

Here we were in a shuttered country. Stay inside. Keep calm and remain indoors. Don't venture out!

Time's up! Time was up for the old outdoor life; the old existence that took us into the streets.

At the dawn of the third decade of the third Millennium, country after country was in the grip of existential convulsions. People had been taking to the streets in very different ways to reject their traditional politics as a way of doing things. It was not good enough. Time's up!

The times they are a'changing. So are the values. Aren't they?

The trial of the movie Moghul Harvey Weinstein has come and gone. ⁱ This is a cultural re-set, not just a court case that ended with a long sentence. The 'Me-too' movement has gained huge traction. Time's up for sexual harassment in the workplace. Or come to that anywhere...

Time's up for telling survivors of abuse to shut up and keep silence.

Time's up for the vested interests of the powerful. Any meaningful policy has to upset the established power base and the wealthy. Any policy that doesn't challenge wealth and power will be useless. Unless that is, the young join them in imitation because that's how the world goes round.

Time's up for doing things that cost the earth. Or for separating environment issues from people: the world's weather will continue to become more extreme and it is people around the world who will continue to pay the price. ⁱⁱ In 2018, school children demanded urgent change NOW! Time's up.

Time's up for a new normal. Things will not settle down anytime soon.

Time's up for systems wherein two billion people in world do not have access to waste management.

Time's up for those manufacturing a political reality which bears no relationship to the world we see.

Time's up for entrenched political polarisation as young people demand wisdom from their leaders.

Time's up for the gun lobby when, in March 2018 in the biggest US gun control protest in a generation, hundreds of thousands of students and children marched; some carrying homemade signs read, "Your right to bear arms doesn't override my right to stay alive," and "Your silence leads to violence." It will only be the young people that will end this Second Amendment throwback to a bygone era when local militias were common and they did not have assault rifles. "Enough is enough!" they shouted. Though an issue of core identity for many Americans, it is time to stop now.

Today's children will be much more radical than their parents. There will be no other choice for them. The radicalism that is emerging is taking people by surprise. Racism, homophobia, disability issues – young people get passionate about them because they can't see why so many others are.

At the same time that the universe had been expanding and human significance shrinking, a new and comprehensive vision has been emerging. The struggle was costly and confusing; costly for there was much to bolt us and prevent us from rising up in protest; confusing for we did not know what song of protest we were singing and how the words went. Gradually, scattered notes began to form a pattern. 'Hang a label round each other's neck. Let the label read' 'Handle with care'. Remove the false labels of names and boxes that allow you to treat another person as second class freight.

Countless scenes of battle were fought for the dignity and worth of humanity. 'Hang a label round their necks. Treat them with value (there's something special about human beings)'. Struggles for equality, dignity and justice drove contemporary agendas,. A new vision- or old dressed differently?

Loud indignant protests arose against show trials without recourse; committing its victims to prison or institution, the continuing traffic in people, the struggle of the disabled wanting society to relate to them as an individual, the struggle of women to be empowered and the battle for equality at work. For centuries, Western society had been unsure about how to treat women. But a new world was coming (hopefully).

There were those angry voices raised against the economics of the day before yesterday. 'Don't measure our value by money...Tell the whole story about us'. In any enterprise, the crucial ingredient was still the human ingredient; the morale, the participation. Where people had incentives to work and the freedom to do so, wealth was created; value they had found in themselves transmuted mysteriously into gold – as long as humane working environments permit.

'Human beings are only a set of chemicals...nothing but a group of neurons... nothing but a selfish gene... a number". As if everything to be said had been spoken, the mystery flushed out. Such explanations left abandoned orphans bereaved of joys and sorrows, loves and laughter, memories and ambitions, their identity and their freedom of choice, their purpose and their meaning.

On every side, a crescendo had arisen against the injustice. "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy". It was loud, it was defiant!

