs, and cutting emissions. British Gas ran an interesting experiment recently. Eight British streets were asked to compete in cutting their fuel bills, using only the easiest of efficiency measures. Very quickly, they cut their CO<sub>2</sub> by an average 20% and their fuel bills by a third.

The IPPR, which monitored the programme for BG, worked out what it would cost to scale this experiment up nationwide. The answer proved to be 10,000 adviser jobs at an outlay of half a billion pounds. This outlay, for these 10,000 green jobs, would save £4.6 bn in the first year, and more than that in every subsequent year. That has to be described as a pretty good return on investment.

5. We need support for a windfall tax on the grotesque profits which the energy companies have made from the energy crisis. These are corporations whose profits have increased 6-fold in just 5 years, on the back of a double windfall – from high oil and gas prices last year, and from the £9 billion worth of carbon trading permits they were given by the government for free.

Just three companies – BP, Centrica, and Shell – together made £1000 profit every second over the first 6 months of last year – and that is quite simply obscene. Instead of going to the oil companies, that money should be used to help the tens of thousands who are facing fuel poverty this winter, as well as to help fund green energy solutions.

Politicians should stop banks we own, like RBS, from investing in the exploration of more fossil fuels – as well as cancelling the obscene salaries and bonuses that are continuing to be paid out.

We need new financial instruments, like local authority bonds, so that private savings and pension funds can be channelled in a way that is both secure and sustainable, enabling people to actively support their local communities.

We need radical regulation of the financial system, an immediate end to corporate abuses like tax havens, along with the introduction of a Tobin-like tax on all foreign exchange transactions. We need smaller, community banks and credit unions.

Crucially, we need to get away from the idea that we can grow our way out of our problems – we need development towards a steady-state economy, as well as better public education on population growth, and measures to enable women in poorer countries to control their own fertility.

That's a long list of things for politicians to do. But the role of citizens movements, NGOs, transition town movements, of climate camp, and indeed of meetings like this, is to open up the political space, and to change the definition of what is deemed "politically possible."

A million good ideas die before they're ever tried because someone says they're not politically realistic.

We're here because we recognise that, with less than 100 months left, it falls to this generation, to our generation, to act.

It's an awesome responsibility, but an amazing opportunity.

Together we are powerful.

A hundred years ago, Emmeline Pankhurst said, to be militant is a privilege. And she was right.

I hope all of us will leave here today resolved to be more militant, to stand up for what we believe in.

The time for action is now.

And we have to act in a number of ways – by lobbying politicians, by becoming politicians, by demonstrating alternative ways of living ourselves – but also by exploring and demonstrating a profound change in the relationship between ourselves and the ecosystem on which we depend:

I want to close with my favourite quotation from Vaclav Havel:

“What could change the direction of today’s civilisation? It is my deep conviction that the only option is a change in the sphere of the spirit, in the sphere of human conscience. It’s not enough to invent new machines, new regulations, new institutions. We must develop a new understanding of the true purpose of our existence on this Earth. Only by making such a fundamental shift will be able to create new models of behaviour and a new set of values for the planet.”

These are incredibly worrying times. But they can also be exhilarating.

I wish you militant, and also exhilarating, and times ahead.