How Is Your New Normal Looking?

Much the same as the old one, only worse?

So we’ve come through the first shock of coronavirus, and we’re starting to come out of lockdown and get the economy going again. And for many, if not most, of us, that means trying to do all the things we did before within the continuing constraints imposed by managing a pandemic.

When we all stopped for a while, and the skies cleared, the roads fell silent and nature took a long breath of relief, it seemed like there was a chance to change. We were forced to reflect on what we value. Many of us were given the gift of time, which is so often missing from relentlessly busy lives. When we have time to cook, we don’t have to eat junk. When we have time to think, maybe we make better decisions.

Now that brief glimpse of a different ‘normal’ is slipping away from us. It feels like that chance for change is being quickly wrested out of our hands.

But I said in the first webinar of this series – this is a long journey. There is no point looking for the Grand Design when we’re still laying the foundations.

And we have started.

**Dreams happen overnight. Reality takes such a damn long time.**

There is a perception that the world of global finance did not learn the lessons of the economic collapse of 2008/9. That’s not true. Change takes time.

In 2015 the UN published their 17 Sustainable Development goals. These goals have driven a movement to embed environmental and social responsibility into financial markets and thereby into business practice.

The first significant shift came when pension funds – who tend to look at long-term returns rather than quick wins – realised that sustainability simply meant prudent investment choices. Investing in industries that had a future. Not the ones killing it off.
The impact is now rippling through the financial markets to change the way corporate business thinks about and measures success. What it competes on. What investors consider when they decide where to put their money.

The term used by the business community is Environmental and Social Governance. One of the most encouraging of the many newsletters that clutter up my inbox is one I get from Funds Europe “the business strategy magazine for Europe’s asset management professionals.” This is an extract from an article published in June 2020 headed, “Covid-19: ‘Are we at the tipping point of ESG?’” (https://www.funds-europe.com/news/covid-19-are-we-at-the-tipping-point-of-ESG)

“We believe a tipping point for investors has already been reached and we see Environmental & Social Governance increasingly embedded in the corporate and public psyche.”

The three key reasons they give for taking this view are:

• Companies can measure, manage and compete on achieving sustainable development goals
• Environmental and social factors can impact on stock or bond prices
• People worldwide ARE concerned about climate change

Like it or not, we do live in a global market economy. The law of supply and demand applies, and one of the main reasons Funds Europe reckons that ESG has passed the tipping point to being embedded in financial dealings is because the “push” from the UN is matched by a corresponding “pull” from the people.

The Funds Europe article goes on to quote a survey conducted by The Yale Program on Climate Change Communication in April 2020 showed that 73% of Americans think climate change is happening and 66% are at least “somewhat worried” about it. This is a survey conducted in the middle of a pandemic, in a country governed by a President who denies and actively tries to accelerate climate change and environmental degradation.

And the US is probably lagging behind - an Ipsos Mori survey “Climate Change and the Weather”, conducted in the UK in July 2019, showed 85% of respondents were concerned about climate change, with concern crossing party political boundaries. Although Conservative supporters were the least concerned, it was only compared to supporters of other parties. 83% of Conservative voters are concerned about climate change; 42% are very concerned.

The main reason people are still arguing over climate change is because they don’t know what to do about it. This is a massive change we have to make, and the political circus we’ve been living with in recent years not only seems irrelevant, it is.

**Make Your Voice Heard**

We cannot go on ignoring the problem and we cannot trust those ‘in power’ to make the right choices.

Life is not a command-and-control hierarchy where governments can wave a magic wand and resolve complex issues at a stroke. The more apparent power an individual holds, the more
used they are to being seen as a leader, the more daunted they must be by the prospect of dealing with this huge issue that they don’t have the tools to deal with. The danger is that they ignore it. Because it’s not going to go away.

Sustainability transcends party politics – nature, like viruses, doesn’t listen to human arguments and doesn’t behave how humans want it to behave. But that’s not to say we can’t get a good understanding of how it does behave.

Environmentalists have spent more than twenty years gathering data and enhancing our scientific understanding of the problem. That’s why a just transition to sustainable living depends on science-based planning. Bigotry and dogma won’t get us there, and the time for learning how to distinguish expert advice from snake oil salesmen is long overdue.

We need to be holding our politicians in general and our Government in particular properly to account for delivering the will of the people. Tackling both climate change and coronavirus can only be done at community level, and we need to be putting pressure on our Government to support community capability with intelligent funding, effective organisation strategies, and necessary legislation. The time for fermenting divisions and going to war with ourselves is over; the time for cross-party co-operation is here.

