

Political innovations for rapid transition

Blog by Steven R. Smith

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Steven: To innovate is to bring in something new. What innovations do we need to address the climate crisis? Most of us automatically think of technological innovations such as solar panels, wind turbines and electric vehicles. Our elected leaders also like to focus on technologies. They tell us that as long as we transition to a renewable energy economy by 2050 we'll be fine, and we don't even have to give up anything to get there. Being green is easy, we're told. It's just a matter of gradually phasing in new technologies, finance, markets, and new sources of energy.

When I first started working on climate change in 1991, the scientific consensus then was that we urgently needed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 60%. Instead, over those 30 years, we actually increased them by 60%. The costs of that collective failure are everywhere: rising sea levels, coral bleaching, devastating wildfires, floods, droughts, crop failures, conflicts, refugees and species extinctions. And things are going to get worse until we stop emitting these gases into our atmosphere altogether. If we don't do it fast enough, it is also possible that we could cross one or more 'tipping points' that accelerate climate overheating, with consequences that would be catastrophic to everyone and everywhere that we care about.

The innovations we need go far beyond just technology. The purpose of the TORCH COP 26 Climate Crisis Thinking podcasts is to encourage thinking about other kinds of innovation, including innovations in education, the future of work, more democratic institutions, the arts, social practices and behaviour change, activism, campaigning and the narratives that can mobilise a critical mass for radical change; and innovations to help us think about what really matters and what we value. In this podcast we'll discuss a few innovations in politics and society at the national and local scale, and I've invited some experts at the forefront of thinking in this area to help explain the kinds of innovation they think could really make a difference in accelerating the transition to a safe climate future.

First, I spoke to Alex Evans, the founder and executive director of Larger Us, and author of *The Myth Gap: What Happens When Evidence and Arguments Aren't Enough*. I began by asking Alex what's wrong with the dominant, technology-based, 'being green is easy' narrative.

Alex: What's wrong with that narrative is that it misses how people are complicated and don't always act as rational economic actors. The obvious example of that is domestic energy efficiency, which, if you tot up the costs, is cheaper than free. It'll save you money. And yet we've made much less progress over the last decade and longer than we need to on that. Because, in the real world, doing domestic efficiency, like lagging your loft or replacing your boiler, involves upfront costs, which take a long time to recoup. It's not straightforward if you rent your property rather than own it. There's a lot of hassle involved. And these, in the real world, are factors that weigh on people. The bigger picture is that climate isn't just about technology or investment. I've always seen it, first and foremost, as a collective action problem. It's full of examples of "I will if you will". And we see that at the international level, where no country wants to move radically on this unless it's confident that other countries are going along too. In a smaller way that's probably true for lots of us at individual level as well. Thinking of it as a collective action problem, the thing I've really become most interested in in recent years is what opens up or closes down the political space for radical change. Because this isn't just collective action in the sense of what happens at United Nations summits. It's also about whether voters are demanding this from governments, so that governments feel that they've got not just a mandate but a clear demand from citizens to make this happen. I think a lot of the time what we see is governments running quite shy of really going full steam ahead on this transformation.

Steven: I'm completely with you there, Alex. Governments aren't going to act fast enough until people collectively demand it. The aim of your organisation, Larger Us, is to imagine and co-create new forms of citizenship and leadership "at the places where states of mind and the state of the world intersect". Could you talk us a little bit through this aim, explain why we need this kind of innovation, and how you're trying to making it happen?

Alex: At the heart of our work there are basically two ideas. The first is that we need to become a 'larger us', and that has two sub-meanings within it. The first is that we need to (what Einstein called) expand our circles of compassion so that the 'us' we identify with is not just our immediate social networks or the town where we live, but ultimately includes all of humanity, other species, and future generations. That's necessary because this is a global problem, which obviously has very unequal global impacts. All of us are already being affected by climate change, but the people most at the sharp end are people who are — very often on the other side of the world — least responsible for causing it. It's essential that we see them as 'us'. The other sub-meaning of being a 'larger us' is overcoming the kind of 'them and us' political polarisation that we keep seeing in so many contexts, especially in the United States, where opinion polling shows that climate is even more polarised than abortion as a political issue, with disastrous consequences for actually doing anything about it. Instead, you get these these constant logjams on Capitol Hill and in states, and so on. There's a risk of climate becoming a new culture war in other countries, too. There are lots of examples of ways that climate skeptics are trying to polarise climate. So, that's another way in which we need to become a 'larger us'.

