

Climate Action:

Shared Goals, Different Forms, Personal Motivations

Writeup of the 17th PTRC Fireside Chat co-supported by the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport and the Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation

Glenn Lyons, 18 November 2023

Mott MacDonald Professor of Future Mobility, UWE Bristol



*“You take the blue pill - the story ends,
you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe.
You take the red pill - you stay in Wonderland
and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.”*

Morpheus, 1999



Foreword

If you are truly prepared to open your mind and read the following account with care, attention and reflection, I believe it will pull at your heart strings and wrench at your soul. You will come to understand why ‘love and gratitude’ and ‘love and rage’ sit at the heart of Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion. We are in existential times.



On 16 November 2023 the 17th event in the PTRC Fireside Chat series took place. Brogan McPherson and I have been on quite a journey together since the series began at the start of the pandemic. The series set out with a common theme of considering transport-related implications of COVID-19 – that enormous shock to all our lives. We’ve covered a wide variety of topics. However, while every topic has been challenging, addressing climate action took us to a new level in terms of a group of professionals sharing their deeply personal thoughts and vulnerabilities about their journeys into and through climate activism as we face an almost incomprehensible threat to the future of our species. The pandemic barely featured in the conversation.

Perhaps befitting the current culture wars, weaponisation of climate change politically, and conspiracy theories, we were unable – in the way we’ve always done before – to go live from our panel in Zoom to the audience waiting in YouTube. Had someone or something detected a threat from an event titled ‘climate action’? Perhaps we’ll never know, but in any case, the show went on through another link and our audience in part if not in full was able to find us, with people joining from many parts of the UK as well as internationally.

For this event I had carefully chosen a group of people who, in their different ways, are all my climate heroes. They all accepted the invitation without hesitation. They are influential professionals. But more than that, they are humans who all care deeply about the predicament we face and who are taking risks in their personal and professional lives to rebel against extinction. I was humbled to have them gathered together and privileged to be able to learn from them and hear their stories.

It was an emotional conversation, never moreso than when one of our panellists described the immense sense of peace they felt having been arrested and handcuffed. This is not just a fellow human but a fellow professional.

Whether you were in the audience and want to watch again or missed the chance first time around, the recording of the panel discussion is available on [YouTube](#). What follows is a summary account of the event which I hope captures the key points that arose. Any misrepresentation is my own.

Some takeaways

1. Audience descriptors of climate change included horrified, desperation, exhaustion, scared, powerless, and rage.
2. Going on climate marches can help you cope with feelings of helplessness or hopelessness or wanting to give up.
3. Some humans have been taking climate action for decades and can now look back wondering what might have been had we acted in good time.
4. Some of those leaders around you professionally are struggling every day with the enormity of the challenge of where we are today with climate change.
5. We've begun to institutionalise climate change and lean on regulation and pathways of intent instead of confronting reality with honesty and transparency.
6. As professionals we can help equip people with the knowledge to challenge what is happening in our society right now.
7. When asked some basic questions like "*why do we need economic growth?*" economists don't seem able to answer very convincingly.
8. If you think STEM alone is going to save us... the arts have a crucial role in communicating about the climate crisis through relatable, accessible and human stories.
9. To help people find their place in the climate conversation there is a need to begin with the things that matter to them in their lives and then invite them to discover how these connect to the climate crisis.
10. Who we are and how we act is in part a product of where we come from and how our parents and their values have shaped us.
11. We can try and maximise love, joy and justice in the time we've got left.
12. We can't leave this to someone else because the authoritarianism and fascism is creeping in at an ever-increasing rate.
13. The more we come to know, the more we are potentially able to deeply come to terms with the reality of what lies around us, and the harder it becomes to bear that knowledge.
14. A rattled fossil fuel lobby will fight back and they will seize upon opportunities to create division and disarray if climate change is associated with other complex societal issues that divide opinion.
15. The problem is everything that is causing climate change.
16. Raising climate change as an issue is different from dealing with it as an issue.
17. Doing a media interview is a form of direct action but beware of the framing they will try and impose on you as those pulling the strings are part of the extractive, patriarchal, capitalist nonsense which has brought us to where we are today.
18. If you think it's risky speaking up in a meeting, consider the risk of food supply collapsing and our economy falling over – recalibrate your risk and upscale your risk to discover what you're capable of.
19. Find the forms of climate action that chime with you and your values and means, we can't do everything.
20. When you are in that situation where you've been handcuffed, being led away by the police, you feel this tremendous sense of peace coming over you.
21. Influence through action is a superpower and you can influence people without ever knowing you have.
22. Even if you think you are only preaching to the choir, that matters because the choir needs to be rallied, we need to help avoid the 'melancholy of the left'.
23. Shying away from climate change to protect your mental health is a natural reaction – it is important as well as caring and taking action to be able to compartmentalise.
24. Everything seems alright, until it isn't – and that can change rapidly.
25. Get ready for more rowing back, excuses and deflection from governments.
26. Shit is happening to millions of people right now, the future's already here.
27. What we're really fighting here is utter injustice and ultimately we're fighting genocide.
28. Focus on the three Rs – resistance, resilience, regeneration.

