A compassionate transition to sustainability

Tim O'Riordan and his colleagues in the Learned Society of Wales present the case for a much more compassionate approach in the transitions to a sustainable society co-operating with a resilient Planet Earth

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Perspective

Avery visible pathway to sustainability is the rocky road to 'net zero' emissions of all greenhouse gases. These are the collection of human-created emissions which collectively heat the lower planetary atmosphere, leading to what is broadly regarded as climate change. In 2015, all the world's governments signed the historic Paris Agreement. This committed all nations to pursue their highest possible ambition, by collectively limiting the overall increase in the global average temperatures to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C, recognising that this would significantly reduce the risks and impacts of climate change. Net zero has an even more demanding purpose. This is to remove all avoidable greenhouse gas emissions, and to create natural 'carbon sinks' of soils, plants and oceans to remove any residual emissions which remain in the inventory.

In the wake of the Paris Agreement, the UK Committee on Climate Change, which has a statutory duty to advise the UK government on how to meet this outcome, pressed for the net zero goal by 2050. Subsequently, the governments of England and Wales have endorsed this path, while Scotland plans to reach net zero by 2045. In one of her last acts of office, former Prime Minister Theresa May said that it was a 'moral duty to leave this world in a better condition than what we inherited'. In effect net zero is now national policy set in a moral and social justice context.

Two prominent social movements known as the Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future (formerly known as the Students' Strike) have activated public protests and resistance demonstrations to speed up the overall transition to sustainability and to achieve net zero before 2030. This date is very symbolic, as it marks the completion of the planet-wide endorsement of UN sustainable development goals, and the emergence of a global human rights endeavour that seeks to ensure that 'no one will be left behind', and that 'the furthest behind' will be reached first.

A survey of 1000 citizens commissioned by the non-governmental organisation Hope Not Hate, published in September 2019 in the UK, Canada, Germany, Italy, Brazil, France, Poland and the US, found that over three-quarters feel that the world is facing a climate emergency of extreme risk and high danger. The widely condemned encouragement of forest fires in the Amazon rainforest by the government of Brazil showed the enormous public resentment of failing politicians, who the survey found are universally regarded as being in the pockets of the fossil fuel, military and money lobbies. A more encouraging report by the Global Adaptation Commission calls for a decade of commitment to widespread adaptation planning and financing that will buttress the UN journey.

This article explores the extremely challenging processes of seeking net zero through a path leading to full sustainability. It examines how such a tortuous process of transition can embrace challenging features of compassion, of decency of treatment for all those affected, and of ensuring the long-term well-being of the human race. These pathways in turn must pay attention to enhancing the health and resilience of the vital planetary ecosystems which retain life on this unique globe. What is new here is the dawning realisation that arriving at net zero will alter substantially the jobs and livelihoods of many millions whose current prosperity and manner of living depend upon and create greenhouse gas emissions. To enable them to transfer to a sustainable society will require an extraordinary journey supported by compassion, empathy and well-being.

The compassionate transition
The Learned Society of Wales, in its third International Symposium organised in co-operation with the British Academy, looked at the mechanisms for interpreting the ethics of sustainable prosperity, drawing on the principles that underpin both The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The global 'commons' – conceived of as both a set of restorative processes and as a metaphor for collective human decency – are being progressively dismantled, leading to inequality, injustice, discrimination, ecocide, and the loss of well-being for increasing numbers of present and future generations. The moral role of humanism is in severe danger of being dismembered, enabling many individuals and inflexible institutionalised mind-sets to override any vestiges of personal responsibility for restraint. This hampers attempts to find collective solutions to the plight of the marginalised poor, notably women, children and ethnic minorities, both in developing countries and in rich nations.

Maintaining well-being and dignity at the community scale requires us to devise a common moral framework, from the local through to the global, even to the cosmic. We need to recognise our common humanity – *adnabod* in Welsh (recognise = know (someone)). Our localism and universalism require re-connecting, seeing the stranger as a neighbour in a true humanism. These sentiments embrace the notion of *compassion*, the kindness of self-aware generosity and the sympathetic joy of acting morally for the benefit of all. Compassion is linked to deep psychological feelings, and embraces attributes such as sympathy, care for well-being, empathy, sensitivity for others' distress and need, and mindful acceptance of the unattainability of the ideal. Acting compassionately reveals the need for interconnecting people and planet, and for unifying gainers and losers in a common morality.

