Funding the Future

Is recognising possibility a revolutionary act?

Published: November 7, 2026, 7:33 am

I have been thinking about a question that might, at first, appear a little abstract. The question is whether the recognition of possibility is a revolutionary act?

The idea came to me from a comment made by former Archbishop of Canterbury, Roman Williams, in a debate in which he was speaking about the nature of reason. He was discussing the need for narrative as the basis of change, which is a theme I have addressed here often, when he added the suggestion that the recognition of possibility is the basis for revolutionary thinking.

I felt when he said this that I had also been saying that, but I admit, not nearly as succinctly as he did, which frustrated me, I admit.

So, what does this mean, because I think it has significance for a great deal of our politics. That is because one of the most effective ways in which power maintains its position is by persuading us that the arrangements under which we live are inevitable. Thatcher was the prime exponent of this. She said ‘There is no alternative’ and neoliberals have said so, ever since.

Their claim is that we must accept that they are right. Most particularly, they say that we have no choice but to accept that. So, they argue, arrangements might be unfair. They might deliver outcomes that almost no one would consciously choose. They might even threaten our survival. But we must accept that there is no alternative. That is their demand, and in that case, any call for change that we might make of them can be dismissed. They believe they need not worry about such demands, because they can dismiss all opposition to the supposed status quo. That status quo cannot change. It just is. There is no argument to be had. Debate has been closed down. They believe they are right, and that is the matter closed

We can complain. We can be angry. We can even vote for different politicians. But if every available government accepts the same constraints, protects the same interests and offers variations on the same policies, the possibility of meaningful change is excluded before political debate has really begun. That is how we got what I call the

single transferable party: that entity that comes in Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat form but which singularly thinks there is only one way of governing, whoever is elected.

That creation is a considerable achievement for those who benefit from things as they are. They do not have to persuade us that the existing order is good. They only have to persuade us that nothing better is possible.

Much of what passes for economic common sense has been created to serve this purpose. We are told that the government has run out of money, that markets will not permit a particular policy, that public services must wait until growth returns, or that competition and self-interest are the only reliable foundations for economic activity. Each claim places something that we might otherwise decide to achieve together beyond the supposed limits of political choice.

And then something changes. Someone asks why those limits exist. Someone explains that an institution works differently from the way we have been told it does. Someone demonstrates that a service could be organised around need, that a community could own an asset, or that people might cooperate because they care about an outcome.

At that point, what appeared impossible becomes something we can discuss. We might still disagree about it. Practical difficulties might remain. But a choice has become available where previously we were told there was none.

I think that matters enormously. But then, I would. That is what I do. And I do so because I think it makes a difference.

Consider the difference between believing that poverty is an unavoidable feature of human society and recognising that it could be prevented. Once we accept that possibility, the continued existence of poverty demands a different explanation. We have to ask which decisions sustain it, who benefits from those decisions, and why we tolerate their consequences.

Recognising possibility also changes the question of responsibility. What was presented as an unfortunate inevitability, which some might even blame on those suffering the consequence, becomes an outcome for which people and institutions can instead be held to account.

The same is true of public services. If we accept that their decline is inevitable because there is supposedly no money, we are invited to lower our expectations. If we recognise that the real questions concern the people, skills, buildings, equipment and other resources required to provide them, we can begin discussing what must actually be done. We can train people, invest, organise and plan. Constraints exist, but identifying them gives us work to do.

This is one reason why I spend so much time challenging the economic stories we are told. Explaining how government money works might seem technical. Its political consequence can, however, be profound. It can allow someone to ask what government could achieve instead of accepting its excuses for failing to act.

None of this means that imagining a better future brings it into existence. There is work between recognising a possibility and realising it. Institutions have to change. Resources have to be organised. Interests will resist. People have to build enough trust in one another to act together, often without any guarantee of success.

Nor does every promise of change deserve our support. Authoritarian politics offers possibilities too, frequently by promising that life will improve when some other group is excluded, silenced or punished. We have to judge the future being proposed by whose needs it meets, whose freedom it expands and whether people will have a meaningful say in shaping it.

But these qualifications do not diminish the importance of recognising that change is possible. They instead explain why that recognition needs to be followed by political thought, organisation and action.

A politics concerned with creating a better society has to offer some account of what that society could be. Anger at failure is understandable, but it does not, by itself, tell us where to go. People need a destination they have reason to want, and a credible explanation of how they might help reach it. This is the narrative I talk about, the 'better song to sing' as I call it. This is the story that Rowan Williams said we need.

That, to me, is part of what the Courageous State is about. It begins with recognising that government can accept responsibility for meeting needs, enabling cooperation, and preparing for our shared future. It then asks what governing for those purposes requires.

So, is the recognition of possibility a revolutionary act? It can be, because it challenges the resignation on which so much power depends. Once people understand that a different outcome is possible, they can begin to demand it.

And those who insist that we must carry on as we are, maintaining a failing status quo, have a much harder question to answer, whch is why should we?