Setting the scene

In two weeks' time, COP28 takes place in the United Arab Emirates, presided over by the CEO of a national oil company. We are currently in the hottest year on record. Antonio Guterres, the Secretary General of the United Nations, has said this year that “*The era of global warming has ended. The era of global boiling has arrived*”. In the face of **inadequate climate action globally**, he has also said that “*humanity has opened the gates of hell*”. Such statements could be cast aside as theatrical one-liners if the science did not lend weight to their credibility. How do you get your head around something so enormous and profound?

Return of the secret transport planner

Some of you may recall *The Secret Transport Planner* from another Fireside Chat earlier this year. They wish to remain anonymous. Just before the event they got in touch with me and, amongst other things, said the following:

“There is a point where you can’t say ‘But I still believe we can turn this round ...’ the words become hollow and false. People inside their heads reach the conclusion that their sacrifices aren’t going to make a difference, so they turn away hoping (even if they believe in the science) that it’s all a false alarm. And anyway, there’s the next weekend break to Cornwall to plan ... just another 500 mile round trip...”

Is it too late? Are we living on borrowed time? It’s as if there is a hole in the side of the ship and the crew have distracted most of the passengers with evening dinner on board.

Woke emotions

On the matter of climate action, as individuals we *can* face the temptation to give up **hope**, but also the **tiring** sense of relentlessly having climate change within, or dominating, our field of view. Meanwhile, as I’ve been [reading](#) this week, **anger** (prompted by perceived violations of morality and fairness) can be a strong motivator for turning to activism.

Perhaps some people skimmed over the promotion for this event thinking here was yet another item online containing the words ‘climate change’ and ‘climate action’. Maybe they feared falling into the clutches of the tofu-eating wokerati?!

This Fireside Chat has been about **what motivates climate activists to do what they do**.

Taking the temperature in the room

While our technical glitch prevented us getting off to a smooth start and asking questions of our audience at the outset, I was able to pose these questions towards the end, albeit with a smaller level of response. The following offers an indication of the mood of our live audience (having heard much by that time from our panel members).

The results are not dissimilar to those I have got on several occasions this year when posing the questions at other events. They are sobering.



Over to our panel



[Hiba Khan](#) is Unit Sustainability and Social Outcomes Lead at [Mott MacDonald](#) and also sits on the [Board of Trustees at the UN Global Compact UK Network](#) (*"the largest corporate sustainability initiative in the world"*). She has moved from a career in engineering into international development which allows her to take climate action professionally. Her approach to climate action *"has always been driven by just trying to do the right thing"*. As she has built and built her level of commitment she realised that she had to temper that with things that energise her and bring her joy. And this crosses over into her personal life, helping her *"cope with feelings of helplessness or hopelessness or wanting to give up"*. She **considers climate marches incredibly joyful**, with her young son involved too – *"full of hope, full of like-minded people"*. Her forms of climate action are many and varied – the small stuff alongside the seemingly bigger stuff: ***"one of the best actions I did with [Extinction Rebellion](#) was going out in the night and secretly planting wild flowers in the grass verges – the amount of joy that brought not just me but the whole community was something that really enriched the way that I approach things and to leave that legacy that I would like to see"***.

