# A possible pathway to building revolutionary change for 'democracy, environmental justice and sustainable development'

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Every successful significant revolution in the past 250 years – in England, the USA, France, Russia, China – has combined three elements:

- a manifesto text (or texts) which encapsulates a set of game-changing ideas about how to shape  a new model of political economy, along with inspirational values that the new society be founded upon
- the spread and embedding of transformative technologies and new labour-capital relationships
- and, a committed band of idealistic revolutionaries who persuade the majority to support the cause.

[This is not to judge the outcome of these revolutions as universally successful, but to note common characteristics that led to the overthrow of each prevailing 'ancien regime'.]

Of course, there has been a fourth and terrible dimension that also characterised these previous transformations – violence.  Persuasion all too often degenerated into violent repression by the revolutionary vanguard, once the new elite gained power.  (This was true even in the USA, where politicians and industrial barons perverted revolutionary ideals and used market forces to eradicate Native Peoples, embed slavery, and create an entrenched under-class of workers.  Similarly, in England where, throughout the Industrial Revolution, the aristocracy cleverly absorbed the 'arriviste' merchant oligarchy while sublimating overt tyranny into an insidiously repressive class warfare at home, and exporting the military tendency through the forging of empire.  The deep irony of Adam Smith's moral philosophy, and his strictures about liberalised markets and self-seeking merchant-barons, being so regularly perverted in practice by his most passionate advocates is generally lost on Anglo-Saxon, free-marketeers).  The challenge now is to replicate the three successful elements, and avoid the fourth.

At the turn of the 21st century, there is no shortage of compelling ideas or inspirational values to embed through a sustainability revolution.  We see them in the work of individuals and leaders in all societies at all levels, in the findings of inter-governmental commissions, in the publications of NGOs and academics.  Some of these common pathways for a sustainable and prosperous civilisation, which can be nested together and implemented between and within nation states, include objectives like:

- living, working and playing within biospheric limits
- ensuring the efficient use and fair shares distribution of natural resources
- balancing political, economic and cultural interests between and within local, national and international levels of power
- safeguarding the needs of future generations
- guaranteeing universal rights through law, custom and practice

- acting as stewards within nature and respecting the survival and regenerative dynamics of ecological systems and species
- restraining interference in the affairs of sovereign nations and basing military action only on genuine self defence
- empowering collaborative communities, and economic and political self-determination ('localism')
- enforcing transparent, non-corrupt and accountable government (legislative, executive, judicial), able to mix representative and participatory forms of political engagement according to mandates determined by electorates
- harmonising fair market competition within a fundamentally cooperative and mutually supportive trade and fiscal framework
- and, developing a representative and empowered United Nations tier of government able to democratically undertake ecological, economic and political planetary management for the common good .

These are some of the building blocks upon which to found a truly sustainable, planet-wide political economy, cornerstones for a society worth living in whoever and wherever you are. They can give rise to a new model of political and economic community based on collaboration for the common good, and negotiation and diplomacy between self-determining peoples, which can judiciously satisfy human needs and the requirements of other life forms.

Implicit in any such set are hard-to-resolve issues of power-sharing, and trade-offs between a multiplicity of existing and usually competing interests. Overcoming the fragmentation of the status quo, and the dominance of obvious as well as hidden circles of self-serving power, in order to develop a fairer, more productive and life-enhancing civilisation is the ultimate challenge that our generation faces.

And even as we worry about impending climate-induced ecological, economic and social turbulence, we must also deal with a range of other looming disrupters to the established order (again, between and within nation states):

- profound demographic shifts in age structures within countries, and between geo-political hemispheres
- the spread of futuristic technologies which, like money, have huge potential for 'good' and 'bad' (e.g. robotics, artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, computing power and 'nanos')
- entrenched and worsening social, economic and political inequalities (class, religion, ethnic, national)
- increasingly depleted natural resource stocks and increasingly intense resource wars
- unprecedented migrations
- failing states
- endemic corruption and increasingly centralised state control
- religious and cultural fanaticism
- and, from out of this (still avoidable) melee, increased self-justifying terrorist atrocity and global criminal networks.

