

A courageous transition

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I am spoke at an event in Brighton this afternoon. The wax organised by Andrew Simms of the New Weather Institute [and in its words](#) it considered:

A new study by the ESRC STEPS Centre at Sussex University and the New Weather Institute [that] points to historical evidence that the sort of rapid, large scale social and economic change needed in the face of climate destabilisation has occurred before and could do so again.

In the face of climate change and social inequality, changing to a greener and fairer society might feel impossible — but rapid, radical transitions may be more possible than we think, according to a new study.

This is, pretty much, what I had to say:

I struggled to think what I might say today.

What is the transition we need?

How can it be achieved quickly?

Those seemed to me to be questions it was unreasonable to ask or to expect me to answer.

Two recent conversations gave me the clues I needed to unwrap my own thinking.

The first of those conversations was about the need for change. During it I was reminded that it takes courage to create change. But more than that: it takes courage to see ourselves in a true light, which we have to do if we are to realise that change is required.

The second was about my dog. Someone commented on his apparent obedience. And it is true that he does seem to be remarkably good at obeying my commands. But as I explained, his whole freedom to walk without a lead and so to explore the world as he

sniffs it is based on his willingness to accept the constraints I impose. In a strange way that takes courage as well. It requires that he trust me.

And in a nutshell those two conversations told me all I needed to know.

We know that when we stand back and look in a true light that the way we are living is not sustainable.

Worse, we know that the way we live is not what we really want. If it was it would not take the enormous and dedicated power of the advertising industry to shape our whims of desire, all with the goal of seemingly ensuring that we remain perpetually enslaved in debt.

And so we want to change.

But doing so requires courage.

And that requires trust.

Trust that we can really do something better.

Trust that living with materially fewer things will deliver us better emotional, family, intellectual and spiritual lives.

Trust that others might broadly share our view.

Trust that working together we can achieve this goal.

Trust that this desire will not be abused by some taking advantage of others.

Trust most of all that contrary to all that we have been told for so long we have a collective ability to effect change.

Which requires that we trust our neighbour to care for us as we do for them.

*Which brought me back to rethinking why I wrote a book called *The Courageous State* a few years ago.*

*In it I argued that what I have lived in most of my life has been a *Cowardly State*. That's one where elected politicians do four things.*

First they tell us that governments cannot solve problems.

Second they tell us instead to trust that markets can meet our needs.

Third, they do this because they say that it is only individual greed and not collective action that creates well-being.

And fourth, as a result they seek to turn the power of the state over to a small and highly selected group of individuals who individually profit as a consequence at cost to all the rest of us.

Well I have to tell you that we must have the courage to say that they are wrong.

We must believe that government, elected by us, acting for us, and held to account for what it does, is to be trusted as the agent to deliver change on our behalf.

But that does not mean we give up our faith in ourselves.

Or the belief in our ability to innovate, including in the market place.

What it does instead mean is that we accept that collectively we can trust each other to set the rules that create the level playing field where all can flourish.

And by all, I mean all.

Not just those alive now, but those to come as well.

And not just those with the ability to take part in government, but everyone. That's because the expectation shall be that those who govern do not do so for their own benefit, as has all too clearly been the objective of too many who have held high offices of state of late, but for the sake of us all.

We need to have the courage to believe that politics can, despite everything, be an honourable calling.

And that the state can when directed as if it cares for us as we care for ourselves can be the instrument for change that we are looking for.

And that as a result the transition we desire is possible.

It will take courage.

It will mean we have to accept the reality of constraints in a finite world.

But that courage will give us the freedom to sniff the world as we want.

I believe that's a right that everyone should share. It's not just a privilege for my dog to enjoy.

A transition is possible. The tools to achieve it already exist. But we must have the courage to claim them for our common good motivated by our concern for each other and not just ourselves.

Building that narrative on the transition to a Courageous State is what a lot of my work is about.