[Steve Melia](#) is the [Green Travel Writer](#) and a Visiting Fellow at the [University of the West of England's Centre for Transport & Society](#) where, until recently, he was a senior lecturer in transport and planning. Steve has been active for some 30 years when it comes to climate change, becoming really conscious of it in the 1990s. *"The first thing I've got a record of having done was in '97 when I persuaded the Liberal Democrat Conference – I was a parliamentary candidate back then – to vote to impose a cap on the volume of aviation, followed by a*



gradual reduction thereafter – and I’ve often wondered if people had taken this threat seriously back then whether would be in a much better position today. His other activities including setting up a branch of [Friends of the Earth](#), deciding (from 2005 onwards) to stop flying, advising government departments, and speaking at climate assemblies. Increasing frustration with the lack of progress set against alarming science led him into further action: *“from 2019 onwards I was arrested four times with Extinction Rebellion”*. He goes on: *“at some point in all of that, we passed the point, as a national, as a species, where catastrophe could have been avoided”*. Compared to the 1990s, the context of climate action today is different with hope founded on *“mitigating the scale of that disaster”*. Steve isn’t quite sure where activism goes next. His emotions have changed, *“this is always a rollercoaster”* as he puts it. *“Anyone who embarks on the course will find themselves torn between this sense of hope and worthwhile, and the sense of the whole thing passing you by”*.



[Greg Marsden](#) is Professor of Transport Governance at the [Institute for Transport Studies, University of Leeds](#). He is also Director of the [DecarboN8 Network](#). *“I personally struggle with the scale of the challenge and where we are, most days”* he says, and when he’s otherwise distracted he feels guilty, *“it affects me every day”*. He sees himself as someone who *“has always worked within the system”*. He notes the time it takes to build trust with organisations. He feels time is running out if has not already run out and is concerned that *“we’ve begun to institutionalise climate change and say that we’re tackling it but we’re not actually doing what needs to be done, we’re*

institutionalising failure in some respects”. In 2022 Greg submitted a Freedom of Information Request to the Department for Transport to *“just explain what was in their Transport Decarbonisation Plan, what it actually meant for people”*. He’d first asked informally but *“they refused and it was a deliberate concealment, and we’ll get nowhere if we haven’t got honesty in all of this”*. Greg’s actions, he reflects, come from his upbringing. *“My mum in particular was a massive rule abider; honesty was critical to her and it’s a value that I’ve carried with me”*. Greg recognises his actions will have burnt some bridges, but hopefully built others. *“I’m not a marcher; that doesn’t mean that I won’t march”* he says. Greg recognises that, beyond experts, we need this to become more real for people and political if change is to come. *“Part of my job is to make sure that we’re not allowing politicians, and we’re not allowing civil servants to be off the hook”*.



[Emma Woods](#) is founder of [Flourish Economics](#), an organisation that seeks to democratise economic thinking by providing education on alternative forms of economics outside of mainstream teaching. She seeks, as Greg does, *“to equip people with the knowledge to challenge what is happening in our society right now”*. She has previously been a public sector economist for 13 years. *“But the longer I was in those roles, the more it misaligned with my own values and I really started to question traditional economic thought, especially as my awareness of climate change grew but also as I became a mother”*. She is

