Building Back Better

There is a lot of uncertainty over what the future holds right now. But one thing we can be sure of is that the coronavirus pandemic is a game changer. The world will never be quite the same.

But what will it look like?

Four Future States

Below is a scenario created by Simon Mair, a Research Fellow in Ecological Economics at the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity, University of Surrey. It looks at possible future states after COVID-19 in terms of the centralised government response, and the distributed social response, to the impact on the economy.

The full article can be found at https://theconversation.com/what-will-the-world-be-like-after-coronavirus-four-possible-futures-134085 and is well worth reading.
He writes:

“...Versions of all of these futures are perfectly possible, if not equally desirable.”

What Mair describes as “Barbarism” is probably the least desirable of these states. It describes basically a breakdown of civil society, where each individual is left to sink or swim alone. Think organised crime.

“...People die. Barbarism is ultimately an unstable state that ends in ruin or a transition to one of the other grid sections after a period of political and social devastation.”

The centralised response that prioritises exchange value over life is the State Capitalism we have been familiar with for several decades – a system dominated by the market, and driven by economic growth.

We know this system is environmentally unsustainable, and delivering increasing poverty and hardship to increasing numbers of people. That is not a good direction to return to.

Under the alternative centralised response, State Socialism:

“Citizens no longer rely on employers as intermediaries between them and the basic materials of life. Payments are made to everyone directly and are not related to the exchange value they create. Instead, payments are the same to all (on the basis that we deserve to be able to live, simply because we are alive), or they are based on the usefulness of the work.”

This sounds in many ways infinitely preferable, but will raise in many naturally conservative and change-averse minds the spectre of Communist-style state control and the loss of individual freedoms. We have already seen people with such views rebelling against the loss of individual freedom imposed by lockdown.

I believe the way to avoid such a loss of individual freedoms is for the move towards State Socialism to come from the bottom up, not from the top down. The key therefore lies not in the centralised response to COVID-19 (which is likely to be more State Capitalism) but in the distributed response.

The Grant Rule Trust has a remit to cultivate inclusive communities – that’s the decentralised “Mutual Aid” response that prioritises the protection of life. So that’s where we are adding our two-pennyworth.

Most ordinary decent folk would put life above economic return – we’ve seen that during the pandemic, around the world.

But we’re up against a global system that prioritises exchange value.
Current state vs Wellbeing

We Are Here

CURRENT SYSTEM
People and planet support money

WELLBEING
Money supports people & planet

We need to go here

The current system is driven by GDP. Its an indiscriminate measure of economic activity that doesn’t distinguish between building prisons and building hospitals. Walking rather than driving has a negative impact on GDP. Being a full time parent or carer has a negative effect on GDP – you are, in fact, invisible in terms of GDP.

It’s measuring the wrong thing, and it drives catastrophically dysfunctional behaviours, at all levels from the individual to the corporate. It delivers dismally poor government because economic growth is the only topic of political debate. Government simply abdicates its role in nurturing the common good.

I believe the recent breakdown of meaningful political debate and the polarisation of opinions is because mainstream politics and mainstream media are locked into the mindset of this old, dying system. We have witnessed years of the politics of denial - simply ignoring the negative impact of the State Capitalist model – dictating the agenda. The opposition has been the politics of protests – a constant outcry of complaint, a reaction against increasingly
irresponsible behaviour by those in power. Think of all those petitions, pressure groups, campaigns and demos. Think of the demonisation of Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn.

The State Capitalists have figured out that our sophisticated interconnected global economy is a chaotic adaptive system that no-one can control. The State Socialists haven’t.

Which is ironic. Because the future lies not in the nihilistic world of Barbarism, but in distributed socialism – aka mutual aid.

We cannot move forward from the politics of protest to the politics of hope until we recognise that the drivers behind the whole system have to change. That will take time.

So don’t despair just because it hasn’t happened yet. It’s a massive global culture change, and the behemoth is moving. We have actually made great progress since humanity first became aware of the impact of the current system on the environment – which I’m taking to be somewhere around the publication of Rachel Carson’s “Silent Spring” in 1962. It’s just that all the noise comes from the shallow end - from the old centralised methods of government that are increasingly losing the plot. They are wedded to a system that simply lines the pockets of the rich, and they’re busily creating the algorithms to ensure that system continues.

