Entry for the Sustainability First Writing Prize from Sally Cairns, 8/7/21.

Together for a fair climate future: The Wrong Solution

The sun beat down relentlessly. Behind him, the building offered welcome safety, but ahead, the dusty soil stretched blankly, endlessly, into the distance, vanishing in a shimmer of heat on the horizon. Nothing moved. To the east, the landscape was scarred with a barren, fissured gash that marked the path of a once great river. Through his shirt, he felt as if his skin was already starting to burn, and, with every breath, he was aware of the dryness of the air. He turned and went in.

Sarah caught up with him in the outer chamber: "Where were you?"

"I went outside", he said shortly.

"Outside?" She raised her eyebrows slightly at the eccentricity but was too excited to pursue it. "All the polls say we're going to win Counts 1 and 2 today."

"What about tomorrow?" (Count 3 – the critical one.)

"Still too close to call."

In the courtroom, even though most people were attending by screen, there was still a buzz, a sense of keen anticipation that this protracted case was finally ending.

The Refugees of the Newly Displaced Nations versus the Established Economies

Count 1: That the Established Economies were fully aware of the potential threat of climate change.

Count 2: That there was sufficient evidence that this threat was materialising that the Established Economies should have taken more action.

"Respected judges, in presenting this closing argument, I would like to highlight again that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change formed as early as 1988 …"

"…Let me repeat to you some of the language used in their reports – take, for example, their 5th Annual Report from 2014 - '…it is *very likely* that heat waves will occur more often and last longer, and that extreme precipitation events will become more intense and frequent in many regions. The ocean will continue to warm and acidify, and global mean sea level to rise… A large fraction of species faces increased extinction risk (*high confidence*)… Rural areas are expected to experience major impacts on water availability and supply, food

security, infrastructure and agricultural incomes, including shifts in the production areas of food and non-food crops around the world (*high confidence*)…'[1]"

"…Let me also remind you of some of the disasters that were already happening. Wildfires in 2020 destroyed millions of hectares of land in Australia, California, Siberia and the Amazon. Heatwaves, hurricanes, flooding, droughts, cyclones, typhoons – most parts of the world were affected, whether it was the 2019 Indian monsoon that killed thousands of people[2], or Storms Ciara and Dennis in the UK that caused billions of pounds of property damage[3]…"

The courtroom was quiet when he finished. He looked across at the Defence as he sat down. They had chosen their lead lawyer well, he thought – an older man, with the kind of face you instinctively trusted. But how could he win these points? By arguing world leaders had truly believed that thousands of the world's leading scientists had concocted the story of climate change as a hoax? By suggesting that the endless reports of unprecedented weather events were plausibly all a massive coincidence?

As predicted, they won Counts 1 and 2.

He didn't sleep well that night. The heat seemed to press against the windows. In his dreams, giant walls of ice cracked away and smashed into rising seas. Majestic forests were devoured by flames, and then, somehow, he stood in a wasteland where, through the dust and floating soot, the last wild tiger looked at him sadly, before padding slowly away.

The next day, the atmosphere in the courtroom was different. Like the stillness before a storm, there was a tension that had been missing yesterday. This was the critical argument, that had a fundamental effect on the ruling.

Count 3: That the Established Economies could have prevented what has happened by taking appropriate actions.

"The Defence will argue that the public would not have accepted the sorts of changes necessary; that the funding was not available and that the technologies were lacking. However, as the evidence presented over the last few months has shown, this is simply not true. To the Governments of the Established Economies, I say this:

First, you fundamentally misjudged your own populations, despite evidence to the contrary. Time and again, in citizens assemblies, ordinary people reported that they understood the need for change to address the climate crisis. They could see that things would have to be

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[1] IPCC (2014) Climate change 2014 synthesis report: Summary for policymakers. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Core Writing Team, R.K. Pachauri and L.A. Meyer (eds.)]. IPCC, Geneva, Switzerland, 151 pp. AR5_SYR_FINAL_SPM.pdf (ipcc.ch), quotations taken from pages 10, 13 and 16

[2] Counting the cost 2019: a year of climate breakdown (christianaid.org.uk)

[3] Storms inflict £7.7bn worth of damage on a third of UK property | The Independent | The Independent

different, but they could also see that making changes to their own lives wouldn't be enough without coherent national and international measures to make change more widespread. And so they waited for you to do something, and you waited for them to behave differently and nothing happened. You were there to lead – where was your leadership?"