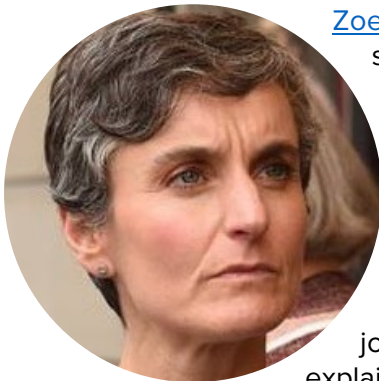
concerned about how inaccessible economics is which is why she has set up Flourish Economics, *“to empower people to imagine different ways of living”*. Emma illustrated how simple acts can help build community and a coalition for change – *“even if that’s just writing a letter sending it to your neighbours saying ‘hey, we live next door to each other and I don’t even know your name’”*. I was keen to get a taste of the emotions Emma must have been through making her brave move *“out of neoclassical, neoliberal economics”*.

She referred us to the book [“Small Is Beautiful”](#) she’d purchased, which was one of her first steps and that she considers “*a cornerstone of alternative economics*”. She found in turn that **when asking some basic questions of economists, like “why do we need economic growth?” they didn’t seem able to answer very convincingly**. This was when it really began to rub up against her values and the pressure grew too much, so she handed in her notice.



[Robin Lyons](#) is Artistic Director of [Ergon Theatre](#), an organisation focusing on climate theatre. He is also runs [Climate Leadership Training](#) providing carbon literacy training for business leaders and future leaders. “*I fervently believe the arts have a crucial role in communicating about the climate crisis through relatable, accessible and human stories that entertain, educate and empower*” he says. He refers to climate change as a ‘hyper object’, “*so vast in time and space that no human mind can really comprehend it*”. Instead therefore, in making art about it “*we always start from a place where climate change is absent*” he explains. This is about **finding things that are important**

or tangible to people in their everyday lives outside of the climate crisis, which can then be the basis for finding a way to find a place in the climate conversation, to find the human and personal connections: “*how our important thing is impacted by, or impacts the climate crisis*”. He gives the most down to earth example. “*If having a Friday night chippy with the family is important to you, a quick Google of ‘British fish and chips and climate change’ will show you that climate change is affecting British cod and haddock that are looking to migrated out of British waters due to the changing sea temperatures*”. Robin feels there are lots of people primed ready to be part of the climate conversation but they have not been communicated to in the right way.



[Zoe Cohen](#) is a mother, coach, business owner, concerned citizen, supporter of [Extinction Rebellion](#), [Insulate Britain](#) and [Just Stop Oil](#). She starts “*I strongly feel that our language is not meeting the challenge at the moment – I increasingly don’t use ‘climate change’, ‘climate crisis’, it’s both too big and too small and totally unsatisfactory*”. She sees herself as both “*quite geeky*” and a pretty “*feeling person*”. “*I think deeply and I feel deeply*” she says, “*it brings us very, very fundamentally to what it is to be human, I think*”. Each of us have a personal story about our journey, our upbringing, leading us to be the person we are, Zoe explains. “*I primarily got my love of nature from my mum, and I*

primarily got my love of social justice from my dad”. Her father’s parents fled fascism. Her mum’s dad helped the French resistance get Jews out of occupied France. As Zoe has found, this realisation of what has shaped us can take time to dawn on us – many years perhaps. Zoe emphasises how she is a very ordinary person, with a 20 year-old daughter. In the last 10 years, more recently especially, she has had to come to terms with a realisation that “*pretty much everything I’d done had failed*” (in terms of all sorts of climate action). “*I think accepting that failure and being humble about it is a really important part of moving on*” she says. Like thousands of others, she discovered Extinction Rebellion in 2018. They have helped in “*democratising direct action*”, helping individuals realise “*that you don’t have to be a special kind of person to do some dramatic thing like Greenpeace used to do ... I realised in 2018 that actually, ‘shit’, I can do this stuff, because who the hell else is going to, and how do I look myself in the eye, how do I look my daughter in the eye if I don’t?*”. Zoe has become a figure increasingly seen in the media, she also takes direct action and has been arrested seven times, and “*spent a short time in prison last year on remand just for sitting on the road*”.