So we need to look at the story that allows those centralised powers to hold onto the status quo.

**Individual vs Society**

We have a culture that idolises individual freedom. It has been the fundamental driver of American culture and by default, global culture.

Think of all the cowboy heroes. The rags-to-riches myth of capitalism. The idea that “anyone can become President”. As if being the President was all about individual ambition, rather than the security and prosperity of the country.

It’s a culture that not only places totally unrealistic expectations on people, particularly those in the public eye, it always wants to find someone to blame for anything unforeseen or unwelcome that happens – you’ve just got to look at all the conspiracy theories infesting social media.

Economy not delivering? Must be all the “others” scrounging off hard working people like you & me.

Climate change? Well, you helped cause it, so you’ve got to fix it. If you aren’t an environmental saint just shut up about the environment.

Coronavirus? Be alert. Just make sure you don’t catch it, and if you do, it’s your fault. It’s my right to play golf or go to the beach or have a party and you Fascists can’t stop me.

This obsession with individual freedom all too often spills over into the voice of privilege and entitlement that rides roughshod over the rights of others.

More importantly, it denies the fact that humans are social animals, that we need connections to each other and to nature. That we need love.

Here in the UK, we have a Conservative government wedded to State Capitalism, making the absolute minimum social intervention in response to the COVID-19 crisis – just what is essential to maintain the economy. It’s being done in a grudging and mealy-mouthed fashion that leaves large numbers of people financially stranded. The whole Government response to the pandemic has shown a catastrophic level of incompetence and a callous disregard for life.

It is beyond the power of any individual, or group of individuals, to fix this. We have to re-discover collective responsibility, collective power and collective action.

When we come together, ordinary people are powerful. That’s why those in the centre want us to keep squabbling with each other.

What do we do about it?

Let’s go back to Simon Mair’s Four Futures and think about that Mutual Aid square.

Mutual Aid is what we’ve seen breaking out in neighbourhoods and communities around the world. People talking (from a distance) to neighbours they’ve never spoken to before. Rallying around to support the vulnerable. Standing on their doorsteps applauding key workers, and specifically health service workers. Community groups and businesses pivoting from their normal activities to deliver what’s needed right here, right now; key workers adapting to meet the changed circumstances. Charities stepping into the yawning gap left by decimated public services.

We’ve sought to bridge the sudden break in normal social connection through the internet, with concerts, quizzes, and chat as well as business meetings. More and more of us have started talking about what we value.

A poll of members of the Unlock Democracy campaign group found the vast majority were “familiar with the mutual aid or neighbourhood support groups that have sprung up during the Covid-19 crisis.” 34.7% were involved in supporting or even organising these groups.

These groups and networks could have an effect on community politics for months and years to come. The people who are most engaged in trying to change the political system are the ones active in them. It is not just words, not just the politics of protest. This is turning into tangible action. The politics of hope.

The politics of protest have done their job, creating multiple groups of campaigners on everything from Europe to social justice, from the environment to child poverty. The petition groups such as 38 Degrees and Avaaz have matured into organisations capable of mobilising
large numbers of people around the world. These groups are coming together behind a common agenda, to build a better human society than the one we lived in before COVID-19. But we do need to recognise that protecting human life demands a certain level of economic activity. It’s about balance, and it’s about where the money goes. We need to negotiate a new understanding between private and public sector, between government and governed. Between life and economic growth. We need to take a long hard look at what progress means.

The Barbarians are out there too, telling us it’s all about individual freedom.

Non-negotiables of a wellbeing economy

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<th>WEAll need…</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Dignity: Everyone has enough to live in comfort, safety and happiness</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Nature: A restored and safe natural world for all life</td>
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<td>3. Connection: A sense of belonging, and institutions that serve the common good</td>
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<td>4. Fairness: Justice in all its dimensions at the heart of economic systems, and the gap between the richest and poorest greatly reduced</td>
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<td>5. Participation: Citizens are actively engaged in their communities and locally rooted economies</td>
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https://wellbeingeconomy.org

The Wellbeing Economy Alliance is an umbrella organisation which brings together groups, individuals and governments working to develop an economy which prioritises life.

I think of this as “changing the points” on the global direction of travel. Instead of measuring national performance in terms of GDP, we measure it by the health and wellbeing of the people.