I recently joined with a group of others from my constituency of Argyll and Bute to lobby our MP as part of a mass lobby organised by the Climate Coalition. My MP (SNP) shares many of my views on many things, including climate change. Yours may not. But they are still there to represent you in Parliament, and you need to make your views known to them.

In the days of letters, if an MP received five letters on a subject, it was a matter of interest to him/her. It may be slightly more in the days of emails, but nevertheless my MP was taken aback to be confronted with nearly 30 constituents prepared to take the time and trouble to attend a virtual meeting with him. He offered us half an hour and gave us forty five minutes (I think we almost made him late for his next appointment) for a very constructive meeting that has led to an on-going working relationship, and the setting up of the Time for Change (Argyll & Bute) group to co-ordinate our strategy. We are seeking similar levels of engagement with our MSPs and with our local council.

There is no reason you cannot do the same in your constituency. Every MP is concerned about the views of his/her constituents. It is supposed to be what our much vaunted First Past the Post electoral system prizes above all else. So use it. Use your democratic rights while you still have them.

For three hundred years or more, Western civilisation has been evolving a view of the world that puts humankind separate from, and in control of, the natural world. Nature has become a resource to be plundered. And now she is presenting us with the bill.

Another word for “sustainable” is “living”. I leave you to draw your own conclusions on the synonym for “unsustainable”.

We cannot tackle climate change or coronavirus through individual efforts alone, or even national efforts alone. These are things we have to tackle together.

Nationally and internationally, individually and as communities, we need to focus our resources on human wellbeing and sustainable living.
The Doughnut Model

The Wellbeing Economy Alliance brings together all the science, research and knowledge that can transition us to a globally sustainable way of living – and not only in terms of climate change. It is no accident that the country that appears at the moment to have dealt most effectively with COVID-19 is New Zealand – a country with a government that has put the principles of the Wellbeing Economy at the heart of its policies and planning.

Collectively, humanity knows what a low carbon economy looks like, a good deal about how it can work and a lot about the benefits it will deliver. All that is lacking is the political will to transition to it. Politics is driving us apart at the very time we need to be coming together.

We talk about politics, all the time, in terms of Left vs. Right. This is predicated on the argument that the economy relies on a balance between capital and labour; in the UK we have political parties representing those two poles and our electoral system operates on a fairly basic system of adversarial politics which puts one or the other in charge. Increasingly, it has put Capital in charge, as the electorate figured those who dealt in money probably knew how to run an economy. (Whether they do or not is another matter.)

Other than that, the electorate are not usually asked to express an opinion about political matters, and when we are, we are subject to an avalanche of misinformation which leaves us ill-equipped to reach an informed opinion.

Environmentalism transcends the Capital vs Labour argument. It is in no-one’s interests to prop up a system that is destroying the conditions for life on earth. All we’re really arguing about is how quickly we do can change it. And if we listen to the science, we don’t have that long before it’s too late to do anything except cope with the consequences of inaction. Rather as Britain has done with coronavirus.

The financial crash of the 1930s brought the realisation that economic activity relies on labour as well as capital. The financial crash of 2009 shows us that economic activity must take place within the envelope of environmental constraints, including the constraints of the human society in which it operates. The global economy must serve people and planet. Environmental and social responsibility.

Politicians have been chronically slow to adapt to this fundamental shift of emphasis. I believe what we have witnessed in the past couple of decades is not an argument between Left and Right, but the politics of denial which ignores the fault lines of the current economic
system – exemplified in the Trump administration – and the politics of protest, which simply points the finger and demands that someone else fixes all the problems.

The good news is that many if not all the pressure groups and campaigning organisations that have been feeding the politics of protest are beginning to build a consensus around a just transition to a sustainable economic model – it is exciting and exhilarating to find out just how much work is going on around the world to deliver that just transition. The pandemic has transformed the politics of protest into the politics of consensus – or as I prefer to describe it, the politics of hope.

But if you’re outside that bubble of optimism, the popular political discourse is still mired in the old battles, nursing old grudges and continually picking at old wounds. That is why the next Trust webinar will be focussing on individual Wellbeing. Before we can heal the divisions in our society, we need to heal ourselves. Only then can we create an ethos of mutual aid which allows us to move forward in hope.

Constructive and rational debate comes from a place of calm reflection and a sense of responsibility; not from anger and fear, insecurity and powerlessness. Freedom is not the shrill voice of entitlement.