She also has a suspended sentence for being [found guilty](#) along with six other women “for carefully cracking a window at Barclays HQ in 2021 to call them out for the biggest fossil fuel funder in Europe”.

Our Fireside Chat was well-timed. Zoe shared the news that on the same day, nine women (to quote the [Guardian](#)) “have been cleared by a jury of causing £500,000 worth of criminal damage to the windows at the headquarters of HSBC bank in London”. Zoe informed us that HSBC is the second biggest fossil fuel funder in Europe. One of the women, Clare Farrell, is quoted in the Guardian as saying “*It’s tragically surreal to live in times when the justice system agrees we’re totally fucked but has nothing to say about the cause, the remedy, the victims or the perpetrators. We must continue, we will.*” Zoe wanted to share another piece of good news, concerning the [achievement](#) of Extinction Rebellion Netherlands. They had been blockading the A12 highway leading to the Hague day after day demanding an end to fossil fuel subsidies. After thousands of arrests but with no let-up in the protest, this led to the Dutch Parliament voting to phase out fossil fuel subsidies. “*It is possible to achieve change*” even though “*we’re not turning this hyper object around*” says Zoe. For her it is about “*maximising joy, love and justice in the time we’ve got left*”. “*We have way more power than we realise*” she emphasises and encourages us to remember “*and*” – whatever else we are doing in our lives “*and resist*”. “*We can’t leave this to someone else because the authoritarianism and fascism is creeping in at an ever-increasing rate*”.

Further into the conversation

The burden of intellect and the risks of division

I was once introduced to the phrase ‘the burden of intellect’. It felt very relevant following insights from all our panel members. **The more we come to know, the more we are potentially able to deeply come to terms with the reality of what lies around us, and the harder it becomes to bear that knowledge.** I’m a big fan of the Matrix in which Morpheus offers Neo a choice of two pills – **take the red pill and you’ll see the world for what it really is – its naked, unvarnished, ugly truth;** take the blue pill and you can continue to live in ignorance, consuming an airbrushed, curated version of reality oblivious to what lies beneath the veneer. Of course, life is not as simple as Hollywood but I wondered, was there a sense that some parts of humanity have taken the red pill and can see the injustice around them, can see that the house is on fire, while larger parts are still taking the blue pill either unwittingly, or knowingly because the alternative is too grim. **Is there a problem with those who are most concerned about the climate crisis not being relatable to others?** I relayed my impression of going to The Big One march in April this year in London. I was struck by how ‘leftie woke’ most people looked. Appearance shouldn’t matter but is this working against a wider sense of invitation to others to join us?

Steve acknowledged he was concerned about this. He referred back to the upsurge of Extinction Rebellion in 2019 and how it appealed to many ‘soft conservatives’. “**And that really frightened the fossil fuel lobby and their supporters and so they moved into action very quickly, obviously using the media that they influence, and particularly an organisation called Policy Exchange**” which produced “*a highly influential report called ‘[Extremism Rebellion](#)’... which was aimed at opinion formers to say ‘these people who are banging on about climate change are anti-capitalist anti-British, extremists’*” he says. Steve feels campaign groups can sometimes score own goals by allowing their campaigns “*to be associated with other divisive left-wing issues*” (such as reparations for slavery). “**Where an issue becomes associated with a political cleavage... a social movement will find it very difficult if not impossible to achieve change – and of course that’s precisely what the fossil-fuel lobby wanted to do**”. At this point I’m left thinking about ‘[The Plan for Drivers](#)’ alongside 20-minute

neighbourhoods – playing with political cleavages. Steve is clear: to make progress with climate action, “*divorce from other issues, change your language, and learn to speak different languages to different audiences*”.