The Wellbeing agenda is only just touching the edges of old systems and old mindsets. We have a long way to go, but the longest journey has to start with a single step. And that step has been taken. We have the compass bearing.

WEAll organises its activities by “clusters” – Government, Business, and Narrative – narrative being the story individuals and communities tell ourselves about who we are and what success means.

In 2018, Scotland, Iceland and New Zealand set up the Wellbeing Economy Governments initiative (WEGo). The Welsh Assembly has just recently joined this group.
I think it’s worth looking at why Scotland is there as a founding member of this group. And perhaps why England is lagging behind in the Wellbeing Economy movement.

Scotland’s political history is socialist. Election after election, Scotland voted Labour and ended up being governed by Conservatives in Westminster. This is largely what fuels the independence movement.

With a proportional representation system in place, the SNP can only maintain a majority in the Scottish Parliament by staying in tune with public feeling. Their opponents are constantly prowling around looking for a chance to wrest the prize from them. As a recent immigrant to Scotland from the London commuter belt, I find the difference to the political debate is noticeable. There is proper, grown-up political debate at Holyrood.

The SNP-dominated Scottish Government, like Scottish independence itself, is informed by State Socialism. It’s inclusive nationalism.

I am reminded of a joke circulated on Facebook recently by a Scottish musician friend and staunch Scottish Nationalist.

**Scottish Citizenship Test**

- Do you want to be Scottish?
  - No: Aye, ye do, try again.
  - Yes: Great! Ye're in!

This is not to say there is no racism and bigotry in Scotland. Far from it. But government policy should never be based on racism and bigotry. It is the job of political leaders to lead. Not follow the lowest common denominator.

There are also, of course, very pragmatic reasons why the SNP wish to encourage rather than discourage immigration – Scotland has a dwindling and ageing population. It needs immigrants.

But the evidence tells us that the UK as a whole derives a net economic benefit from immigrant workers. They underpin the NHS. They work in many of our essential, but poorly paid, services. They do the jobs entitled people consider beneath them. And the state treats them like dirt.

Labour’s socialist agenda just suffered a major electoral defeat. The UK government, dominated by the Conservative Party, is based on State Capitalism and a mantra of individual liberty that has become a mantra of individual privilege in the distributed response.

Easy to see why there is tension between Westminster and Holyrood. Between England and Scotland.
Does it make a difference?

Scotland may not be the first exemplar to spring to English minds when you talk about health and wellbeing. But that’s precisely why the Scottish Government are tackling it. They are actually trying to do what they have been elected to do. Govern.

A recent initiative in Glasgow to treat alcoholism as an illness, requiring support and early intervention to prevent people falling victim to the social and mental health issues that drive alcohol abuse, has proved far more effective at reducing the problem than punitive measures.

We know from the evidence that investing in initiatives such as community policing are far more effective at tackling crime, particularly things such as gang-related violence. That rehabilitation of first offenders, particularly young offenders, is more effective at preventing repeat crimes than punishment. But we are not measuring these schemes by results. We are measuring GDP. Prevention and rehabilitation are invisible to GDP. Building more prisons is good for it. So such initiatives are seen as expendable by politicians and journalists tied into the old, dead system.

You can see from the representation of Scotland’s National Performance Framework reproduced below the kind of measures of success Scotland is aspiring to: “We live in communities that are inclusive, empowered, resilient and safe.”
On the WEAll website you can see a TED talk on Wellbeing Economics by Nicola Sturgeon. The Scottish Government is working to redress the endemic lack of trust in politicians by seeking to open up two-way conversations with community groups, businesses and individuals about how we make this work. About what the response to COVID-19 should be.

The Wellbeing journey has gone beyond aspiration into Scottish Government policy, and in the way in which that policy is delivered. It feeds through into the Government funding provided to the private sector, to the public sector and to charities and community groups.

There’s a long way yet to go and a lot of cultural and economic challenges to be overcome. Old systems and old mindsets make this a clunky, difficult, stop-start transition. But unlike England, Scotland has at least started the journey, and the Welsh Assembly are embarking on it too.

Community groups and neighbourhoods around the UK have responded to COVID-19, and Scotland’s response has been just as variable and just as dependent on individual initiative and capability as elsewhere. The virus has exposed both the strengths and the weaknesses of our communities, nationwide. The difference is that within weeks of lockdown, the Scottish government had made a fund available to support community groups switching their operations to COVID-19 related activities. English community groups had no such financial support. It was all down to individuals.

