

ecoLonomics

Paul Mobbs' newsletter of thoughts, ideas and observations on energy, economics and human ecology

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“We're all planetary hospice workers now”

From local currencies to planning for life beyond the growth paradigm; moving beyond the mentality of Bretton Woods to something more meaningful

Euston Road/Marylebone Road, London, 26th September 2009

The current economic crisis may, according to some pundits, be over but the trends that forced it into being are still operating in the background – and will return once the global economy takes off again. Amidst the pressures of our everyday life we focus primarily on the surface features of existence; we have so little time to peel away the surface of what is presented to us, and delve into its deeper meaning. If we did what terrors would that hold for a society inhered by the economic dogma that emerged from that previous great crash into the [conference of Bretton Woods](#)¹ sixty-five years ago. The global economic framework that was developed in 1944 has delivered us into the world we inhabit today, but the assumptions upon which that system was based are no longer valid; such bad news might not be pleasant, but sometimes it is necessary to state such a truth in order to move on.

I'm walking; it's my favourite way to get around most cities, particularly London. For the first mile or so I can walk just as quickly as riding the Underground, and I can do so without having to imbibe the collective troglodytian angst of the other travellers who endure the necessary indignity of a hot, stuffy carriage to get where they want to be. Above ground you are free to let your mind soar into the dynamism of the clouds, especially on a sunny day like this; on the Underground you are held within a metal tube with only the inarticulate, isomeric mentality of advertising for inspiration.

I'm pounding along Euston Road towards Marylebone station. I'm not pressed for time, but still my feet keep up the metronomic three miles per hour pace that my body naturally settles into on journeys such as this. This is my second consecutive weekend in London, which for me is one weekend too

many in such a short space of time – and to make things more of a drudge I know that I'm back again next Wednesday. The last few weeks have involved a lot of travelling, a lot of reading, a lot of talking and a lot of writing – today is following this same pattern.

Leaving the quiet interior of Friends House in the late afternoon, opposite the bustle of Euston station, my legs are on auto-pilot and thoughts cascade through my mind. As I pass Gower Street I think of lectures at UCL, and of the district of Bloomsbury beyond; in turn I think of [The Bloomsbury Group](#)², of W.B. Yeats and – given the subject matter of the conference that I have just attended – [the apt words](#)³ that [he wrote in 1920](#)⁴,

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

A week ago I was heading for Brockwell Park near Herne Hill. I had a fairly quiet journey into and across London but at Elephant and Castle I found that the train line was closed for engineering works; this was problematic as I was due to speak a little over an hour later. Like today I wasn't feeling rushed, and so after applying a little thought to the problem I went instead to London Bridge, on to Tulse Hill, and then I walked down the hill to Brockwell Park.

[Brockwell Park](#)⁵ was a former manse, a legacy of Victorian industrialism now converted by municipal benevolence into an extensive public park and various community facilities. Even though the route I took was slightly longer, it rewarded me with a view across the expanse of central London and Docklands which I might have otherwise missed had I travelled via Herne Hill. As a guest of the [Urban Green Fair](#)⁶ I was due to talk about some work I did

earlier in the year on [Britain's Secretive Police Force](#)⁷, which made a nice change to the usual energy-related gig; but as I looked down upon the swathe of former financial might that is the City of London and Docklands, dwarfing the towers of the Palace of Westminster and Whitehall that were buried in the chaotic mass of architecture before me, my mind was on other things than the democratically dodgy dealings of the Association of Chief Police Officers.

In the non-space of the mind all things are relative, and right now the problems of the world had relatively little to do with the apparent normality that the scene before me conveyed; the indifference of the media or political debate to the trends driving the world towards a catastrophic human crisis because, in their desire to stand away from the barbed problems of incessantly driving economic growth within a finite resource base, their isolation from reality obscures the complexity of the processes involved.