**What We Learned About the Economy**

In lockdown, we learned that the economy can hit the pause button, albeit temporarily. And maybe we began to realise what the economy is.

For most of us, ‘the economy’ is not really about abstracts like GDP or financial markets, oil prices or hedge funds. It’s about having an income. Where we buy our food. Where we live, and how we get to work. Whether our families are safe and properly provided for, whether the children are being educated and the old folks looked after. Its about medical supplies and protective equipment. Health care. And public services.

It is about whether we have a healthy, secure, prospering population. Whether this is a country we can be proud of living in.

The word ‘economy’ comes from a combination of the Greek words for “household management”. Managing a household means providing for all the basic needs of the people who live in the household – cooking, buying provisions, storing provisions, preserving provisions. Making sure everyone has somewhere to sleep, clean clothes, fresh bedding. Looking after the children, the sick and the old folks.

So that’s what a national economy should do. That’s the reason we’re all supposedly going back to work, coronavirus or no coronavirus – because the economy is all about managing our day-to-day living.

The Bank of England says “Economics is the study of scarcity, because resources are limited - while the demand for them is infinite. Basically, we always want more.” Now we need to get back to generating the income, educating the children, getting the monetary ‘blood’ circulating around the system again, perhaps it’s time to question that statement.

Do we always want more? Or do we want “better”? Do we, individually and as communities, have our own Environmental and Social Responsibility goals?
Recession or Transition?

Economically, the outlook is grim. The Bank of England forecasts a 14% reduction in economic activity – and normally, they talk in terms of 1% or 2% either way. The Great Depression of the 1930s saw an 8% drop.

What does “a 14% reduction in economic activity” mean? Have you heard any politician explain it? Have you heard any journalist ask the question? Where is the science-based planning behind the political response to that forecast?

In the UK in particular, we face not only the ongoing impact of COVID-19 but also the lurking threat of No Deal Brexit. I have to question why it is that the result of the Brexit referendum was never interpreted by any politician anywhere for what I believe it was – a sign of a deeply divided population and deeply dysfunctional democracy. Division does not benefit any of us in the UK. It does benefit malignant foreign forces.

Does that mean we just stand like rabbits in the headlights and wait to be run down by the driverless juggernaut rushing towards us?

Well, let’s rewind and come at this from another direction.

The Bank of England forecasts a 14% reduction in economic activity. This means we are embarking on a transition to a sustainable economy. The kind that will allow us to restore the balance between human activity and environmental sustainability. The kind that allows us to focus on quality rather than quantity, on durable rather than cheap, on repairable rather than disposable. On different, more equitable models of wealth distribution that value individual human beings as individual human beings, not ‘workers’ or ‘consumers’, ‘capitalists’ or ‘communists’. On managing the household properly.

Never have we had a better opportunity. The economy is drastically shrinking anyway. So let’s chaotically adapt and use it to our advantage. There are numerous little local initiatives springing up everywhere addressing different aspects of sustainable living, from local food production to recycling, from sustainable housing projects to community healthcare. Find out what’s going on in your neighbourhood – you might surprise yourself.

We can only address the environmental crisis together, and we can only address the economic crisis together. It’s time to stop allowing the noise and the nonsense divide us.

Unfortunately, we are saddled with a very centralist UK government that is still in thrall to market economics. They can only see the threat. They can’t see the opportunity. They’re not even looking for it. While we are governed by the politics of denial, it is going to be tough to move forward into transition. We will be stuck in recession, and all the poverty and suffering that is likely to bring with it.

I’m afraid that means there will be some very rough seas to navigate over the coming months. But that is all the more reason to start thinking about strengthening the mutual aid network that surfaced during lockdown, so that we can hold onto each other through the coming storms and come out safe the other side to re-build.
Mutual Aid

“...there is a way out, and that is to take the stuff we learned among ourselves – the stuff about valuing everyday workers above super-rich politicians, the stuff about asking our neighbours if they needed shopping, the stuff about doing without everyday rampant consumerism – that we can hold on to.”

Commoners Choir

You may have your own views on the leadership we are getting from the current UK government, but it cannot be denied that Britain has a higher death toll from COVID-19 than comparable countries, or that the pandemic has revealed serious gaps in our public services. Numerous people are being left stranded in the wake of the pandemic – financially, and in terms of healthcare, particularly mental healthcare.