The second big idea we're really interested in, in order to become that larger us, is as much about psychology as it is about politics. It's as much about states of mind as about the state of the world. I first started thinking about this when I was working on Brexit as a campaign director at Avaaz. I became very uneasy that what I was doing in this very remain-leaning campaign was contributing to this wound of political polarisation, rather than helping to heal it. And that took me into a deep interest in the psychology of how polarisation happens. For example, when we feel threatened, when we go into a kind of fight or flight state, we immediately become less empathetic, more concerned with our individual self-interest, less interested in the interests of the collective. We become less good at telling the difference between what's real and what's illusory or hypothetical — a very big deal when conspiracy theories and fake news are as important as they are. For all of these reasons, it felt like future campaigning and policymaking about climate, and lots of other issues too,

was going to need to be a lot smarter about using psychology in ways that bring us together, rather than dividing us against each other.

Steven: Right, so the environmental movement needs to be much smarter about how it casts that wide-as-possible net that brings people together. You have also written that in order to achieve anything radical we need bold policies *and* election wins. Is there a dilemma there? In order to win elections you have to appeal to the majority. But the majority, at least so far, are fairly pragmatic on the climate, not radical. Very concerned? Yes. But the British public do not yet perceive the climate crisis as a real emergency demanding a radical response. How do you resolve that dilemma? How do you convert enough pragmatists into radicals to win elections in the absence of a perceived emergency? You recently wrote that to achieve that, we need to blend grassroots networks, advocacy groups, funders and the political parties into a whole that's far more than the sum of its parts. And you noted that the political right has typically been far better at doing this kind of thing. I completely agree with those insights. So what political innovations do you think hold the best prospects for creating this broad coalition? You mention deep canvassing, for example.

Alex: I'm a huge admirer of the work of George Marshall, one of the founders of Climate Outreach. George wrote a wonderful book called *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*. George takes polarisation on climate really seriously. One of the points he makes is that it's much too big of an issue to be solved without pretty much all of society onboard with the solution. We're talking about a huge transition here. What worries me about some climate activism, quite a lot of climate activism actually, is that it acts as if 'we' can win just with a small, fired-up base of activists, probably on the leftward end of the political spectrum. And actually we need to be winning people over from across the political spectrum. Very encouragingly, opinion polling at least here in the UK does seem to suggest that people across the spectrum are fired-up about climate change. They do think it's real. They do think humans are causing it. They do think it's urgent to do something about it. There was some great work that came out earlier this year from More in Common, Climate Outreach (again), and the European Climate Foundation, looking at exactly that, and finding that across a range of different so-called 'segments' of opinion from left to right all the way along this political spectrum, the potential for a big coalition that leads to a big consensus is there on climate change. So, it's not so much a question of converting people from being climate sceptics. They're already pretty much in the right place. It's much more a question of activating them. Often we find with climate that you get what looks like strong support for climate policies in opinion polls, but then it turns out to be quite a 'thin' yes. So, when someone from YouGov phones you up and you're in their poll sample, you'll say, "Oh, yes, I think it's a really big

deal". But, "are you prepared to incur, serious cost or inconvenience?" leads to responses that are much more open to question.