I wasn't entirely sure where the Green Fair was – which is why I headed to the highest point in the park. From the top of the hill I could see tents, marquees and banners laid out at the northern end of the park, and I traced a fairly direct route through the trees and footpaths down towards them. It was still early in the afternoon, and things were pretty quiet; apart that is from the performance poet in the speaker's marquee who was bashing out a Beat's beat, exploding streams of verbiage on the vicissitudes of verdant existence, his manner exuding persistence, no stanza unscopated, unweighted, no injustice unslated, to reach the ultimate end, the audience ablated, in the bends of cultural hypoxia. I toured the site, purchased some really good coffee and, meeting acquaintances old and more recent, slowly made my way back towards the speaker's tent to do my set – which was a little less eventful than I anticipated.

The Urban Green Fair, whilst looking similar to other eco-fairs on the outside, is in fact a very innovative event. For the last few years it's become much harder to organise events like this because of the need to get a public entertainment licence – and with that comes a large amount of expense. As with the increasing regulation of many other aspects of everyday life, the tightening of licensing means that minority interests are finding it harder to organise events because the scale of the costs involved outweigh the ability of the restricted audience to pay the fees. What started as an anti-rave culture effort by the Government in the early 1990s has now shifted towards creating a framework to tightly control [many forms of cultural expression](#)⁸. The moves by public authorities to demand tighter controls over such events, under the banner of preventing “anti-social behaviour” (something I touch upon in my talk), also means that negotiating to hold an event can become a major feat in itself – as demonstrated by the

[collapse of the Big Green Gathering](#)⁹ earlier this year. What's special about this event is that by changing the form of the activities on the site the organisers have set-up the Fair without a formal entertainments licence. This in turn has cut the costs (reportedly just £15,000 to mount the whole event) and so made it far easier to run the day – *it's a great model that others could copy*.

Later I toured around to see what else was on offer at the Fair. Brixton, which borders Brockwell Park, has a strong [Transition group](#)¹⁰. They're quite [high profile at the moment](#)¹¹ having just launched [The Brixton Pound](#)¹², following on from the [Totnes](#)¹³, [Lewes](#)¹⁴ and [Stroud](#)¹⁵ groups who've also launched their own local currencies. The basic idea is that as the currency can only be exchanged locally the “value” that the currency expresses as trade is recycled within the local economy rather than being expropriated by external agencies. Theoretically that's fine, but as most local currencies are pegged to the value of the pound sterling, as with other forms of [Local Exchange Trading System](#)¹⁶ (LETS), the use of the currency can't really escape the realities of the wider economy – devaluation, inflation, and potentially taxation (although the [position of the Inland Revenue](#)¹⁷ is still somewhat vague on this point). Despite these little complications, schemes like this are probably one of the few ways that ordinary people have to intercede within an economic system that's biased towards the needs of the “big” rather than the “small”; and as I left Brockwell Park, looking back over my shoulder, the relative perspective made the Brixton Pound/ Transition Towns stall look every bit as imposing as the distant HSBC Tower in Canary Wharf.

What's important is not to look on things like local currencies as “solutions”. Like the inevitable weathering of stone under the gentle persistence of natural forces, any solution will slowly become less relevant as the world changes around it – and with the [challenges that lie ahead](#)¹⁸, such as peak energy and climate change, society could change very rapidly in the near future. Consequently what we implement needs to be adaptable, not immutable or ethereally prophetic – all “solutions” are at best temporary, at worst a fleeting stop-gap measure.

There are a whole load of reasons, some justifiable, to criticise such efforts *but at least they are doing something tangible locally*. A few weeks ago someone (perhaps inadvertently, perhaps deliberately – it was interesting either way) sent me a copy of Friends of the Earth's ideas for campaigning on [“the food chain”](#)¹⁹ – lots of writing to MPs, petitioning and supporting Early Day Motions (EDMs). Curiously the one measure that can cut the carbon emissions from food consumption the most, *eating less meat*, wasn't championed as a leading element of the campaign; a curious twist as encouraging people to dras-

tically reduce meat consumption, as many [climate scientists now advocate](#)²⁰, is probably the [simplest and cheapest thing](#)²¹ we can all do to reduce emissions. Instead [FoE qualified the meat consumption issue](#)²² within a message about,

...raising public awareness of the environmental impact of intensive meat and dairy production and the health benefits of eating less meat.

