

Coherent Values

Engaging the public on climate change

The government wants to involve people in order to do something about climate change. Is this a problem? No, but they need to be clear what they want people to do. We know from business psychology that if you really want to take people with you, you need to communicate with them clearly and coherently. That is what this paper is about.

Does the government want to succeed?

Does the government really want to succeed? This is not entirely clear since there are inherent contradictions between maintaining the life we know and preventing climate disaster. Clearly it is the life that we in the developed world have all come to assume is normal, that is the cause of the problem.

Life we are told, will be somewhere between uncomfortable and untenable if we don't succeed. So we need a really clear statement of what it is that we want to achieve. We are motivated towards a future positive so this needs to be stated in the positive. However, as the alternatives risk being unthinkable, the worst case scenario also needs to be made explicit. There are push as well as pull factors at work here.

It would be good to have a statement that says what we want for our children's children. The North American native peoples projected their vision and planning seven generations into the future and asked "How will our decisions affect our children's children?" I for one, would like to think that the world would be full of natural richness and beauty, fairer and freer for my descendants.

In the negative sense we are told we are approaching "the tipping point". Since this is a point of no return, a point at which no further human action can achieve anything worthwhile, before ultimate catastrophe, we clearly don't want to go there. Do we want to stop climate change, or reverse it? Do we want to restore the climate picture of the world to the pattern that had previously been established over hundreds of thousands or even millions of years? It would be good to know where we're going.

Another point about an aim is that we can have only one. There is a tendency to say we want to save the planet and save the economy. Isn't it the economy that is destroying the planet? What new kind of economy will we have that also saves the planet? At some point the confusion of aims is liable to generate a conflict of principles and actions.

Language

Our single aim must be articulated in unambiguous terms if we want people to respond. Unfortunately the rhetoric is not necessarily so clear. We want to offer people "choices", we want to respect their "rights", not recognising that if we are on a pathway to disaster some of the "choices" and "rights" that we have enjoyed up until now may no longer be appropriate. The Scottish Parliament has banned smoking from public places. It hasn't stopped us from selling cigarettes altogether. Smokers are free to pollute at home or in the countryside. In the case of other kinds of pollution it may not be a case of "Not in front of us", but simply not at all.

For examples on ambiguous language let us look first at "The polluter pays principle". The government plans to introduce this, but what do the words actually say? Is it alright to pollute as long as I pay? Who can afford to pay to pollute? Given the "choice" can we guess that access to funds is all that is required? In a world that admires wealth as the signature of personal success; in a world that condones escalating personal debt, who do we think will be paying and polluting?

To take an even more ambiguous example; what about "the economy"? Once upon a time economy meant frugality, the wise and sparing dispensation of just that much resource as was needed. Applied to the truth it still does. To be economical with the truth is to dole out just that little bit that will serve the purpose and no more. It is a term of opprobrium.

When we speak about "the economy" the term is indelibly associated with consumerism. To consume means 1. To make away with, destroy, as by fire, evaporation, decomposition, disease and the like.

Also 2. To waste, squander. 3. To use up. 4. To take up, spend, waste (time). 5. To waste away. To burn away. A consumer is one who does these things and the consumer economy is surely just exactly what has brought us to this pass?

In Al Gore's film "An Inconvenient Truth" makes the repeated point that our world is in danger. He builds to a climax with his graph of carbon levels and temperature. The inference is that temperatures are sure to go where carbon levels go, i.e. sky high – not just a degree or two as suggested by some other commentators. Then he tells us "We can do the right thing AND build the economy." This caused an audible sigh of relief, both in his audience and in my Edinburgh cinema audience. "Thank goodness, we can save the economy, life will continue as normal." is the message. No! Not if you want people to bring about effective change. This is the problem with the word economy. It lulls us to sleep at once. Growing the economy is what we've been doing all along. It is a "no change" signal.

Our economy is founded on "growth", the ever increasing use of material to generate products to sell. These have to have a limited life so that we can keep on generating and selling them. The only area of the economy that is capable of renewing itself in this way because of its dependence on cyclic processes has to do with agriculture, fisheries and forestry. These areas depend upon us not taking the heart out of the land or a basic level of stock out of the sea. It also depends upon us keeping our land and oceans clean and in good shape both for us and for future generations. It is a matter of good husbandry, good stewardship; all matters that the Native American Indians appear to have understood. We need a new word for an economy that, in Robert Frost's metaphor, will "Build soil", will put the heart back into our prime resources for ourselves and for future generations.

Values

Once we have a single, clear aim and an unambiguous language to communicate it with, we also need a set of values to operate by. No business and no government have all the answers, particularly to this of all problems. To energise the people in constructive effort, we need values that show us the way we will go about things, not just what to do. One of the issues that has come to the fore in the climate change debate is social justice. It is clear that the peoples of the developed world are causing climate change. Our global footprint is way out of synch with what the world can produce for everyone. We are beginning, as Al Gore puts it, to "join the dots" and see that our way of life is responsible for famine in Africa and drought in China. It is profoundly unethical and unfair.

Values are important because otherwise there is a real risk that people, in the rush to do the right thing, will do it in the wrong way. As an example let us take bio fuels. As a way of reducing pollution and replacing fossil fuels they look to be a fuel for the future. On the other hand when I hear of people cutting down virgin rainforest in order to grow bio fuel crops it seems that we are destroying the more valuable resource for the lesser. Then again, when I hear that so many farmers in the USA have turned their corn crop over to bio-fuels that people in 100 developing countries will lose food aid, I wonder what values this behaviour subscribes to.

Values imply a ranking of priorities. Not everything is a good thing all the time or in all circumstances. Waste recycling could be one example of an industry that should be destined to grow and then decline. We have no business generating waste at all. It is a deadly symptom of consumerism. It uses energy that could be invested more productively, i.e. finding modes of distribution that don't depend on waste.

Motivation

Motivating people is not hard at all, witness the great Asian Tsunami of the New Year 2005. The generous and creative response from people from all over the world was touching and impressive. Governments were embarrassed into dipping their hands deeper and deeper into their pockets as they saw the lengths that ordinary people were prepared to go to to help. People gave not only money but their time. Many left their friends, families, jobs and homes to go to Asia and offer what help they could. They had a clear picture in their minds of the problem and they saw the need for help as overwhelming. No arguments of race or religion got in their way; it was a human response to a human plight. It gives us hope for the creativity and generosity of ordinary people in facing future challenges. We will need every ounce of this. The Tsunami was no more than a stone in a puddle compared with the devastation that climate change could wreak. If governments really want to make a major change for the better then they certainly can do it. The question is do they want to succeed? And just what is it that they want to succeed at?