Time's up for opposing equality for it's really about everyone having the same worth (like they don't have in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere where legal testimony of women is worth only half that of men).

Young people are much less tolerant of intolerance, much more indifferent to difference.

Extreme wealth cannot be right. The world's 2,153 billionaires have more wealth than a combined 4.6 billion people. *"If everyone were to sit on their wealth piled up in \$100 bills, most of humanity would be sitting on the floor,"* its authors said. *"A middle-class person in a rich country would be sitting at the height of a chair. The world's two richest men would be sitting in outer space."*

What price wealth tax? Someone who saved \$10,000 a day since the construction of the Egyptian pyramids would still be 80% less wealthy than the world's five richest billionaires. A 0.5% increase in taxes on the wealthy would generate enough funding to create 117 million jobs in sectors like education and health, according to researchers for an Oxfam Report for Davos 2020. It urged that Governments must take steps to radically reduce the gap between the rich and the rest of society and prioritize the wellbeing of all citizens over unsustainable growth and profit. ⁱⁱⁱ

Time's up for excessive inequality and the obscenity of disproportionate unearned income (rent).

Optimism and human knowledge

Having come to political consciousness in the iconic year 1968, by 1970 I was as immersed as I could be in the causes of that time. Race and Civil Rights we knew about. Prejudice we knew about. Pollution we knew about. The possibility of famine we knew about. Fifty years on, nature is declining at rates unknown in human history, with up to one million species at risk of extinction. Unprecedented forest fires - from the Arctic to the Amazon, Africa, Australia - billions of animals, destroyed lives and wiped out huge areas of forest. Since 1970, there was a 60% average population decline across all vertebrate species. Over the same period, we lost more than half of the world's coral reefs and over a third of all wetlands. Young people care about these things.

It would be good to think that it is young people with all their refusal to accept the status quo who will ride over hill from the future and save us. There is a major problem with this aspiration though. Increasingly, the younger demographic will get their information from You Tube or social media. Under-35 year olds may be hampered from speaking truth to power because who knows what truth is. Pilate asking, 'what is truth?', will throw contemporary people into confusion. How will young people know how to sift and where to weigh? Can you change the world if you don't know the facts?

To some older detractors, young people were often depicted as unserious hedonists. Fortunately there were so many examples of serious and enthused activists who get steamed up about things on social media that this was never anything other than a weak stereotype.

I read a 1969 book called 'Famine – 1975' that had imminent and dark predictions of global famine.^{iv} The evidence seemed plausible enough. But it was wrong. What was left out was the Green Revolution that was already taking hold of the world's agriculture and generating far more food supply through new strains of wheat. Calls for a new growth paradigm and growth indicators were already made in the 1960's. In 1972, the seminal work by The Club of Rome, "The Limits to Growth", laid out the price of progress from socio-economic, financial to environmental tipping points. That too seemed plausible. Oil would be running out by the 1990's. We were spoiling things through greed. Perils of unbridled growth called for wholesale change in the global mindset.^v

Fifty years on, The Club of Rome is attempting to respond to the direct calls for action from citizens around the world, and to formulate a plan that will meet suitably ambitious reduction targets and ensure climate stability. It is understood that national emergencies have to be called sometimes. Governments and businesses around the world habitually set out response plans to protect their economies, jobs, cities and other crucial assets from potential disaster. All leaders were urged to acknowledge that this is the greatest existential risk facing humanity, while showing that we can emerge from emergency. The Club of Rome's Planetary Emergency Plan was set to provide a new compass for nations as they navigate through 2020. Then the Covid bomb went off!^{vi}

As the President of the Club of Rome argued, "*history has shown humanity to be remarkably resilient. We are well adapted to respond to impending risks through cooperation and innovation. What's more, the opportunities to not only mitigate risks and avert disaster, but also to rebuild, improve and regenerate are readily available. The Planetary Emergency Plan comes at a crucial moment. A moment when the world can bend the curve, avert the impending disaster and opt instead to embark on the fastest, most exciting social and economic transformation in history*".^{vii}

Time's up for greenhouse gases. Not that greenhouse gases are all bad. Some are needed so heat from the sun doesn't just head back out to space.