He paused, to let the translators catch up, the low mutter of their voices like the early patter of rain.

"Second, you say you were worried about jobs. But the Green Jobs Revolution was always going to happen. Sure, you provided some retraining opportunities, but it must have been clear that a massive retraining and transitioning programme was needed. Where was the support to enable livestock farmers to make new use of their land? Where were the programmes to transition those working in the international leisure industry into more local leisure jobs? Look at the employment in your current economies – successes like the East of England Riviera, the resilient clothing trend and the micromobility boom might have happened sooner with more support.

And, alongside individual jobs, where was the backing for new businesses? Take the re-use, repair and recycle businesses; the sharing services; the eco-hobby industry. Pre-loved clothes shops; domestic-appliance-repair cafes; car clubs; eco-gardening classes – you could have supported these but instead you left it up to individual start-ups – focusing most of your support on the established industries with established lobbyists – as if trying to keep things the same represented progress; as if pre-existing organisations were best placed to achieve radical change; and as if you were obligated to balance the needs of the future against the vested interests of the time. Covid should have taught you that you can't always have an effective strategy and keep everyone happy – and if you forgo the effective strategy, then often no-one wins."

There was a restlessness in the courtroom now, like wind through tall grass, the stirring of frustrations remembered.

"You talk about cost concerns. But many important sources of current Government revenue – like road pricing and fairer aviation taxation – could have been introduced much earlier. It was already clear that, with investment, the price of new technologies could drop dramatically – take solar panels or wind power or battery technology – so why didn't you invest more? Why did you offer grants for some things but not others – like electric cars but not electric-assist bikes? And why didn't you learn that disasters are really expensive? Clearing up after floods can cost a lot more than preventing them.

You say the technologies weren't available – but many of the most effective measures – like home insulation – didn't require any new inventions. Why didn't building regulations require new buildings to include everything we already knew? Why didn't you use taxes, like stamp duty, to encourage upgrades of existing buildings? Why didn't you require manufacturers to ensure products were repairable and conformed to stricter energy efficiency standards? Why didn't you insist on farming practices that minimised fertiliser use and maximised soil carbon storage?"

He was aware of speaking faster and louder now, his words pounding and echoing off the courtroom walls.

“You couldn’t even do the obvious things – like banning peat extraction; protecting natural forests and important marine areas; stopping airport expansion; limiting sales of the dirtiest cars; or refusing permission for more coal mines. And why didn’t you reshape existing public spending – why did you spend more on high-speed roads or fossil-fuelled power stations than on, say, active travel or upgrading electricity networks; why didn’t you limit the levels of heating, cooling and lighting in public buildings or require lower-carbon food from all public caterers; make ‘swap parties’ a mandatory part of waste disposal; encourage tree planting in every local park; equip libraries to offer virtual meeting spaces?

And you were so fixated on carbon, on long-term goals, on hundred-year metrics, that you missed the opportunity for quick wins. Complementary measures to tackle short-lived climate forcers – like contrails from planes or methane from food waste – might at least have bought us some time.

Worst of all, you will argue that there were other priorities. But from what we know now, how can you argue that anything else was more important? And when people voted for you, they thought it was your duty to understand what was important – and to protect them. And yet you didn’t.”

Afterwards, outside, nothing had changed, the harsh heat still unrelenting. Behind him, he heard the door open. Sarah took a few steps towards him, reluctant to come any further but too excited not to report. “We won”, she said. “We won, and now nearly a billion people have resettlement rights.”

He continued looking at the dead landscape stretching ahead – and in his mind, he saw an old photograph of what it used to be – an endless vista of fields and small houses; a patchwork of colours; children playing; the slow murmur of the river; and gentle sunlight dancing off the water, softened by a scatter of clouds. He blinked and it was gone.

“Nobody won”, he said.

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