I wondered if this suggestion to divorce from other issues was at odds with Robin’s approach of helping people find their place in the climate conversation by finding another issue that mattered to them through which they could connect with climate change. My sense, however, was that Robin’s approach was complementary to Steve’s advice because by ‘diffusing’ people’s forms of connection through multiple other issues with the climate crisis, mass convergence on a single issue of cleavage could be avoided. Robin did, however, emphasise that you can’t just tackle climate change, because climate change itself is the manifestation of problems but not the problem itself – “*the problem is everything that is causing climate change*”.

Had Hiba found herself something of a lone agitator for change in presiding across many projects in consultancy as the sustainability and social outcomes lead? It seems not. Hiba’s sense was that she was – in her professional circles – more someone who is there to pop up and provide a reminder, and that most people are receptive and responsive to that. She doesn’t experience push-back but instead is able to use her role to help cross-fertilise thinking.

“*Raising it [climate change] as an issue is different from dealing with it as an issue*” says Greg, “*and I think that’s where you have to reach out into everyone’s lives and how they live and have those conversations about, well, what needs to be different?*”. He notes the poor track record in terms of failing to make progress on other social issues, and singles out the example of tackling congestion which has only got worse during his career as a transport professional – “*so if we treat climate change like that we’re doomed*” he reflects. Greg pointed to ‘The Plan for Drivers’ as a reminder that the interests you are ignoring are eventually going to kick back. “*The narrative around sustainable transport can be if you don’t use a car ‘tick’, if you do use a car ‘cross’ and that bifurcates people totally unhelpfully and we’ve got to find language and solutions that meet the needs of society*”. Greg found himself sat between agreeing with parts of Steve’s reasoning and Robin’s – “*it is really complicated*” he concedes.

Ridiculed on GB News

I wanted to come to Zoe and her experiences on ‘the front line’ when it comes to media interviews. I pointed to the horrific GB News interview of a young climate activist who was **ridiculed on air, with the presenter quite simply laughing at the fact that he was patiently trying to explain the loss of life last summer due to the extreme temperatures**. If you can stomach it, you can watch the interview [here](#) (but take care, because the conduct of the interviewer is sickening – and frankly it’s a reminder that the film [Don’t Look Up](#) is in some ways only a pale reflection of the awful ‘blue pill’ mainstream media. So how does Zoe approach her media encounters on such outlets? How does she try and connect with the audiences concerned?

Zoe’s first point was to remind us that when you’re being interviewed, “*you’re not just talking to one or two presenters, you’re actually up against a whole team of people, which are funded by oil interests behind them*” which explains the purpose of the earpiece a presenter will have. “*They’re after clicks ‘cos they’re commercial organisations, and they’re after stoking division and hatred and denial ‘cos that’s their business*”. In that context, to try and engage effectively, the first step is to try and understand what you are actually facing. She also notes that doing a media interview “*is a piece of direct action*” in its own right. “*It’s really important to not accept the framing that we’re given*” she says, which tends to be ‘business as usual’ –

the “**extractive, patriarchal, capitalist nonsense which has created this whole setup**”. It takes lots of practice and you have to “*try really hard not to take it personally*” (anyone else in the same situation could get the same sorts of attacks). Zoe reminded us that an interview on climate action is just as likely to be followed by something on the price of fish – “*it’s just clicks*” (she referred to a publication by Hannah Arendt on the [Banality of Evil](#)). “*We just have to cut through the nonsense and be brave...connecting with purpose, connecting with why we’re doing this stuff is super important when we’re going into interviews*”.

Zoe believes “**we need to recalibrate our risk**”. She explains: “*the risks that we might have thought, like ‘a little bit risky’ to say such and such in a meeting... you’re joking aren’t you, our food supply’s collapsing, and our economy’s going to fall over – everything’s at risk*”. She encourages us: “**so let’s upscale our risk, and keep upscaling our risk to see what we’re capable of, because we’re all capable of so much more – and the only thing we’re going to regret in the weeks and months ahead is that we didn’t do stuff**”. And this doesn’t mean we can’t also “*love and laugh and have joy with others*”.