Time's up for pessimism? For doom and gloom. Spring is coming.

In August 2018, a 15 year old schoolgirl declared she would not attend school each Friday until Sweden aligned itself with the targets of the Paris Climate Agreement. Greta Thunberg inspired a movement. A million young people in 125 countries joined School Strikes 4 Climate Action. Despite political reaction being mixed (Donald Trump dismissing it all and urging her to chill out), the surge was unstoppable. At a press conference in Brussels, Greta told the European Commission that in

order to fight climate change we need to change our political and economic systems – a message repeated in the student climate strikes around the world as young people were galvanised to action.

But what is system change? How do entire systems change? When we see “save the planet” initiatives, they often look like individual decisions that don’t cost much, like switching to a bamboo toothbrush or washing containers before you recycle them. By all means, do these things, but don’t confuse them with system change. Then came Covid. Adjustment to that needed system change!

Time’s up for just individual decisions as the solution. Time’s up for the old version of public squares.

The first half of the twentieth century was marked by a fight to the death between two versions of totalitarianism. It was social engineering on a colossal and terrifying scale, claiming their millions in order to generate a new order. The prize was a new breed of humans; the cost, violent disruption.

Then came 1968. It was the year that, on a personal note, I and thousands like me, came to political consciousness. The events are indelible: the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the murder of Martin Luther King’s, The Prague Spring, Les Evènements of Paris, USA medallists’ Mexico Olympics black power salute, the assassination of Robert Kennedy who for many embodied hope. A youth revolt and student unrest combined with working class protest and industrial strikes to shake profoundly the established social order. With reference to leaders on the Left, *“it was this era that fundamentally shaped the radical politics for which they have become such powerful and effective advocates”*.^{viii}

It was an age of poetry; an age of philosophers, of the kind of civilisation could be created. The Sorbonne and London School of Economics became epicentres in a time of questioning. Politics was too important to be left to the politicians.

Fast forward the tape 50 years. The winning banner was the triumph of open, free markets and not just in economics. Liberalism had resulted in a free market of morals: a de-regulation of ways of life, not only business and banks. Word was out that using the proceeds of economic growth to combat poverty and help the disadvantaged had swept the field. That was before the politics of 2016. What now of the safe certainties we grew up with and those cosy post-war dreams of continued progress?

Time’s up for liberal optimism; that life is predictable and can only get better, subject to some blips.

Amidst the darkness, there is the flame of many candles where respect was given and kindness ruled. In every walk of life, an atmosphere based on mutual respect and imparting value to another person made for a relaxed, orderly environment where human beings could do their best work. A movement for change is well under way. It is irresistible. It is irreversible. Demand is already there.

ⁱ January 22nd 2020

ⁱⁱ *Counting the Cost 2019: a year of climate breakdown* Christian Aid Report on extreme weather in 2019

ⁱⁱⁱ Time to care <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/time-care> 20th January 2020

^{iv} William and Paul Paddock (1967) *Famine 1975!* Boston, M.A.: Little Brown & Co

^v Donella H. Meadows; Dennis L. Meadows (1972) *Limits to Growth* Potomac Associates
<https://www.clubofrome.org/report/the-limits-to-growth/>

^{vi} THE CLUB OF ROME CLIMATE EMERGENCY PLAN A Collaborative Call for Climate Action 23/09/ 2019

^{vii} *Sandrine Dixson-Declève Co-President of the Club of Rome, a member of the Climate-KIC Advisory Council, and Ambassador for the Energy Transitions Commission (ETC). Davos 2020*

^{viii} Perryman, M. (2018) *Forever Young: 50 years on from 1968*. London: Compass Think Piece no 95