Equality does not mean equalising. It applies to enabling, to respecting, to creating realistic opportunities for all, and to offering compensatory outcomes to the many who will otherwise surely lose out in the transformative paths to sustainability. There are four concepts of equality – *distributive* (access to resources); *contributive* (ability for fulfilment); *restorative* (rectifying past wrongs); and *epistemic* (recognising different forms of knowledge/having voice with power). These point to the need for a plural approach, interdisciplinary in assessment, creative in delivering institutions, and responsive to public debate. The question is how to move from these broad notions of justice to addressing the perverse power relations that generate inequality. This in turn requires recognition of longstanding north-south imbalances, rooted in the history of colonialism and neo-colonialism that underlie differing dialogues and attitudes to sustainability and climate change responsive action.

Society is only just beginning to pay attention to what is being termed the 'just transition'. They see this as the fusion of *developmental processes* – which encourage natural resources management and urbanisation, but with established political and economic institutional drivers –

The Extinction Rebellion protest in Trafalgar Square, October 2019.

with the *sustainability transition* – which purports to create 'green economies' and to improve social justice. Here we take the notion of 'just' into the deeper framework of 'compassion'.

Exploring the just transition

There is as yet only limited assessment of the scale of social and economic dislocation and reconstruction needed to bring the world to carbon neutrality in the space of one generation. There is incomplete analysis of even the most clear-cut examples of this process, such as the 'removal' of some 7 million existing coal mining jobs if all new coal production is to be progressively curtailed by 2025. The International Energy Agency in its 2019 world energy outlook emphasises the long life of many new and soon-to-be-built coal-fired electricity stations which will result in almost no overall CO2 reduction before 2040. There is a connection here to the emergence of nationalistic 'populisms' which are becoming notably resistant political impediments to the formation of any global low carbon ethical case.

In West Virginia, for example, some 50,000 coal mining jobs have disappeared since 1983. Almost all of these have been on account of changes in coal quality, mining techniques, and competitive forms of new energy sources, such as shale gas from fracking and solar panels. Nevertheless, removal of coal as a big carbon emitter is playing an increasingly prominent role. The consequences for long-established coal-based communities are devastating, as pensions fall, older workers are laid off, and tax receipts atrophy. Here is one heartland for nationalist politics. Fresh jobs in renewables technologies and biogas creation are steadily becoming available. These attract the younger residents whose adaptability to training and to job mobility is vital. Yet such disruption in local economies and social relations is dramatic and painful. There is neither painless nor hurried transition. The savage politics of resistance is never far away. Compassion is not yet a clarion call.

In South Africa some 200,000 miners provide vital economic succour to their families and considerable economic propulsion for their regions. Some 10,000 coal miners have already lost their coal mining jobs in Mpumalanga in the heart of the coal mining region of South Africa. Another 77,000 are vulnerable, as South African electricity companies shift to renewable sources of power for both economic and environmental reasons. These are better paid workers with little educational qualifications, so are not easily or expeditiously transferred to 'greener' jobs. The just transition doesn't mean ignoring the cost of pollution to protect existing jobs. But the pain can't be systemically pushed onto people who already have very little to lose.

The South African case brings into focus the changing relationships between national and global well-being. The income and the economic propulsion of coal production surely contributes to the prosperity of local communities. Yet the prolongation of coal production results in all manner of climate-change-related perils for these same coal mining communities who face a current pernicious choice between jobs and eventual environmental and economic hardship. The impact of the additional global climate change resulting from continued local coal production is ethically very different from the dislocation of local prosperity caused by prematurely shutting down coal mines.