To some questions posed before the event

I then moved around the panel with each of them taking a turn at addressing one of the questions that had been used in the event’s promotional material.

How can someone best determine what climate action is right for them to take?

Emma wanted to bring up values, privilege and power that one can have as an underpinning for climate action, but also the worry about the impact that climate action could have on your job. She also wanted to touch upon how economics and climate change are intertwined.

“*I think the values point is really important because there’s no point in you taking action that doesn’t sort of fit with you*”. It’s about “**finding action that chimes with you, and that will look different for everybody**” she says. Emma wanted to acknowledge that she “*is hugely privileged to have been in a position to have left my secure employment and go into self-employment*”. She cautioned against any sense that we can judge others for the jobs they do, without understanding their circumstances. She points out that “*pretty much everyone has to have some form of employment*” and must therefore depend upon the economic system that we have – which is creating that insecurity. “**When I was in the public sector, I was terrified of having conversations like this, I never would have put anything on social media for fear of losing my job**”. She worries about censorship and whether we really have free speech if people fear for reprisals. She points also to “*marginalised groups that do not have the privilege of not acting...groups within our society where their existence is denied ... there are a lot of conversations at the moment about trans rights...if you are in marginalised groups you are almost forced to take action just to say ‘hey, I am a real person, I do exist’*”. She emphasises that social justice, racial justice, economic justice and climate justice are all really closely intertwined – bringing us back to the complexity Greg acknowledged in reflecting upon Steve’s and Robin’s comments in this respect. I was struck by the theme emerging through the conversation of interconnectedness and to me it seems **the challenge is navigating interconnectedness**.

What are the risks and rewards of taking climate action?

“*I’ll try to be brief on this, because I could talk all day on this*” Steve starts. “*The risks are very clear when you are in employment and...I felt them very keenly...my employment [in academia] was threatened*”. Steve pointed out that as he was nearing retirement none of this

mattered to him in the end in terms of the direct action he had taken. However, he was quick to point out how different it would doubtless feel as a younger person with a mortgage.

*“As regards the ‘what can you get out of it?’, the answer to that is very personal but I’ll share just one reflection which is this....[Steve pauses and the strength of emotion as he reflects is palpable to all of us – powerfully so]... **when you are in that situation where you’ve been handcuffed, being led away by the police, you feel this tremendous sense of peace coming over you – you’ve done what’s the right thing, it’s now out of your hands and it’s for others to do their bit**”.*

What effect can taking climate action have on those around you?

“Our biggest superpower...is influence through action” says Robin, *“simply by taking action, you might influence somebody else to take positive action too”*. He then goes on, *“the problem is with that superpower is that you often have no idea of its effect, you don’t necessarily know who you’re influencing”*. He acknowledged how talking with me previously about our other panel members had been inspiring for him and a motivation to take further action – **they had created influence in others without even knowing**.

“We often talk about preaching to the choir” he notes, *“certainly within climate theatre the audiences we get are probably people on side”*. While this can be made to sound negative, Robin thinks *“**actually we should instead view it as rallying the choir – we can take action to inspire others and to rally those who are alone and stripped of their motivation who need someone to remind them that ‘I’m not alone’**”*. He considers rallying so important because of something called *“the melancholy of the left”*. He goes on to explain: *“on the right-hand of the political spectrum we have our capitalism, neoliberalism and colonialism, and all of the things we might say are the foundations of the climate crisis; and then on the left-hand we point at those things and go ‘that’s the problem!’, but then we end up going ‘that’s the system, we can’t do anything about it’ and we sit into this melancholy where we are deactivated, and it’s that melancholy that sustains everything that’s on the right...and so it’s really difficult but we have to try and break through that wall of melancholy and just keep taking action however big or small”*.

How does climate action relate to mental health?