Of course, if we're talking about viable, adaptable solutions then the activities of the large campaign groups is directly relevant to how we are going to see such measures implemented. I had a lot of involvement with Friends of the Earth from the late 1980s, until around 2001, and what initially attracted me was the ethos of localised work and campaigning. Today, I'm sorry to say: The view from the organisation is decidedly more centrist; it seems that the emphasis has shifted away from directly changing the lifestyles of its members and their local communities and instead concentrates on asking politicians or "corporations" to make the changes on their behalf; it gives up the notion of empowering ourselves and instead makes societal/personal change just another mechanism of external consumption – something to be "asked for" from external actors rather than produced from within our own creative energies; and, as a result, they have given up the deeper, more challenging meaning of the environmental message, they market a sanitised vision of environmentalism that might be more appealing within the notion of the consumer society, but which can never truly deliver on the claims it makes. If Friends of the Earth want a more meaningful slogan on fixing the food chain I would suggest, "make bread not EDMs", but they probably wouldn't feel comfortable with that any more (well, not in public).

Like [Murray Bookchin's](#)²³ description, over forty years ago, of the way that leftist political groups had [centralised and lost their potential](#)²⁴ for creating meaningful change, and often alienated some of their most active and dedicated members as a result, so it seems that FoE (and others – *they represent merely one of the campaign groups to follow this route*) has chosen the option of media-based lobbying and public relations over the more involved and difficult approach of grassroots activism. They have reduced change to a consumer-oriented lifestyle accessory rather than a defined aspiration for changing the way we live our lives: This approach ignores the realities and limitations of how this mode of working produces its results – it is never "your" change, it belongs to someone else; if you ask politicians to do your work for you then it is they, not you, who get to wear the mantle of the radical reformer; and even though you might have initiated that change, the deeper message of your request for action will in all certainty have been watered down and filleted of all radical content in the process; also, due to the

process of intermediation via politics or the media, the public will fail to receive the explicit meaning or urgency for why certain aspects of the way we live today must be changed; and in any case, such unwelcome truths as "we live in a finite world" are something that the political system does not want to communicate because it challenges their competency to run the growth economy without limits.

From where I stood in Brockwell Park, the scene of the Urban Green Fair set against the backdrop of The City beyond, utopian ideas such as "change through grassroots campaigning" might represent an idyll of certain action within a mass of uncertain, contradictory and often conflated depictions of our possible future, but at least it creates perceptible outcomes for ordinary people. Likewise you can knock the idea of "transition", but at least local Transition groups are creating a number of real local initiatives rather than being just another participant in an increasingly monotonous media spectacle. And, in the end, what's more meaningful to ordinary people: Something they can see, touch, and experience; or just another headline in a broadsheet paper and a 10 second sound bite on the news?

Passing Regent's Park tube I suddenly check back into present reality as I rear-up on a group of meandering tourists and have to take a wide arc out into the road to pass them. Walking is a great way to get around, but when you're moving nearly twice as fast as the other users of the pavement it's not a good idea to stray too far off into your own thoughts. It's rather like the navigation of fast ferries crossing the English Channel against the flow of one of the world's busiest shipping lanes; keep a focus twenty metres ahead, plot the courses of all the moving pedestrians and obstructions, and then navigate your own course through the middle without hitting anything. I begin to focus on the events of today's excursion; the [Zero Growth Economy conference](#)²⁵ organised by the [Quakers](#)²⁶ (also known as [The Society of Friends](#)²⁷).

"Zero growth"²⁸, in the context of much of the discussion of our economic future that has followed the recent recession, appears, like the intonation of change through grassroots action, to be another radical concept. The debate has been spurred by the Sustainable Development Commission's [Redefining Prosperity](#)²⁹ project, and their latest report, [Prosperity Without Growth?](#)³⁰. I can't say that I was keen on coming today; I've been working on this topic for the last four years and I didn't expect to come away with anything new. What I was more interested in understanding was how an audience of intelligent and open minded people would react to being told that a lot of the certainties they had grown-up with were no longer valid, and that, as a result, society had to change the basic mode of its operation away from the growth paradigm.