There has been a lot of “mutual aid” going on in Scotland, as elsewhere in the UK, for some years – in more isolated rural communities, particularly on the islands, it is a necessity. As a result, we have more of an infrastructure behind communities and social enterprises, though that infrastructure is not always as effective as it might be, particularly working in a culture obsessed with market economics.

The island of Eigg was an early pioneer of community buy-out of land, and it’s not just islands. There are lots and lots of bits of community-owned land in Scotland. My own village has a parcel that we’re trying to figure out what to do with. And anything we propose will need to demonstrate a positive environmental impact to qualify for the money that was – at least pre-COVID-19 – available from the Scottish Government to support community development initiatives.

One of the things Grant got interested in shortly before his death was permaculture. Permaculture is not just about cultivating the land. It is about studying patterns in nature and applying them to human activities and constructs.

It’s a principle of Permaculture that change comes not from the centre, where those who prospered most under the old system tend to gravitate, but from the margins. Here, in the Highlands of Scotland, we are on the margins. And I believe change is coming.

I urge friends elsewhere in the world to see the Scottish pride in their identity not as a threat, but as something to celebrate. To emulate. To see the bold direction taken by the Scottish government not as an aberration to be brought to heel by the wise men in London, but as the political leadership Westminster is not showing.

It’s not just Scotland that needs self-determination. It’s the whole UK.
The Grant Rule Trust

So, to sum up. The Grant Rule Trust will be setting our strategic compass by the principles of Wellbeing Economics. We are in the process of affiliating the Trust to the WEAll global community.

Wellbeing Economics embraces the “doughnut model” of economics, mapping more closely to reality – the economy sits within and supports human society, and human society operates within the envelope of the natural environment. This model was recently adopted by the Dutch Government and others around the world are considering it. The WEGo group of Iceland, New Zealand, Scotland and Wales already embrace it.

GRT & the Wellbeing Economic Model

The Trust will be looking to work with businesses, communities and individuals to design and deliver a new normal where the economy serves people and planet. To that end, we’ve identified three areas of focus:

- Localisation: local economies, local services, local food-production, local sustainability. Grassroots engagement in a Wellbeing Economy agenda.
- Sustainability: rebalancing the relationship between human activities and the natural world
- Wellbeing: celebrating individual stories and empowering and enabling human beings to be the best they can be, whole, healthy and connected both to each other and the world around them.
We hope to use the Trust’s expertise in systems engineering and organisational culture change, our collective experience in environmental conservation and the network’s creative talents in music and story-telling to feed into the Build Back Better movement.

My personal dream is to create a Wellbeing Economy in the UK one community at a time.

The Dream Team

The final slide is adapted from one of Grant’s. It shows his representation of what he called “the DNA of an effective organisation” – the team and attributes needed to efficiently and reliably deliver the results and outcomes you seek to deliver.

LEADERSHIP = CREATIVES
   Envision, Inspire & Enable.

OPERATIONS = ORGANISERS
   Team-build, empower and energise

PROBLEM-SOLVING = SCIENTISTS
   Root cause analysis,
   evidence-based solution choices

SOLUTIONS = ENGINEERS
   Apply knowledge. Test theories.
   Challenge assumptions. Build robust solutions

I have added to this some of my thoughts about the personal attributes that map to the different roles. While we are all able to contribute to each of the roles, some are a far more natural fit than others. As a “big picture” thinker, I identify with the creative and organisational mindset – I spent my working life as an administrator, and my leisure time writing and making music. My husband Andy is an engineer through and through.

The journey is a long one, as I said at the beginning – in fact, I’m not sure it has any end point. So let’s enjoy it. Play to the team strengths. Don’t ask a dyed-in-the-wool scientist to organise anything. Don’t ask a floaty creative to conduct root-cause analysis. But do ask the scientist to respect the creative vision - and ask the creative genius to respect the science. And ask both to respect the operations person who can actually get the thing done and the engineer who can build it.

Working together on a vision of hope is fun. Its inspiring. It doesn’t matter that Utopia is unattainable. Simply by starting out on the road together we’ve kind of got there already.