Like conscious, deliberate revolution, this current unplanned upheaval is also notable for its range of transformative technologies and products, and radically different relationships between labour and capital, and between the ruled and the rulers. Yet none of these developments are good for any of us, in the short or long-term (though special and criminal interests may be able to exploit the upheavals temporarily). It is in all our common interests to address and resolve these inter-related crises of ecology, economy and government – and that too can be done with sufficient will, wisdom and support.

The Industrial Revolution, and its still-evolving political and economic structures, has brought us to the brink of collapse. We will either succeed or fail to find another more sustainable development path, with correspondingly good or bad consequences for the great majority of earth's citizens. Starkly, society evolves, or we die in unprecedented numbers and suffering.

But we should be optimistic. There are so many extraordinary human achievements in evidence in every field of endeavour in every country, and such profound economic and social opportunity from managing the transition from an unsustainable state of affairs to a sustainable one, that understanding the nature of the crisis should give us the confidence to take the first steps toward collaboratively creating an harmonious state of the world. Look at the revolutionary impact that the IT industry has had on society in 15 short years. Think what zero-carbon and zero-waste economies (to take just one opportunity) could achieve, if wealth and access to power were democratically distributed in rolling out the changes and by applying principles like those articulated above, locally, nationally and across continents.

We do have a long way to go to embark on a successful, mutually beneficial and peaceful revolution. Currently, we have no visionary text explaining the intersect between (those heavy but crucial concepts) democracy, environmental justice and sustainable development. There is no 21st century philosopher-poet who has written the sustainability equivalent of the 'Rights of Man', 'Wealth of Nations', 'Das Kapital', ' Communist Manifesto' or 'Little Red Book'.

The task now upon us, as chaos increasingly bites the world over, is to find a development path that can sustain and improve life, without chasing the chimera of perfect answers to all problems. With no convenient scripture to hand, is there another way to bring about the kind of revolution that is needed? Can we find that transformative, non-violent route-map that can lift us out of the mess we have created and toward a more fulfilling society, moulded by the principles and practice of democracy, environmental justice and sustainable development?

Three words that trip off the tongue of NGOs, academics, pundits and politicians: democracy, justice and sustainability. Yet they are replete with varied, overlapping meaning – like freedom or happiness, interpretation varies from culture to culture, country to country. Trying to find an absolute set of definitions that translate unambiguously into a single universal political economy for all peoples in every circumstance is meaningless and self-defeating. At best, we should strive for what works best, now, for most (and, particularly, the poor and disenfranchised). We need a starting point.

One way forward is for some to begin drafting a suggested core text, and offer that up for improvement by a multitude – to try and employ the wisdom of crowds to delineate the core

principles, values and objectives, alongside mechanisms for delivery, to be built into the new political economy.  These beginners have to be self-appointed, and they must recognise that position with humility.  Their job is to set something out there, with a process for multiple others to engage, refine, correct, amend – in the same sort of way that Wikipedia has formed.  There will be an editorial role, based on resolving disputes and ensuring that violence doesn't emerge at a distance between contributors.

The starting point should define some common core elements, at the level of principle and outcome (such as the listed bulletin points above), that some majority of people could engage with, because they recognise them as self-evidently desirable.  Such a text could provide examples, stories, pictures and case studies of what works and what doesn't, according to the principles and outcomes initially set out in the core text.  The text will therefore include demonstrations in reality of the principles and values in action – and should cover a fertile ground of mechanisms for implementation, e.g.:

- policies in all forms (regulatory, fiscal, judicial etc)
- enterprise and market arrangements
- institutions and agencies
- constitutional frameworks
- cultural, social and community arrangements
- technologies, infrastructure, products and services, etc etc.

In other words, the text will set out the case, concisely (!), for a breadth of options, ranging from carbon taxation to constitutional imperatives, global treaty priorities to sovereignty between local and national government, universal rights to market operations – covering the core elements of human activity that govern our principal (economic and political) relationships with ourselves and nature.  And then, once a manageable draft is ready, and a process for amending defined, it can be released electronically, as well as distributed through existing sign-up organisations to be debated and improved face-to-face in communities, across the world.