The conference was being hosted at Friends House, an imposing, doric-columned building on Euston Road; its [large meeting hall](#)³¹, has in the past hosted speakers such as Mahatma Gandhi and Bertrand Russell. Although the building has the simplicity inherent in Quaker meeting houses, and is certainly less lavish than many of the edifices that were built in this area of London in the early Twentieth Century, the hall's art deco inspiration quietly displays itself in the panelling and fittings. The day was being run according to the Quaker tradition; there are spaces in the programme for silent reflection on the information received, and applause is not encouraged.

I found a seat, sat down with a coffee, and browsed through the conference's information pack... *what an interesting collection* (I have provided links to the various papers and presentations below): There was a reprint of an article on [The Folly of Growth](#)³²; a rather [brief introduction to ecological economics](#)³³ that was fine on the generalities, but given the audience it could have provided a greater background on the more "existential" relationship between humans and their environment; and a paper that outlined [three models of how an economy could operate](#)³⁴ – and of the three we currently operate the worst, debt-based option. I'd really come to hear Richard Douthwaite but it looked like there was going to be an equally interesting exposition of "the problem of production" (as Fritz Schumacher expressed it) from the other speakers too.

The chair, Jocelyn Bell Burnell³⁵ opened the day and then introduced the first speaker, Miriam Kennet³⁶ of the Green Economics Institute³⁷ (the [presentation](#)³⁸ and audio³⁹ are on-line). Her focus was on economic growth and how, through proposals such as the [Stern Review](#)⁴⁰ or the G20 nation's recent commitments on cutting emissions, the world was addressing itself to the issue of climate change. Perhaps the most unsettling thing she had to tell us was that, in the negotiations leading up to the G20 meeting taking place this week, the emphasis at the Copenhagen Climate Conference is likely to be on conventional, growth-oriented development options to produce reductions in carbon emissions – *in other words, not a lot of difference from the policies of the past 20 years that haven't realistically cut emissions so far* (well, certainly not as effectively as the [last twelve months of recession](#)⁴¹ has been able to!). Miriam herself described this approach as, "scary". If you want another [scary fact](#)⁴²; tot up all the carbon emissions from energy use since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in 1751 up until Kyoto 2 is likely to come into force in 2012 – 261 years – and [a third](#) of all emissions will have taken place since the world agreed it had to do something about the problem at the [Earth Summit](#)⁴³ in 1992 – *that's just 20 years!*

She then moved on to the more general question of "what is growth for?". Growth aims to deliver certain improvements in society, but because it is focussed on monetary values rather than human well-being it doesn't necessarily deliver outcomes that are favourable to society – and she used a number of examples of negative impacts that promote growth, such as pollution, divorces and deforestation, to illustrate this.

She then summarised the alternatives to growth as a combination of: [De-growth](#)⁴⁴ or décroissance (after the work of [Serge Latouche](#)⁴⁵); economic contraction and downscaling; reduction of consumption to sustainable levels; redefining prosperity where conventional growth is lower or zero; and prioritising sustainability and well being. Whilst it was an interesting presentation, and I know that it was probably quite difficult for a novice audience to comprehend the extent of the changes she was describing, from my own research I know that the situation is far more complex. Oil depletion might be an immediate worry but the longer-term decline in mineral resources, the unpredictable way that this might affect our [complex, technologically inter-twined global society](#)⁴⁶, and the problems of how we can guide the [emergence](#)⁴⁷ of more sustainable social structures from this process, makes a transition to a different economic paradigm far more difficult than just changing the metrics of progress, or substituting one process for another (as outlined in her [paper](#)⁴⁸ to the Sustainable Development Commission, reproduced in the information pack) – although undoubtedly such instruments would mark a starting point in the process of change and transformation of Britain's political economy.

There are specific limits to growth that we are already bumping up against and these have to be dealt with as part of this process; although these could be dealt with as part of the "de-growth" approach that she all-to-briefly outlined (she was, unfortunately, pressed for time) I think many in the audience might have been even more alarmed by the level of material change this this implicitly imposes on modern society. It's interesting to talk about *processes* but a discussion of *scale* often imposes a very different dynamic to the public debate on these issues.