The World Coal Association calls for more participatory and inclusive procedures to identify those whose coal dependent livelihoods can be transformed with sensitivity and care. Any sudden removal of this labour force would surely result in considerable social and economic hardship, contrary to the ethics of sustainable prosperity for all. In 2018, Germany established a Commission on Growth, Structural Change and Employment, popularly referred to as the Clean Coal Commission. It represents a wide range of interested parties, including young people, but is spearheaded by the trades unions. Its work is bedevilled by devastating complexity, much internal dispute, ambiguity of recommendations, and sluggish phase-out of German coal and lignite production compared to the German commitment to the Paris Agreement. The German experience here is revealing how any just transition is proving painfully tortuous, and some distance away from incorporating compassion.

Another emerging example of this dilemma is the recent announcement by General Motors to close seven plants from its world-wide portfolio over the coming year. One of a number of reasons for this is the forthcoming shift to production of all-electric vehicles and plug-in hybrid cars, as well as self-driving vehicles. This will require retraining and redeploying the workforce. GM Canada plans to invest in excess of Can$170 million to support a transition of operations from vehicle assembly into a test track for autonomous and advanced technology vehicles. The company will also help to transfer employees to other plants, and will offer enhanced retirement packages. All of these arrangements are being co-ordinated by the trade unions involved. In addition, the company will donate a local park and wildlife preserve for the well-being of its citizen neighbours. This revitalised form of co-operation is a sign of many such labour-shifting transformations likely to afflict the automobile industry over the coming decades. But shifting whole communities around is very painful, and again compassion needs to be part of the supportive transition.

The just transition in Wales and Scotland

In 2015 the National Assembly of Wales created the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act. This innovative legislation established an Office of a Commissioner for Well-being of Future Generations. The Commissioner has a duty to ensure that the well-being of forthcoming citizens is properly and justifiably taken into account by all public bodies, working in ever closer collaboration with the civil and business sectors. Indeed, the blurring of these sectors and the progressive removal of their boundaries is a hallmark of the Welsh vision.

This process, which champions both sustainability and well-being in all decision-making, is based on seven well-being goals (see Figure 1). These are required to follow five ways of working, transparent
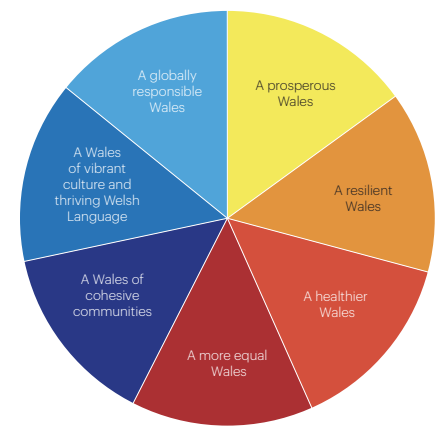

Figure 1. The vision of future well-being and sustainability for Welsh society and culture.

The Scottish Commission will focus on providing environmentally and socially sustainable jobs with an emphasis on poverty alleviation, in order to leave no one behind.

procedures of conducting their affairs, based on the practices of prevention, long-sightedness, integrated action, involvement, and constructive collaboration. The role of the Commissioner's Office is to create ways of thinking and acting across all forms of commitment, so as to ensure that the next cohorts of society are properly safeguarded and enabled to promote the moral values of sustainability.

There are procedures in place for enacting this imaginative approach to a more ethical governance for sustainability. All governing institutions, including local governments, public bodies, executive agencies, regulatory organisations, civic society groups, and citizens' associations are required to follow the five ways of working, and to create mechanisms which build in fresh moral mandates for all metrics for decision-making.

The background to the development of this exciting legislation was a two-year 'national conversation', with particular attention given to the views and aspirations of young people. This was conducted on the basis of a Wales-wide web of 'listening circles'. These were networked groups of active citizens who sought to clarify the purposes and the procedures of the Act, and to work through the moral aspects of successful delivery. An important aspect of this process is the learning for compassionate sustainable governance which is uniting institutions and their employees in fresh experiences and experiments. This learning will be shared through the re-energising of the listening circles. What is vital is that this whole process is re-evaluated in a few years' time, as is the intention.