Therefore, in order to do that job of firing people up across the political spectrum, I think we need to start with a form of campaigning that's based on building bridges, on connecting with people, and that implies a whole range of different tactics. You've already touched on one, deep canvassing, which is such a fascinating area. This is an approach first developed by LGBTQ activists in the United States. The story of how it began was that there was a referendum in California on banning equal marriage. To the absolute amazement and horror of a lot of LGBTQ activists the ballot was passed and equal marriage was banned. This was before national legislation on equal marriage. Understandably, a lot of activists were furious and wanted to go out and mobilise and protest. But a group of activists led by Dave Fleischer at the LA LGBT Centre's Leadership Lab had the idea of going to talk to some of their most ardent opponents, just to have some conversations and start by really looking to understand why they had voted the way they did. If nothing else, that's going to give you a bunch of useful political intelligence. But, in fact, what Dave and his team discovered was that once these conversations were underway it was possible, by asking a whole series of open-ended questions and really trying to understand the emotions and the experiences that led people to their opinions, to find a kind of base, a foundation, of shared experience and empathy with each other. And then, sometimes, from that foundation, it was possible to actually invite people to change their minds. You're not defeating them in an argument. You're not pummelling them with facts and figures. You're just kind of establishing where the emotions are: you feel care for that person; I feel care for this person. And then you're moving people into a mental state where they're much more likely to look again at their opinions and reconsider them. It's a really interesting approach to campaigning because it tips so much conventional wisdom on its head. The conventional wisdom of what to do when you're canvassing during an election campaign is what they call 'get out the vote'. You identify the people you think will vote for you and then you make sure they turn out on polling day. The idea of spending time with your most ardent opponents, to understand them and maybe try and win them over, really tips that conventional wisdom on its head. But the evidence — and this has been exhaustively researched by academic evidence — is that it does work. It takes longer to train activists to do it. The conversations take longer than traditional canvassing conversations. But it does work. It changes people's minds a lot of the time. So, that's one example.

There are lots of other tactics that are relevant here. One that I often think of is just making sure that activists and movements look representative of the people that they're trying to win over. I was

involved in Extinction Rebellion a couple of years back and actually ended up, after very little time involved in XR, as one of the media coordinators for its actions in Leeds when they were doing actions in various cities in the UK simultaneously. And the thing that gave me pause, whilst on a bridge we occupied for a week, was that we looked exactly like the stereotype someone once referred to as ‘Glastonbury-times-Waitrose’, which is kind of harsh and kind of a caricature, but there is some truth to it — very white, very middle-class. I think XR realised that it had a problem with racial diversity and started to think much more seriously about that. Incidents like the one at Canning Town, where a bunch of XR activists stopped underground trains from moving during rush hour in a very working-class area of London, showed that they could still, nevertheless, be incredibly tin-eared about how they were coming across. It just looked like a bunch of very privileged rich kids, basically, getting in the way of working-class people who were just trying to get to work first thing in the morning. It was just tone deaf. So, I think it’s important to make sure that activism looks representative of the people it’s trying to win over. Making it harder for people, activists and on-lookers alike, to ‘other’ people who are different, also really matters. There are lots of other things that you could add to that list. That's just a couple of examples.

Steven: One of Extinction Rebellion’s founders, Gail Bradbrook, recently said, “They have money, we have organising” — “they” referring to the well-funded groups that oppose strong climate action. It has been estimated that, on average, deep canvassing has something like a 10% success rate. And these are all time-consuming, one-to-one conversations. Environmental activism doesn’t have the money to recruit, train and deploy tens of thousands of deep canvassers, and neither does it have the time to slowly build a voluntary network of canvassers. So, what are the prospects of persuading enough people to support more radical action fast enough?

Alex: To start with, in terms of how we get enough people into the movement to make a difference, one of the things we need to do is to recognise that a lot of people are turned off by ‘activism’. My friend Anthea Lawson wrote a wonderful book recently called *The Entangled Activist*, which explores some of this. A lot of ordinary people see activists as troublemakers and really quite different from ‘people like me’. And yet, we need people who don't see themselves as activists involved in a movement on this scale in order for it to work. And I think that XR from the outset placed enormous emphasis on getting as many people as possible arrested. Their theory of change was that they’d overwhelm prisons, jails and police stations with people who'd been arrested. They had this idea lifted from an American political scientist called Erica Chenoweth that when you had 2.5% of a population engaged, that was enough for a ‘tipping point’. I think both of those things

were really open to question. Just getting as many people arrested as possible was not a well thought theory of change. It was lifted from a very different context. Similarly, the Erica Chenoweth statistic they cited so widely, that was about a completely different context again: that's the percentage of a population needed to overthrow an autocratic government, not to sustain support for an energy transition which is going to take decades. So, thinking about what a more inclusive form of climate campaigning might look like: it could have a ladder of engagement, so that people who don't see themselves as activists, but who do care about climate change, have opportunities to participate. It's not an in-group of insiders manning the barricades, and then there's everybody else. It's a kind of spectrum. That's one way of getting more people involved.