Will there be one size fits all?  One dominant model of political economy rigidly applied to all different societies, cultures, belief systems?  I don't think so.  I do think that an adaptable type will emerge that different peoples will apply as they self-determine, with different mixes of these mechanisms as suits in particular circumstances and particular times: variations on a theme, as it were.  But I also think that for common problems and shared threats that none can escape it is also possible to agree a (near) universally shared approach and global sign-up to specific inter-governmental and inter-market arrangements, rules and institutional responsibilities.  This is the unavoidable, irreducible core of relationships between ourselves and with nature that we must get right for the common good.  As time passes, these will undoubtedly be amended by subsequent generations as circumstances change inevitably.  Our job is to deal with our own reality as best we can – and a lot better than we do currently.

Is there an end-point, or will the recommendations and suggestions for implementation forever evolve?  Continuous editorialising might in some ways be inevitable in an electronically mediated debate, conducted on both a global and a set of national and local scales.  But for implementation,

there should be staging points in time marked as part of the process of decision.  Such a process can combine, for want of a better phrase, both top-down and bottom-up approaches to find an imperfect but acceptable resolution, through the spread of what should become increasingly convergent ideas across the whole network and sub-nets of participants.

There is always the risk of subversion and corruption by special interest cadres, whoever they may be.  The internet is renowned for fostering 'covert-open' destructive manipulation by the perpetually angry and insidious, as much as it is for cooperative and transparent enterprise.  But the ragers and the snakes cannot rule.  The process of debate and decision on any sustainability manifesto for the planet must also incorporate face-to-face gatherings, coordinated locally, nationally and internationally, between the reasonable and the rational, regardless of class, creed and circumstance.  If ever there was a time when humanity needs to be guided by the golden thread of reasoned debate and decision for public wellbeing, now surely is it.

 There are many precedents for this type of venture in the way that responsible social movements, corporations and governments interact with each other.  Now, they should be taken to the next stage of development.

Always, fulfilment for the common good, the need to surmount common challenges and the imperative to avoid common disaster from the failures of business-as-usual approaches should drive and be seen to drive these processes.  And this too will be imperfect and frustrating at times to execute; but can be designed to be functional and self-corrective.

After the drafting comes the action.  One huge advantage of organising the editorial process on a wisdom of crowds basis, electronically and face-to-face across nations, is that this engagement builds ownership amongst communities of 'ordinary' people, along-side a network of cooperative NGOs and community organisations, who have signed up to the text.  Creating the text communally builds a very strong way of working - a base - to ensure implementation.

Change is all about power – who wields it and for what purpose.  The beauty of democracies is that power really does reside in the hands of constituents, voters and tax-payers – in other words, in communities and neighbourhoods and families and individuals.  The irony is that, for a range of surmountable reasons, electorates rarely think of themselves as having that power – not least because they usually only get to act in a heavily corralled manner every five years or so.

Too many citizens slough off the responsibility of getting politics to work better (admittedly a difficult thing to do if no reasonable opportunity is available – that's one fault this proposition aims to correct).   In actuality, no government can govern without the consent of voters and tax-payers.  No politician can get elected without the support of constituents.  Build up enough legitimate demand for change and government will respond – look at how the sustained and righteous anger over spiv-bankers is finally pushing politicians from 'left' and 'right' to regulate the excesses of the financial markets, introduce a 'Tobin Tax' on currency transactions (unheard of for 30 years despite the evidence, and arguments of NGOs) and begin coordinating market regulatory and fiscal actions on an international basis

There are many instances where such networked coalitions of communities and NGOs working to a common (but more specific and limited) cause have achieved exactly that government backing – even when the executive and/or legislature have initially been hostile to or rejected the motion/ law/ tax reform in question. But, put forward a proposition that makes economic, environmental and social sense, organise voter support in every constituency, build alliances between organisations (e.g. NGOs of many types, unions, local media, community and voluntary groups, business associations, faith groups) locally and nationally, lobby, march, publicly meet, rally and press for your elected politicians support (or the other guy or gal gets the vote), and you'll build an unstoppable momentum of support in the legislature and wider society that no government can resist.