In Scotland, a Just Transition Commission has begun to play an important role

to help plan and deliver a just transition across Scotland that protects vulnerable workers, consumers and rural and island populations in the route to net zero. The Commission forms part of a more general drive to a well-being society spearheaded by the First Ministers of Scotland, New Zealand and Iceland. The aim is to focus on social support, mental health, and overall community nurture leading to personal contentment and happiness. The Scottish Commission will focus on the provision of environmentally and socially sustainable jobs with an emphasis on poverty alleviation, in order to leave no one behind. It will actively consider employment opportunities when developing net zero pathways, and design and deliver low-carbon infrastructure with the aim of creating decent, high-value work. The Commission will reach out to the trade union movement, to business communities, to the environmental and social civic organisations, and especially to the poverty support groups. In making its recommendations, the Commission will seek to mitigate risks that could undermine regional cohesion, equalities, poverty (including fuel poverty), and a sustainable and inclusive labour market. All of this cannot be at the expense of existing high value employment and the robustness of the overall economy.

The Commission is also innovating with regional meetings on regional topics with regional evidence. It has already convened these in the oil and gas sector of Aberdeen, and the coalfield communities of West Fife, and plans to visit the hill farming communities of the Southern Uplands. The Commission will publish an interim report in early 2020 to gauge its public and political interest, and will continue with its geographical perambu-

lations over following year.

Such an innovation needs to extend to all parts of the UK, and indeed elsewhere. The Trades Union Congress has also called for a UK-wide Commission with a special remit to look at skills training and green economic transitions, again highlighting the involvement of young people. What is important here is to learn from the innovative ways of working initiated by the Scottish and Welsh experiments, and to tailor these to the more demanding English and Northern Ireland contexts.

Compassionate carbon contributions

In order to address the massive social, economic and ecological costs associated with mitigating and adapting to the climate emergency, a possible way forward is to price all greenhouse gases at the point of exploration, production and emission. While such a move would result in higher prices for any subsequent use of greenhouse gas incorporated consumption, not all of these costs would necessarily be passed on in a competitive consumer market. This would neither be a tax nor a levy, for such notions are toxic to those who would have to pay. Such a hugely controversial course of action would only be possible if the politically powerful interests, which maintain non-sustainability and which champion the subsidised support for fossil fuels, are confronted by a widening and deepening public demand for moral empathy for the future of humanness which is so tragically being lost. Hence the need for a more neutral purpose arising from such charges, which might be labelled in the form of a 'compassionate carbon contribution' from the present to future generations. Introduced slowly and ramped up carefully, such contributions would eventually create vast funds for enabling the low carbon transition and associated low carbon consumption to take place more justly all over the world. Resources of investment, people and training could be made available for a series of community-supported and not for profit-backed schemes – to help the poor become better off in a low-carbon economy and society, to offset the costs of adaptation and training, to supply investments in foresight preparedness for the global vulnerable, and to foster all manner of low-carbon lifestyles and technologies. The budgets and recommendations of the various Just Transition Commissions outlined here would benefit hugely

from such contributions.

In the course of time, such contributions would have to be matched by additional provisions from direct greenhouse-gas-emitting consuming behaviour. Initially this would be necessary to get round the 'rebound' effect. This is the kick-back when consumers feel they are able to use any carbon-neutral technology with no sense of guilt. There is also the more politically touchy question of nudging diets toward more pulses, vegetables and fruit, and away from red meat which is linked to the loss of carbon-storing forest and new methane emissions from expanding livestock production. But in the course of time, dealing with consumption confronts a particularly difficult moral arena, as more and more the burden of the personal carbon rucksack will fall on the consumer of traded goods and services, not the consumer as a user of heat and mobility. As yet these is no international agreement covering these unexplored carbon heavyweights.

Yet there is the beginning of a reassuring precedence here. The Canadian government is levying a progressive carbon tax across the nation (but giving way to provinces already in the lead). This will be introduced at $20 per tonne, but will increase to $50 per tonne by 2022. The relevant aspect here is the decision to return most of the revenue in the form of an income tax rebate to all citizens, but to deploy about 15 per cent of the levy to industrial processes for investment in clean technology, carbon removal, and low carbon growth. This will include setting aside funds for retraining and relocating displaced employees. The policy provides for cap and trade arrangements for heavy carbon emitting businesses (through which there will be an allowable emission, designed to be traded, followed by a rising levy which cannot be avoided). A tax of $50 per tonne will amount to about $Can 11.3 cents per litre of gasoline, but will apply to all fossil-based fuels to varying amounts.