In terms of deep canvassing, that's just one of a whole range of different tactics that can be used. You're quite right, it is expensive and resource intensive. So, you'd clearly want to be focusing that on the areas where it's going to have the most impact. My friends at the Campaign to Defend Aid and Development in the UK are doing deep canvassing on support for foreign aid. And what they do is target parliamentary constituencies where it's going to have the most impact: cabinet ministers constituencies, for instance, which is smart. So, there are ways of using it strategically.

More broadly, we need an enormous public information campaign about climate change. One of the problems we've got is that people tend to assume that the problem's being solved because if it wasn't being solved (which it isn't), and it was a huge deal (which it is), then surely the government would be talking about nothing else (which they're not). And so that kind of cognitive dissonance leads people to assume that it's not really real. George Marshall, again going back to him, has been talking for ages about how we need a huge public information push on climate change. I think back to historical examples, like when the United Nations came into being, it was recognised that there was potential for very strong pushback on that idea in the United States. So, there was an enormous mobilisation of roadshows and information to explain the idea to people, walk them through why this was needed, what it would look like, and why it would be good for America. This really worked at transforming public opinion.

Another thing that the movement could do would be just to help with the immediate response when you have climate impacts like floods, which keep afflicting towns all over Britain. Imagine if activists, rather than doing things like blocking underground trains or blocking junctions of the M25, like Insulate Britain is doing at the moment, were like the Red Cross: first responders, who would very visibly show up helping, connecting with people, delivering disaster response and

humanitarian assistance, while just quietly making the point, and being increasingly noisy as the immediate disaster response phases out, that this is about climate change, that there's a reason these disasters, these floods, these droughts, whatever it may be, keep happening. The linking theme to all of these ideas is that it's a form of campaigning that's based on connection and doing everything to avoid an 'in-group' where you have a very tight-knit crew who are often in their own little echo chamber, rather than building those bridges. That, I think, is a crucial principle for what it's going to take to win this struggle.

Finally, on your point about urgency. Of course, you're absolutely right. The clock is ticking so loudly. And yet, I think that this is an existential issue and there's no way through it except by doing the hard inner work that's involved. We've touched on the psychological aspects of some of this already, and all of us in different ways are going to be grappling with eco-anxiety and climate grief as the impacts stack up, and that's going to imply work to be done. But then there's also the relational work of just helping each other through it and coming together to navigate this transition. And that stuff is going to take time to do. If there were a clear shortcut, if there were an obvious alternative, I'd be saying "let's do that". Because I agree with you that we are so out of time at this point. But I don't see what the alternative to that is. We've got to bring people with us. I don't see us as eco-authoritarian or something, where a government says, "we're doing this". I mean, that's clearly not going to happen here in the UK. So, we've no choice but to win over a critical mass of people over from across the political spectrum.

Steven: Alex's conclusion rings powerfully true: we have no choice but to bridge the divides and win over a critical mass of people from across the political spectrum. This is equally true at the local level — perhaps especially at the local level — where strong personal and community ties can create innovative and resilient solutions, and people can immediately appreciate their benefits, regardless of whatever is happening at the national or international level. Two people at the forefront of thinking on community-level innovations are Lucy Stone and Gustavo de Oca. Lucy and Gustavo are social entrepreneurs, writers and strategists working with community-based organisations and are co-founders of *Our Common Climate*. They co-authored, together with Ian Christie, a chapter entitled *A Commoners Climate Movement* in the recently published book *Addressing the Climate Crisis: Local Action in Theory and Practice*. I asked Gustavo and Lucy to

explain why it's important to support innovations like 'commoning' (the subject of their book chapter), bringing people together at the community level.