A Councillor or an MP, faced with a substantial minority (let alone majority) of their constituents, and a wide range of their local organisations and associations, unified in calling for a measure, and providing evidence and demonstrable examples of how life improves as a result; that politician will invariably join the cause – even standing up to his or her Executive and Party Whips to represent their voters' wishes. And once enough members of the ruling party as well as opposition members are backing change, then that change will happen.

It's been done many times before in Britain by Friends of the Earth-initiated legislative campaigns (with every draft Bill initially stringently opposed by the government of the day before becoming law on the say so of the legislature, Parliament), the latest of which led to The Climate Change Act. Look at what 'Move On' achieved in the USA in generating a progressive coalition of voters at state and federal levels through proposition support-building and fundraising via the Internet as well as Town Hall meetings, on a continent-wide scale.

What can be done in one nation can be done across nations, with the right agenda, sufficient public support, and committed organisation. Having built up a cooperative network of communities and organisations within and across countries in writing the text – the agenda for change - this movement is perfectly placed to ensure that it is put into place by government – or they get voted out.

Similarly, who controls commerce? It really is not large corporations or trade associations (though they are much more adept at manipulating closed door government than consumers or shareholders are – but then that's part of politics that we need to change, so won't hold true for ever). In the High Street, the consumer is King and Queen. No company will make or sell anything if sufficient people don't buy the product. That's markets for you. Companies go where the profits are and good business is.

Similarly, Boards and Chief Executives have authority, but that is always limited by shareholders (alongside other stakeholders) – who can approve or not. Many, many consumer and shareholder campaigns have been won by organised boycotts or AGM resolutions. In a competitive market place, where brand has become such a vital business tool, the last thing a company can put up with is persistent, evidenced-based, bad publicity for whatever demonstrable reason (environmental, health, social, rights, you name it). The key is to get enough people mobilised and acting in a shared interest. And, a host of companies, large and small, in all corners of the world are themselves recognising that a sustainability revolution in the market place is better for business – look at the extraordinary coalition of companies lobbying governments at Copenhagen to make the low-carbon

transition.  Companies like governments are made up of human-beings – they are not aliens or robots (well, not yet): we can find common cause.

Business needs a license to operate – and that approval is granted by society at large.  If done unthinkingly, then excess and abuse will inevitably result.  Government too operates under a social contract granted by its citizens.  If we the people fall asleep, and let civic responsibility wane, then there is no-one to blame but ourselves when things go wrong.  We get what we allow. It's a drag that this is so, but it is.  Because we are granted the power to act, we must take the responsibility directly – and not simply allow others, an elected or other cadre, to decide or to do on our behalf.  That way lies disaster, as we are discovering.

Movement building, especially on a grand and ambitious scale, cannot rely on remote means of communicating and organising.  Smart communication devices are (pretty damn extraordinary) cheap and efficient, but they do not build trust.  Face-face human contact is essential – ultimately the only secure way of debating, arguing, listening, amending, collaborating and acting together.  Building a movement for change, let alone a sustainability agenda, can no more be left to electronics than it can be left to experts (though both are a necessary part of the mix!).  So, it may be a herculean effort of organisation, and it will take some years in transparent, sustained and concerted debate and action, but this is the scale that such a democratic and peaceful revolution requires to stand a chance of success.

But if it has been done already at the level of building sufficient support for radical issues across a nation, then why not for a radical agenda across the globe? If it makes sense, it will appeal.  Radical doesn't mean crazy.  With a broad and deep sustainability agenda, there is the opportunity to unite people and organisations from all walks of life: on the clear evidence that current norms are collapsing and using demonstrable evidence of how to make life better: a more diverse, productive and stable biosphere, much greater prosperity and quality of life for all, fairer and more responsible and responsive government, safer presents and securer futures.  These are prizes worth agitating for and organising to accomplish.

