Points arising raised by panellists, following the delivery of
A History of Change
As part the European Sustainability Development Network, Berlin,
12 October 2020
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<u>The importance of municipalities</u>

Locality is going to be ever-increasing in importance, as I mentioned in the speech, and there are advantages for municipalities and communities in this. Of course, this includes low transport miles, great food security and employment opportunities. I myself spent 14 years on a planning authority that did much to push the local-food agenda. Thus I find it astonishing that, after many millennia of communities priding themselves on being able to feed themselves *in times of want*, we have shifted to an economy where probably every community in Europe is dependent on transport infrastructure to feed its members. Almost nowhere is self-sufficient. And that is not only dangerous, it is damaging to the environment, unsustainable in the use of fuel, psychologically dislocating to many – both potential farmers and those who simply want to know where their food comes from – and wholly unnecessary. Local government can do much in this respect, and I know, many are already pushing this agenda.

<u>The dangers of sustainability leading to great social inequality.</u>

I allude in the talk to the near certainty that society will become more unequal again, whether or not it becomes more sustainable. This is based on the observation that in the UK, in 1688, the average income of the upper classes (roughly 1.25% of the population) was 33 times the average income of the lowest-earning half of the population and in the Regency period, it was still 26 or 27 times as great. At present, although inequality has been growing slowly since 1980 (according to Thomas Picketty's *Capitalism in the 21ˢᵗ Century*), we are only looking at a difference of 6 or 7 times between the average income of the lowest-earning half and average of the highest-earning 1%. However, if we start to return to the inequalities of the early 19ᵗʰ century, when the inequality was profound, people will simply have more pressing needs than sustainability. Someone who cannot feed their children today will not worry about the state of the world in 100 years' time.

As mentioned in my book on the history of change,* if we try to learn lessons from the last millennium to plan for the next millennium, one of our greatest challenges will be the

sustainability of land use. We can make more energy; we can invent more ways of producing food; but we cannot make more land. If we have a greater proportion of people disenfranchised and disempowered by having to pay exorbitant amounts of money for a roof over their head – or, worse, cannot obtain shelter – they will hardly care for the collective good of society in the long run. And yet if we hand over all our land to accommodation, we will end up with the very opposite of the 'garden' the young folk want for their future. We need green spaces to feel positive about ourselves; a world of urban areas is not the solution. Thus over the next 200-300 years, land use will become the crunch issue. Provided we live that long.

* This is known by several titles: *Centuries of Change* in the UK in hardback and audiobook; *Human Race* in UK paperback; *Millennium* in the USA; *Zeiten der Erkenntnis* in German; *Il Libro dei Secoli* in Italian; among other languages.

Covid-19

The one great positive that has come out of Covid-19 (Corona/Coronavirus) is to demonstrate to everyone throughout the world that radical and sudden change across the whole of society is possible. That surely has to give everyone hope.

When people ask me as a historian how the Covid-19 compares with plague, smallpox and cholera, I tell them there is simply no comparison. Those diseases were far more deadly. But the real reason there is no comparison is that in those days, people simply got on with their business and left it to luck as to whether they contracted the disease – either that or god. Today, we expect our governments to look after us. A major change has taken place. Leaving everyone in society to take their chances is not something that any head of state sees as an option. Perhaps the widespread notion that governments have a responsibility for the wellbeing of their citizens is perhaps further grounds for optimism that they will do more for their future wellbeing.

On the practical level, Covid-19 has allowed us any hardly any respite from environmental damage. For every plane that it is not flying there are buses and trains travelling with no one on board, as people minimise risk by eschewing public transport. It is probably obvious to all that Covid-19 presents us with threats to our past achievements as well as future opportunities.

Optimism

Pete said he started as an optimist and became increasingly pessimistic about our capacity to change. I understand that entirely. I replied that an earlier version of my speech was far more pessimistic about the lessons from history. This was a section that I cut from an earlier draft:

Giving things up is different from taking things up. Inventions enter our culture at specific points and cannot normally be un-invented. Renouncing things, however, is a continual process. If the sustainability of the world were finally to be achieved at noon on a certain day, would the afternoon of that day be glorious? No, not at all, because as soon as noon struck, the hour hand would move on. The achievement would start to fall apart. Historically, renunciations are hard because they are never-ending processes that have to be controlled and enforced, unlike the consequences of inventions or disasters.

This is an important distinction because, as far as I can see, no renunciation in our history has ever been the consequence of external pressures, such as the weather or a disease. People who lived in towns and villages that were being eroded by the sea frequently left it until too late to move away, and they lost everything in a final, dreadful storm. The port of Dunwich in 1286-7 is the classic English example. When syphilis came to Europe in the late fifteenth century, although most kingdoms tried to restrict the spread of the disease by prohibiting the bathhouses where prostitutes worked, many men still took the risk of seeking out available women. Even though we knew all about the dangers of plague and quarantine in 1665, in that year a London house that had been boarded up by the authorities because a person inside had plague, was opened by the mob and the inhabitants liberated, to general rejoicing. How many would have died anyway we cannot say but, partly as a result of such behaviour, one fifth of the whole city died of plague, 12,000 of them in that same parish. People feel they can ignore external threats. What makes them change their behaviour is the pressure for change from *within* society, not from outside. As mentioned above, past renunciations such as slavery and cruelty have only taken place when a nation has felt secure enough in its basic requirements to turn its attention to moral issues. It doesn't matter how terrible the fate that awaits them: people have historically ignored the threat of natural disaster because it is just that, a threat, and they interpret that not as a clear and imminent danger but as an opportunity – for they might get away with it.

This is the frightening problem we face. The increasing environmental unsustainability of the world is not in itself a social pressure. It therefore does not in force change. For it to do so, it needs to manifest itself as a political pressure. To return to Hegel's contention – that people and governments never learn from history – although he is demonstrably wrong in respect of internal

pressures, he is right when it comes to diseases and climate change. Unless they are forced to change by a calamity actually *happening*, people stick to the normality they know.

So, to answer the question, what historical principles should inform people hoping to bring about progress towards sustainability? First, technology does not in itself make things happen; it only provides us with tools when we have already decided to act. Second, what really makes things change are the external and internal pressures on society. However, external ones only force change when they actually have happened. The internal ones, social pressures, are what force us to give things up that are immoral or unsustainable. Third, social pressures are only effective when society's most basic needs have already been met. Fourth, these social pressures must be both consistent and permanent if they are to drive the long-term processes that underlie real change.

Finally,

Peter asked me for a single line that unpinned my optimism about the future. I replied that all human history is fundamentally the story of our imagination – and how we have overcome adversity. There will be casualties along the way, that is inevitable, but you would be very unwise to bet against the human imagination after all we have achieved over the millennia.