Gustavo: It's about the opening up of the possibility space. Solutions are usually framed along two axes: the state axis and the business axis. These are the areas in which we expect solutions to come from. What we're interested in is a third axis, a community axis. The points that you can plot on a two axis grid are two dimensional. As soon as you open up a third axis, the points you can open up on that three-dimensional grid multiply. You have far more options and alternatives. That's interesting as an alternative to the state/business duality. The individual/system duality is another place where the solution grid is looking either at the X axis of individuals or the Y axis of system-type solutions. When you add that third axis, the collective, again, you're increasing the dimensional space in which solutions can be found. So, commoning allows a whole new class or axis of innovation — almost like a meta-innovation, if you like.

Lucy: Yes, it's a social, cultural innovation. The climate crisis is primarily now a political, social, and cultural challenge. We have the technological solutions. We even have enough finance if we choose to use it. It's really a question of political mobilisation and power, and the power dynamics that are that are creating a logjam in political progress.

Gustavo: And some of these changes are already happening.

Lucy: Yes, the transition is underway. It's not something we're trying to gear towards. We are in the midst of it. It's already happening, and it's messy. The impacts of climate change — we're really seeing over 1.1 degrees of warming — and the messy transition are no longer going to be slow and steady, calm, measured and planned over 30 years, though the net zero target language likes to give that impression. The science is pretty clear now. We need to drastically, radically, reduce carbon emissions over the next five to eight year time frame. This is a really quick transition that needs to happen, and it's going to be messy, and it is not going to be perfect. And so we need to make sure that the transition has people at the heart of it. Otherwise, we're just switching out dirty technology for clean technology and maintaining the same inequalities, the same injustices, propping up the same power dynamics, and probably laying the groundwork for the next crisis in fifty to a hundred years time. So, as Gustavo said, this opportunity space is perhaps the important innovation that may be missing at the moment: this opportunity space for looking beyond just thinking about individual action versus systemic or state and corporate action, and looking at collective citizen action. Not just actions of citizens as individuals as consumers, or as voters, but

how citizens collectively come together. So, we've been exploring this idea of 'the commons'.

Borrowing from Elinor Ostrom, we're looking at the commons as a concept of having a collective stake and say and participation not just in the transition, but in the assets that are generated in a green economy. So that might look like community ownership of renewable energy. There are lots of different ways to do that, lots of different models, whether it's a co-operative or community enterprise. But the point is, it's neither exactly state nor private sector. It's a different space and this space is perhaps what's missing.

Gustavo: Yes, and to your point about the speed that is needed: we often think that the state can do things at speed because it has 'big levers'; or business can do it, because it has 'big money'.

Whereas, citizen-led collectives are often seen as too slow and quaint. Our suggestion is that as part of the environmental movement, people need to start asking for it. When the solutions are limited to those two poles, state or business, it leaves people without agency. And when people have very little agency, or when they've become used to the idea of having little agency, they are reluctant to give things up. Asking people to change their way of behaving, with the only alternative being to not do things they did before, they're going to be very reluctant. But when the alternative is to provide them with some kind of meaning and purpose, to replace it with a role to play, a stake, and perhaps some ownership in the new future, this could accelerate people's desire to see it come true. It's an attractive pull rather than a resistance.

Lucy: Elinor Ostrom, who won the Nobel Prize for economics, really should be more of a household name. What she showed, as Gustavo said, is that when people are involved in collective common pool resource decisions they're more willing to accept consequences that might otherwise seem unacceptable sacrifices. This is really important if we accept that we are in a messy transition, there are going to be winners and losers, and we want to do everything we can to make sure that we are creating a just transition. It's no longer good enough just to ask people to have a say in the transition. If you give people that stake in the transition, Ostrom showed that they're more willing to accept the sorts of sacrifices that will be required, and also because obviously there are some benefits. There is a direct benefit from participating, and more of a sense of control over the process of transition. And we know from psychology that a sense of control is almost as important as the transition impacts in their own right. The other counter-argument I've heard many times is that when you're confronted by the urgency, the huge enormity of the tons of carbon dioxide that need to be reduced and extracted from the atmosphere, it's really easy, as Gustavo said, to dismiss the community and commons scale as small and woolly and nice and lovely, but you're not going to get

the scale of the impact that we need. But we know, there is some evidence to show, that that's not entirely true. We know that indigenous, collectively owned, collectively managed forestry projects sequester more carbon than government or private conservation equivalent projects. And similarly with wind turbine planning applications, community-owned wind turbine schemes are typically far better able to secure planning permission because they have that stake from the community. So, actually this could be a way to speed up the transition, we would argue.