What of truly brutal tyrannies – how do these insights apply there?  With much greater difficulty and considerable more bravery by their citizens is the simple answer.  But look at the extraordinary social upheavals in Burma, China and Iran, for example, in recent years.  Those peoples struggle to succeed because they have so little outside help, and their governments are adept at keeping UN-mandated political influence weak or non-existent.  Government looks after its own in the status quo.  As the mass of democratic nations change their priorities, and common-cause networks of the type suggested above, grab hold of a transformative sustainability agenda, then tyrannies become isolated and their citizens can become sufficiently empowered to find their own self-determining path.  In an inter-connected world, charging toward sustainability and democracy, North Korean regimes will not survive.

NGOs of all types, shapes and sizes will be critical to the organisation of this peoples' revolution.  There are hundreds and thousands – if not millions – of them worldwide, working on inter-related issues – issues which are the constituent parts of the democracy, prosperity and sustainability agenda.  They certainly employ millions of staff and volunteers.  Their combined budgets must number billions of dollars.  Yet, while many cooperate on particular campaigns, locally, nationally

and internationally, they remain a disparate, disorganised bunch of fellow-travellers, heading in the same general direction but not collaborating as they need to to progress. As progressive (!) movements and organisations, with essentially a centrist and common political outlook, they have not yet succeeded in changing business-as-usual trends – they have built no critical mass in society, one capable of democratically and peacefully turning things around.

Ironically, for organisations that strive to alter the fundamental ways in which government and companies do business, they are surprisingly naive about power. And, particularly what it takes to loosen the hands of those who grip so tightly the levers of control. For 40 years or more, there has been a mighty NGO huffing and puffing about how bad life is getting, variously for humans and the wild things, but surprisingly little change. The deep trends of economy and politics that perpetuate the destabilisation of the biosphere, the horrendous waste and unfair distribution of essential resources, unprecedentedly rapid and sweeping extinctions, unsustainable human inequalities and bondage, reduce liberty and increased State interference, entrenched poverty and suffering populations continue largely unchecked. That's why even the wealthy are worried, and the poor despair.

For all their extraordinary energy and commitment, hard work and good intentions, for all their numbers, budgets and supporters, it's not been nearly enough. At their best (and thank goodness they do!), NGOs whistle-blow, expose bad practice and malfeasance stop many outrageous rights abuses and bad development projects, generate publicity for a cause, build significant (though largely passive) memberships, spread useful information, march and protest, meet and meditate on the state of the world, develop practical solutions to a wide range of problems, provide useful services for humanity and the planet - all of which are necessary ... but none of which are sufficient fundamentally to make things better. And, that's the rub. Having built this type of momentum, their reach must now stretch further to help transform established powers and the mainstream. That means going beyond lobbying about policy, or crying foul in the press, to helping catalyse a very different type of revolutionary change. It's about building a critical mass for change.

And this in itself will be a challenge! Paradoxically, reasonable attempts in Britain, like the Real World coalition in the mid-1990s or ACT (Active Citizens Transform) in the early 2000s, to build broad-based alliances between UK NGOs working on so-called separate themes (such as the environment, and peace, and democracy, and rights, and development), by demonstrating the fundamental links between these agendas' individual destructive problems and practical policy and other solutions, have failed: crashed on the rocks of organisational egos, identity issues and competitive fundraising for 'their' causes. The challenge of the common good means that NGOs, as much as governments, corporations and citizens at large, must change their established and unsustainable ways!

Such a game-changing, agenda-setting, coalition-building, community-cooperative, citizen action is what we need to do now – but on the grand global scale, and not for a single issue but for a comprehensive sustainability programme. It's a question of scaling up and rolling out what we know already works. And, most crucially of all, doing so by using the established opportunities created by the very workings of democratic, market-based political economies – so there is no need for tanks or guns or violence. This can be the first peaceful, system-transforming game-changer in history.

It is a revolution that can be built democratically on three simple propositions: in a state, citizens are the power.  In the market place, the consumer and shareholder rule.  In an inter-connected world, tyrannies cannot survive on their own.  Can we do it?  In the words of a recent transformative election chant, 'Yes, we can!'

*Charles Secrett, 11th December 2009*