It is estimated that as many as 1 in 10 of those who contract COVID-19 suffer a ‘long-tail’ effect, which leaves them unable to work and sometimes unable to look after themselves for weeks and months. One of our own Trustees, Lyndsey, contracted the virus in March and she is still unwell - it is unlikely that she will be able to return to work for months to come. The critical healthcare response has been there when it was needed, and the NHS is working hard to put some support in place for the significant number of people who suffer longer-term symptoms, but it is of course up against chronic underfunding and it is still dealing with an on-going pandemic. Apart from the health professionals, there is little recognition and no support for those suffering from these long-term effects of coronavirus. And 1 in 10 is going to be a lot of people.

There are going to be numerous other on-going effects on the physical, mental, emotional and financial health of the population that will go way beyond the capacity of the NHS and an already compromised social welfare system.

That is why the second of the GRT focus groups is around localisation. Distributed government. Meeting the need where it is – in our communities.

Locally, we can identify needs and work as a community to provide the resources required to meet those needs. Locally, we can devise emergency response plans, prepare and train teams of volunteers to support professional services in a crisis. Locally, we can establish secure food supplies, tackle housing needs and make informed planning decisions. We can generate energy. We can generate revenue. We can mourn together, celebrate together, learn together. And maybe we can reach out to other communities, to share our pride in who we are and learn from each other.

Locally, we can start to debate the issues that divide us in a constructive way. Only by doing that can we come together and make a just transition to a stable and sustainable economy that provides for the needs of all UK citizens regardless of colour, creed, gender, wealth or status.

GRT is hoping to work with local authorities, charities and community groups to use our expertise in organisational culture change to help them deliver better public services with constrained budgets.

We will be looking to work with businesses on Wellbeing in the workplace, and how they can engage with the communities in which they exist to meet their ESG goals.
And we will be opposing the continuation of austerity, which destroys public wellbeing to prop up a dysfunctional economic system.

**Help Shape Our Strategy**

So, the three areas where the Trust is looking to engage in “Building Back Better” are Individual Wellbeing, Localisation, and Sustainable Business. They do, of course, overlap considerably.

If you have an opportunity, or some expertise, in any of these areas, do please get in touch and help shape our plans.

For Individual Wellbeing contact Sue Rule, sue.rule@grantrule.org
For Localisation contact Peter Leeson peter@pleeson.co.uk
For Sustainable Business contact Paul Hookham paul@businesssimulations.com

This is a cartoon I came across a few years ago. It just sums it up for me. Why are we even arguing about this?

Well, that’s something I will be exploring more in the next webinar.

Why are we so divided?

How can we change the political conversation?

Why do people behave in anti-social ways?

How can we create stronger communities?

Is it possible to have any hope for the future? Join me for the next webinar in the Building Back Better Series

**Wellbeing Circles**

"A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken."
( Ecclesiastes 4:12)

In the meantime, there are tough times ahead. We need to be ready for them.

A Wellbeing Circle simply brings together a group of friends with a little light-touch organisation and communications infrastructure to provide a ‘safe space’ for all the
individuals in the circle to share and care for each other. It can provide practical and emotional support in times of crisis; solace and encouragement when we feel depressed; and laughter and silliness when we’re feeling sorry for ourselves. That’s what friends are for.

We created the idea to help Lyndsey through her long journey with COVID-19 but you don’t have to wait until someone falls ill to create a Wellbeing Circle. Maybe you have a couple of friends who want to see a transition to a Wellbeing Economy, or just want to find out what it means. So your circle might simply be a safe space to talk about all your fears and anxieties, and share your dreams of a better world with those most sympathetic to them. GRT would be interested in being part of those discussions, capturing stories and helping you build a strong mutual aid group.

We need to surround ourselves with positive energy. We just need to move those who say it can’t be done out of the way of the people doing it.

It dawned on me in preparing this webinar that democracy in the UK is not yet 100 years old. Women only got the vote in 1928 – four years after my mother was born. If ours is to meet the challenge of climate change, I think it needs to grow up a bit. Citizens need to have greater involvement in our national wellbeing than choosing between two parties fighting over market economics once every five years.

Make It So

“You can make things happen, watch things happen or wonder what happened.”

Watts Humphrey

This is a quote from one of Grant’s “heroes”, Watts Humphrey. It neatly sums up the choice each of us is facing. We can stay in denial and wonder what happened. We can hold our breath and wait to see what happens. Or we can get stuck in and make the change we want to see happen.

I do think this is an issue where every individual is part of the problem unless they are trying to be part of the solution. So the questions I’d like you to take away and think about are:

- If your “new normal” is much like the old one only worse, what is preventing you from changing it?”
- If you are already engaged in “building back better” how can the Trust best support you?