After a short break, Richard Douthwaite⁴⁹ took the podium (his [presentation](#)⁵⁰ and audio podcast⁵¹ are on-line). ***I have seen his presentations before and – perhaps given the fact that a few years have elapsed, and the signs of a critical shortage of energy are now even more evident – his approach was far more strident.*** In some ways the persona he took was that of Jeremiah; not the modern conception of a person who is pessimistic about the present and foresees a calamitous future, but rather the [Biblical Jeremiah](#)⁵² who told of the inevitable enslavement into Babylon because the

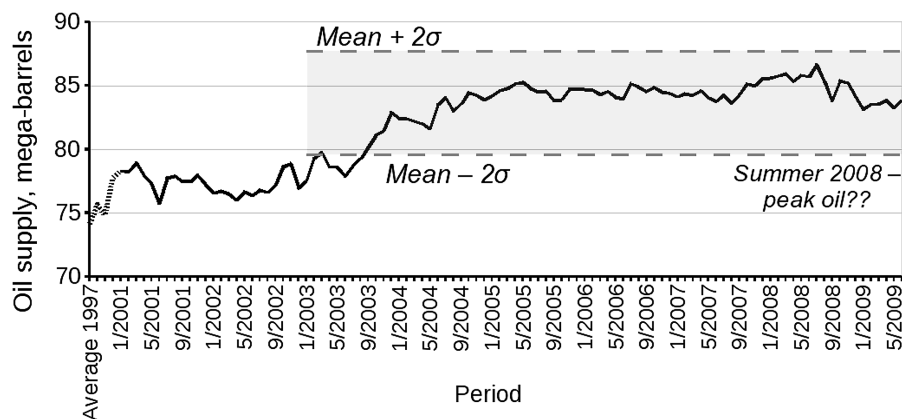
people had refused to heed the message that they had broken the [Covenant](#)⁵³ – but in this case the Covenant was with the [ecological limits](#)⁵⁴ that determine human ecology.

The paper that accompanied his presentation, [The Stark Choice is not Growth or No Growth: It's Share or Die](#)⁵⁵, was equally as strident. From my point of view what he relayed was a basic outline of the inter-relationship between energy, oil and the economy, and especially the role of debt and financial flows in the process of both growth and resource consumption. The feeling I picked up from the audience was that this was an extremely unsettling talk, and whilst they might accept its factual basis they perhaps would rather not have received such unsettling news in one sitting (I've been in Richard's position myself, and have sometimes received a similar reception). One person I talked to later suggested that the anger he exhibited wasn't really welcome in a venue such as this.

Richard's view is that global oil production has peaked, and that from now on the economic system that we have relied on to deliver growth and prosperity will become increasing dysfunctional. He also outlined the evidence that, contrary to the common portrayal of the problem of “sub-prime loans”, it was the general rise in commodity prices that forced the poorest in society to default on loans and thus initiate the credit crunch. Moving forward, as the global economic recovery takes hold, the continuing shortage of oil, excised from everyday news coverage now that it has ceased to be the most important economic indicator, will inevitably drive prices higher and so it is likely that the commodity price rise/economic recession cycle will repeat itself once again.

Whilst extremely difficult for the poorest nations, because of the poverty and starvation that high commodity prices create, this is also problematic for the richest states as it increases the outflow of capital from the economy in order to pay for the rising cost of energy importation. This in turn creates a drag on national economic growth and stability – a far more serious problem now that many developed nations are more heavily in debt than before. Richard used the example of Ireland, but Britain is in a far more problematic position because we'll also have to contend with the effects of indigenous energy depletion – from both our oil, natural gas and coal reserves – as well as paying higher importation costs.