“It’s so intertwined with mental health” says Hiba, *“a natural approach to pain – the radiator’s hot, you touch the radiator, you take the hand off the radiator ‘cos it burns, you don’t continue to hold the radiator, you don’t continue to hold the hot thing”*. *“So looking into something so painful...I used to sit and cry and think about the polar bear, and that polar bear was really sad and didn’t have any food, and I couldn’t really handle dealing with all of those feelings, so the tendency to shy away from that or put it in a box...that’s a very protectionist measure, and if you’re not going to do that, it will impact your mental health”* she reflects. So how to counteract this? *“The main thing for me was understanding that you can only do what you can do”* she says, *“if you have to think about the seriousness of that polar bear and be really sad, you can still go out for a coffee with a friend, you have to be able to compartmentalise that”*. Hiba looked ahead as well to mental health in later life and the comfort in times when climate change will be worse than today of knowing she did what she could.

What is the outlook for climate action over the years ahead?

Greg wanted to start with an observation made by [Fridays for Future](#) at COP26, *“if COP was the answer, we wouldn’t be on number 26, or 28 as it is now”*. *“I know we need international*

discussions on these things but **pinning hope on COP as a process is very difficult for me**" he acknowledges.

"We are failing, so it's not 1.5 degrees for me, it's how much more than 1.5 degrees" he says, and goes on to ask "so how do we respond to planning to fail"? Greg believes "climate legislation feels like a bit of a safety net to people working in this". He is anxious about the responses we are starting to see and may see more of: "**the recent row backs from the Sunak Government ... on to discourses of delay, 'we're doing better than other people', 'it's not our fault it's not 1.5 degrees', pushing things to the right, rewriting legislation**". As a result he thinks "it's [now] very much about how the public responds to this". He goes on, "more and more people, people like us, we've got a massive role to play in just, if we are going to drift on and not do enough, let's not feel like that debate wasn't had". To remind us how surreal our existence is he comments: "I can't believe how annoyed people get about there not being enough peppers in Tesco or whatever last summer, you ain't seen nothing yet, people really need to understand this". That resonated for me – back to Robin's hyperobject – **I just don't think we can comprehend that this might be the thin end of the wedge – everything was alright. And then it wasn't. I don't think people can appreciate how quickly 'and then it wasn't' can happen.**

We then turned to Zoe. "I guess the truth is, no-one knows the future" she says, but "futurists often say you can see the future in what's already around and already emerging". She goes on to elaborate: "hundreds of millions of people are feeling this now, aren't they, food insecurity has been spiking globally since 2018/2019, 20,000+ babies in Somalia have died in the last, I think, three years in the climate drought there; it's real now, isn't it, 14 million people, 1 in 5 people in this country, are food insecure....**that's shit isn't it, let's just call it what it is, it's shit**".

Zoe is unequivocal in her closing words: "**If we go back to the systemic drivers of all of this, the greed, inequality, elites, extraction to the nth degree, the financialisation of everything... we have to join the dots... what we're really fighting here is utter injustice... and ultimately we're fighting genocide**". Zoe referred to a quote from the President of Columbia who recently said "Gaza is just the first experiment in considering us all disposable" – as Zoe notes: "he's writing that primarily from a Global South perspective but not just from a Global South perspective". She is clear in her view: "the people in power consider us disposable, don't they, that's true, because otherwise why would they be accepting that 1 in 5 people in the UK don't know if they can feed their kids in the coming weeks". For her, the three 'Rs' are important: "resistance, resilience and regeneration", at every level. She also emphasised that "we need to defend our democracy in every way we possibly can and fight for more and better democracy, like the people working on the ['Defend Our Juries'](#) campaign".

Signing off

As we drew to a close I had to note how surreal it is that the Sunak Government can have cheap slogans on their podium like 'Stop the Boats' and 'Long Term Decisions for a Brighter Future'. Could I have imagined three and a half years ago at the start of our Fireside Chat series that we would find ourselves so deeply invested in such emotional and fundamental issues that reach well beyond the comprehension of the normal bounds of our professional undertakings? I don't think so. But we are now where we are. Where are we heading? Who knows.

With love and gratitude, love and rage xxx