Steven: You mention several times this concept of 'the commons' or 'commoning', which is the subject of your recently published book chapter, *A Commoners' Climate Movement*. Perhaps you could explain what you mean by 'the commons' in the context of climate change.

Lucy: The commons is typically associated with common lands for grazing or woodland. These are the most readily recognised forms of commoning. It's an ancient practice of managing shared access. It doesn't have to mean shared ownership. It's more about shared access and use and negotiating that between different people. But it doesn't just refer to land. The concept of a 'commons' as a collectively managed resource also applies to renewable energy. Indeed, there are lots of community-owned and community-managed solar, wind and other projects across the UK and internationally. And there are all manner of other resources that need to be created and managed as we transition away from a fossil fuel economy.

Other examples exist in agriculture and land-use. Land-use needs to be drastically transformed in the coming decades. Not only to reduce carbon emissions, but also to restore peatland, increase tree planting, and reduce agricultural impacts. Farmers face huge risks and uncertainties in navigating this transition and the policy environment is woefully inadequate. Community-managed or community-owned farms are another option. Shareholders share the risks as well as the benefits with farmers, and can provide labour. And then there are community land trusts, which can purchase land on behalf of the community and create affordable housing, for example. Interestingly, a lot of community land trusts don't necessarily set out with explicitly climate-related aims. But the housing they build often has high levels of sustainability in the design, because the objective is to create affordable, long-term housing, rather than to generate short-term profit. These are just a few examples of how commoning is being used to address the climate crisis.

This commons practice is ancient. It exists in every country in the world in different forms and in different contexts. It has been eroded, particularly in the UK, but also in many other countries. And that's a fight that's happening alongside the climate fight. By allying commoning and the climate fight together, there are gains to be made on a just transition and on equity.

Steven: Lucy and Gustavo's passionate conviction in the transformative potential of commoning is such an inspiring and hopeful vision, and even more so as they go on to explain the narrative potential — the story that can be told — that might be one of the key missing links that we need to bring people together and create, as Alex put it, that 'larger us'.

Lucy: There is a narrative message here, which is that we need to stop getting bogged down in the tired debates about individual token actions — which are, frankly, propaganda from the fossil fuel industry to put the guilt on individuals — and focus instead on systemic change. But it's very hard to feel empowered if systemic change relies on a few key actors with extraordinary amounts of power and control. Perhaps introducing this narrative of collective action, not just as a campaign but as a practical way of envisaging and bringing about the green economy in our own communities, a narrative of hope and possibility, is the most important thing about the commoning agenda. It creates that possibility space of focusing collectively, rather than just as an individual.

Gustavo: We're talking about solutions that are made by and close to the people who are living with and affected by them. The classic, distant expertise of business or state doesn't always have the granular sense of how a particular challenge is felt on the ground, or how a particular solution or technology is deployed and received. By working in this commons framework, by giving stakeholders a share and a say, an ownership, perhaps, in the new economy, it's a way of making sure that their responses are appropriate and invited, and therefore lasting.

Lucy: Part of the underlying narrative problem with climate change is this sense of separation from nature as 'other', 'over there', something we need to manage as a resource. If we accept that — not just with the climate crisis, but the environmental and biodiversity crisis more broadly — we need to situate ourselves back within and as part of nature, that's the language that commoning offers. Commoning offers a narrative about people coming together to negotiate the conflicting requirements and use of resources. It's about how we live together. I like the Gaelic definition of 'common land', which translates as 'people together as one with the land'. It creates this real sense of people working and living together, within the land, as part of the land, and having to figure out how we're going to live sustainably with the scarce resources that we have, within the parameters of

1.5°C, not exceeding the tipping points and our planetary boundaries. That concept, that language, that way of viewing and talking about climate change, could be an innovation that helps move us away from this paralysis of feeling that the issue is too big, too intractable, too distanced from 'little me' to deal with.