Whether global oil production has peaked is a moot point; it's only something we can objectively know once we have data that confirms a decline, by which time the crisis that a falling oil supply would



create will have already taken hold. The fact that global production has plateaued, irrespective of the fact that high prices should have brought new/spare capacity into the market, is far clearer. In his paper Richard produced a graph of world oil production to illustrate the plateau in global production. I would present the data in a rather different way, as in the graph above where I use data from the [US Energy Information Agency](#)⁵⁶ to illustrate world oil supply. There is clearly a plateau, and to illustrate this I've drawn two lines, each two standard deviations (2σ) from the mean value of monthly supply from January 2003 until June 2009. Whilst production is in a plateau state statistically 95% of the monthly production data should fall between these two lines; if supply consistently rises above the upper line then clearly production has not peaked, but if/when it consistently falls below the lower line we can say more correctly that “we've peaked”. To hazard a guess from the available data, then Summer 2008 looks like the possible period over which production peaked – which if it has a symmetrical distribution (a big “if”) means we're not going to see a demonstrable fall in global oil production until at least 2012 or 2013 (you never know – perhaps it'll become critical just in time for the London Olympics!)

Even with the fall in consumption due to the global recession (from the Summer of 2008 when high prices [destroyed the level of demand](#)⁵⁷) the figure still hasn't fallen outside the “noise” of the previous five years of monthly supply data. That's because, unlike the 1980s recession, whilst consumption may have fallen in the most developed states in a number of the developing states (such as India or China) demand is still maintaining the level of consumption. This doesn't bode well for when the economies of the developed nations “recover” as the increase in demand will quickly extinguish the remaining spare capacity and [drive prices higher once again](#)⁵⁸.

We adjourned for lunch. I had a quick look at the café but, given the queue and my shortage of funds, I walked across Euston Road and into the station to find something cheap but probably a lot less pleasing.

The contrast was a little bleak; from calm to

chaos, from comprehension to dissonance, the issues we'd been considering in the morning session came spilling out in a cacophony of carefree consumption – to me if not to the oblivious throng of Euston station. If, rather than the manufactured views of the Sky News video stream being beamed into the consciousness of ponderous passengers we could have televised the morning's proceedings in this place, how much would the people passing by have chosen to hear?; and how much would they accept as being a reality contingent to the quality of their future lives? I finished grazing as quickly as possible and made my way back to the sanctuary on the other side of the road. I wanted to talk to as many people as possible over the remainder of the lunch period to get some feedback and viewpoints on the morning's presentations.

At the beginning of the afternoon session we were introduced to [Duncan Green](#)⁵⁹ from Oxfam (his [presentation](#)⁶⁰ and audio⁶¹ are available on-line). His argument, from the perspective of an aid and development group, was very different to those that had gone previously – and in many respects it was much less “radical” as it was more supportive of the existing economic consensus.

Duncan accepted that tackling climate change would be difficult, but in the information he presented he tried to reinforce the conventional interpretation that the best way to deal with the problem of poverty and climate change was through continuing the process of growth; albeit he thought there was a case to ration growth between those who already had its benefits, and those who needed it the most. The approach he seemed to promote was broadly technological, as typified by his discussion of reducing [energy and carbon intensity](#)⁶² as a means to tackle carbon emissions – even through there is little evidence to show that past reductions have been the result of technological change, and in fact have been dominated by fuel switching (from coal and oil to natural gas) in the developed states.

He phrased the need for progress within the framework of “ideas”, “interests” and “institutions”, but as this broadly reflected the practice of global institutions today I found that this approach could not encompass the fundamental challenges to the growth paradigm posed by climate change, population growth and the depletion of natural resources. He did touch on the “limits to growth” issue, but without actually engaging in what these trends mean for the economies and wealth of the developed and developing nations. A shortcoming illustrated by the fact that throughout the presentation his essential point was that, whether growth was “good” or “bad”, it represented the only means by which we could lift people out of poverty – but in making this point he failed to tackle the ecological implications of it, especially in terms of the disproportionate capital flows

that are inherent in the global economic system which mean that to get \$1 of poverty alleviation for the world's poorest the level of global production and consumption [must rise by \\$166](#)⁶³.