There is a degree of public support for the income-returning features of these arrangements, though initially only a few will connect higher prices in the pumps and fuel bills with a one-off annual tax rebate. There will also be questions about both the ethics of the levy which could fall more on carbon-dependent poorer families and rural communities. And there will be dispute over the prosperity impacts of returns on wealthy taxpayers compared to poorer taxpayers with very low levels of tax deduction on their incomes. On top of this, there are important political arguments over the respective roles of government in interfering with electors' behaviour, as well as the very concept of taxing a 'growth' product. Yet the Canadian experience is worth following, as it begins to tackle both the morals and the ethics of carbon contributions.

Public opinion polling in the US has shown that social communication, regular dialogue, reinforcement of positive messages about the economic, technological and social betterment of low carbon living, and the call to a moral consensus embracing all engaged citizens, could lead to the kinds of moral spreading that is currently being stifled. This research also finds that 'cautious conservatives' (open minded Republicans) respond positively to prompts from trusted social networks, where the moral advantages of redistribution for an overall just sustainability transition are widely and persistently shared.

The practicalities of any global-scale carbon contribution funding source would be almost impossible to manage on the large scale. The scope for corruption, syphoning off and embezzlement, and underreporting, would just be too tempting. If these funds could be channeled into community-scale not-for-profit schemes and subject to scrutiny and to accountability of delivery at the local scale, there might be a glimmer of hope. For this to be achieved, there would have to be a notable switch to compassionate humanness and decency of treatment on a universal scale.

Such a compassionate transition would need to be pursued on many fronts. One will certainly involve a more universal approach by 'good governments' to ground well-being for the already left behind and for future generations into basic law. Another will encompass many experiments with highly participatory just transition commissions, whose experiences need to be universally documented so as to become learning leaders. A third must be to embody citizenship and compassion into all forms of knowledge sharing, beginning with the primary schools, but embracing all professional training and retraining. A fourth has to be the recognition by the 'dark forces' currently promoting continued greenhouse gas emissions, that they face an intolerant public, deeply anxious about the environmental safety of their families and communities. A fifth may emerge in some form of eventual global carbon abolition law which would make it illegal to emit any carbon after the onset of a global net zero date. Such a law would be backed by moral force and could unleash a widespread burst of technological and cultural innovation. And a sixth may still have to be the continued expression of resistance by young people, garnering the support of their elders who are persistently prepared to disrupt non-sustainable activities. Above all, the trialling of compassionate carbon contributions needs to be given a fair wind, rooted in social prompting and community pride.

Reflections and proflections

This perspective arising from the Learned Society of Wales symposium is offered to open up important avenues for dialogue and examination. We feel that we have begun a journey towards ethically sustainable transitions which heretofore has not fully received the attention it deserves. We are well aware of the amazing pulse of both the activities of the Extinction Rebellion and of the Fridays for Fu-

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ture strikes. Here is a new form of protest and democracy where caring for and providing for the well-being of future generations is the key driver. It is notable that public response to both sets of protest has been largely sympathetic. Given scope for compassionate dialogue, it is possible that these movements may combine with the power of science-based knowledge and community-based reform of governing and regulatory institutions for the sake of human survival.

Maybe we are just not ready. Maybe our current forms of knowledge creation and imperfect blending are not easily united through our existing educational, theological, political and cultural arrangements, where well-being of future generations cannot sensitively and fully be identified and incorporated into our contemporary morals. There is a research agenda here involving fascinating interpretations of cultural identities, embracing history, geography and philosophy, linked to penetrative forms of learning and confidence building through which current and future generations can bond through fresh forms of compassion, empathy and sharing.

There is no time to wait. We realise that the famous clock is ticking even faster than real time suggests.

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Further reading

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