I found that this, more than any of the other three presentations we received today, had the greatest difficulties in terms of the arguments it presented. In a number of instances I felt that we were being asked to consider the issue of “growth” when in fact we should have been talking about “wealth”; talking about having “less growth” might be considered contentious, but clearly it's not as heretical as talking of “less wealth”! At many points I felt this presentation tried to argue a case from the point of view of growth when in fact he should have been assessing the level of wealth in certain states; rather than arguing that wealth should be more effectively redistributed he followed the less contentious line that we should have more wealth overall in order to boost the wealth of the poorest. The [Cap and Share](#)⁶⁴ argument put earlier by Richard Douthwaite might have its difficulties, not least that for the richest citizens of the globe it is strongly redistributive, but that still makes it a more realistic approach than the concept of continuing growth, in however limited a fashion.

The most disheartening point of his presentation, and for me of the whole day, was when he expressed his view (qualifying that this was a personal, not an Oxfam view) that the more difficult issues – such as limits to growth, or the problems inherent in the growth paradigm – could not be presented to national (e.g. Downing Street) or global (e.g. G20) political institutions because you would be unlikely to be invited back to present your policy arguments again. To me such action denies not only our ability as “rational beings” to change the world for what we feel are the right reasons, but it also regularises a larger unjust principle for the meagre price of resolving a smaller one – *it's a trade-off for power and influence, not for justice.*

The unstated implication of this is that, even though you might know that the extant national or global economic policy is in error, you are making a value judgement that what little you can achieve by being quiet within the system is better than speaking the truth from outside. In that sense, to what extent are the large campaign groups – as I outlined above with regard to groups such as Friends of the Earth – failing to represent the reality of our predicament through their reluctance to [“speak truth to power”](#)⁶⁵; be that the political power of governments or the consumer power of a poorly informed public. At the same time, such action represents not the public interest, but a more narrow, politically-oriented interest as it promotes not the collective good but the well-being of large institutions. Looking at this issue in extremis, if a small gain is worth keeping quiet for when do the costs of not “speaking the truth to

power” make it necessary to speak out – and are you so compromised by that point that doing so would be even more injurious to your reputation than had you spoken out at some earlier time?

In more metaphorical terms, the Emperor may have no clothes on, but if the small boy is too timid to say that [the Emperor is naked](#)⁶⁶ the Emperor's delusion will continue without change. Such reasoning leaves us trapped within the present problems of the world because it both provides a false reassurance to political and business leaders, and insulates them from the critical pressure of the lobbying groups who claim to represent the public interest. During my time on the Board of Friends of the Earth I was told that the demand of an “uncritical” relationship were made by the Blair government as a pre-condition of engaging environmental groups within the government's policy consultation processes – that fact that Britain's performance in many key areas of policy has been so poor is perhaps another indicator of the failure of this approach.

I know that, following the question time, Duncan himself may have felt somewhat abashed by the comments from the floor. As he was packing up I heard him say that he hadn't understood that Quakers were so radical – a point he alluded to in [his blog](#)⁶⁷ following the conference.

Finally were were introduced to [Alastair McIntosh](#)⁶⁸, Quaker, [author and activist](#)⁶⁹. After the three previous presentations it might have been easy to take his words – lacking the academic, value-free rational justification of the previous presentations – as gravely depressing; but, making his case within the spiritual framework of a humanist view of the world and its environment, they were actually very uplifting.

He began rather unconventionally; after a moment of silence he began to make the noise of a steam train, rather like *Ivor the Engine*. After blowing steam, and gaining speed in a circuit of the podium table and around in front of the audience he finally, reaching a crescendo, hit the doors at the back of the stage. He returned to the podium; “listening to what we have heard today doesn't it feel like you've been in a train wreck”. A moment of theatre, but perhaps a moment of great release as he expressed empathy with what for many in the audience would have been a challenging day. It's difficult to do justice to the content of his presentation – the conference podcast is the best way to comprehend what he said⁷⁰.

He eloquently expressed the cognitive dissonance that many may have felt when faced with what climate change and resource depletion represent for our society, both from the Quaker perspective but also from a more secular viewpoint, set against the seeming indifference of mainstream politics and the media. He expressed this in various ways, such as

his discussion of Jung's [Rainmaker Story](#)⁷¹ – “we are not living in the Tao”, the place where our spiritual being is able to give insight into how we can live peaceably within our environment, and where we might find within ourselves the strength to find a way through the morass of difficulties that lie ahead.

Perhaps the starkest contrast between the nature of the conventional political debate today, and the reality of what the available evidence (such as that we heard today) describes for our possible future, was brought home when he made the argument that, “we are planetary hospice workers”; we see what is taking place, and we might not like what that dictates for the future of society, but we must do our best to minister to the world during its time of need. We cannot stop what must be, but at least we can try and spread the resilience to endure the changes that lie ahead. More significantly to most of the members of this audience, if the future must be less materially endowed than the principles of Quakers, and in particular the [Testimony of Simplicity](#)⁷², have great relevance for how people will be able to make the transition towards a lifestyle that must become far simpler – to re-conceive their lives as something more than the acquisition of material wealth promised by the paradigm of growth.

The questions session that followed re-iterated much of what had gone before. Perhaps the one new area was a discussion of how the mainstream's response to these issues doesn't engage with the reality of the debate: Duncan Green emphasised the need to be realistic – “hair-shirtism doesn't work”; in contrast, Alastair McIntosh made the point, following the analysis of Wolfgang Sachs⁷³, that the present public debate on our future is unable to distinguish between the realities of frugality, scarcity, and destitution. As the conference closes, we are thanked for our participation, and urged to follow-up any further points through the new [Quakernomics blog](#)⁷⁴.

I left. As I note at the beginning of this post, I cruise down Euston Road digesting my experiences of the last two weekends. The sun is setting, shining directly down Euston Road/Marylebone Road, dazzling and blurring my vision, making it more difficult to navigate my way around the tourists who still swarm across the pavement near Madame Tussauds. I arrive at Marylebone station, find a drink and a train, and begin the hour and a half journey home.

I stare out of the window; an expensive but incalculably valuable ring-side seat to the sun's furnace of light setting in the west. As we approach winter the sun moves across the sky at a lower angle and so the sunset becomes perceptibly longer; it spills out in a shifting milieu, modified by cloud and landscape along the horizon, merging with the monochrome shadows cast by the low angle light to create an ever changing panorama of perception – if you let

your mind float free you can lose yourself in its depths, its graduated variety, and find inspiration in its Rorschach-esque patterns.

Thoughts and ideas turn over in my mind; the Bretton Woods consensus is sixty-five this year; *shouldn't we let it retire gracefully now and enter into the chest of past paradigms – such as slavery, monarchy and colonialism – that were once considered central to our lives but were eventually discarded – broken or worn out – in favour of newer ideas?* If this is the end of the economic consensus initiated at Bretton Woods sixty-five years ago, then the physical effects of this change will be challenging, but the greater challenge are the mental barriers that modern culture, the media, and especially the political system erect both to justify their present approach and to myopically ignore the evidence that change is essential – the obstreperous spectre of Galbraith's "[conventional wisdom](#)"⁷⁵ still haunts our efforts to initiate a better future.

People are an essential part in this process, not as lobby fodder for campaigners who will not "speak truth to power" in spite of the available evidence, but rather as the mechanism that can create change

within their own sphere of influence; family, friends, work, community, but most importantly within the three pounds of fatty tissue, with its 100 million neurons (almost as many neurons as stars in our own galaxy) and 100 trillion synaptic connections (perhaps as many connections as there are stars in our local group of thirty galaxies), that lies between our ears. We can think of scales of difficulty that work against us but that, in the mental non-space of how we value and conceive our own existence, merely represent values in a sea of abstract data. We often conceive of such obstacles to obscure and obstruct the need for changes that we don't want to undertake ourselves, rather than viewing these problems objectively – and ultimately it is we who must bend to reality, not the other way around, in order to resolve such problems of perspective. When we reconcile ourselves to what is, and what is likely to be, then perhaps we can reverse Yeats' observation; the best can once again find the conviction for change irrespective of what "the worst", or even our own minds, may raise as obstructions to what we must do.

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