

Change makers

The Climate Emergency demands us to be change makers not change takers.

David Hunter urges us all to be change makers, not change takers.



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The article below was written before the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst attention has inevitably, and appropriately, been diverted to addressing the pandemic, the points made in the article remain relevant for us all. It is important they are not forgotten and the response to the pandemic has demonstrated that anything is possible – and quickly – where there is sufficient incentive to balance the needs of human life, liberty and the economy.

‘Our greatest responsibility is to be good ancestors.’

These are the words of Jonas Salk, one of the twentieth century’s great scientists. Until recently, many might have taken this to mean leave your kids comfortably off and don’t embody Philip Larkin’s This Be the Verse. As the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis loom over us though, that responsibility takes on a more existential flavour.

The impact of climate change will affect everything we do. It contributes to biodiversity loss, will exacerbate water and food shortages, cause mass internal migrations and create millions of

international refugees; coastal cities will disappear and geopolitical tensions are likely to increase. This is not the worst-case scenario. This is what the science tells us is inevitable. The urgency is around limiting the consequences. Alongside this, the UN’s leading research body on nature has announced urgent action is necessary to reverse the loss of plants, insects and other creatures on which humanity depends for food, pollination, clean water and a stable climate, as the planet’s life-support systems are approaching a danger zone for humanity.

This is a critical turning point in human evolution. Even though we have left it too late to prevent climate change and the Sixth Extinction (effectively failing as the oft quoted ‘first generation to understand the impact of human activity and the last with the ability to do something about it’), there is still much we can do to limit their worst effects.

What these twin threats demonstrate is the interdependent nature of the world we live in. Not only do climate change and biodiversity loss exacerbate one another, they are each a product of a culture and

economy that treat nature as existing for human exploitation, rather than valuing it as a living world that we are part of and have a practical, as well as moral, duty to protect. This does not mean businesses and markets have to be demonised. It does mean that they have to return to being means not ends and take their place in contributing to a broader human (and more than human) flourishing.

So, fundamental change to our lives is inevitable and we have the choice of seeking to influence that change in ways that may benefit ourselves, our loved ones and society more widely; or cling to what we know, deal with what is in front of us and leave the future for others to cope with.

Change is challenging. Behavioural economics tells us the majority prefer not to risk losing something they have, for the sake of a potentially greater gain in the future. Many have worked for years to build their knowledge and expertise and do not like to be told that not just the goalposts, but the pitch, are moving. We are often too busy to pause to reflect, never mind to learn. It is especially hard when we are talking not so much about new skills as a new way of being.

What needs to change is attitudinal: what we bring of ourselves to our work, the attention we give to the implications of our actions, our colleagues' actions, our clients' actions (and inactions in each case) and our willingness to engage with those implications. We need to be enquiring and supportive. We are all in this together, none of us knowing what the solutions are, perhaps wondering if something is wrong with us for feeling that the world is, as Shakespeare had it, 'out of joint'.

I am fortunate to work for a B Corp, where our purpose and social impact are taken seriously. We have recognised that reducing our carbon emissions and responding urgently to the climate emergency is essential – or it may undermine any other impact we work towards. We are committed

not just to reducing our own footprint, but helping staff to reduce theirs and prepare for what is to come; to collaborating with others to amplify our impact and sharing our learning; and to using our professional skills to improve and protect the environment.

It means being open to developing a different relationship to our work, our clients and each other; something we are just beginning to explore. We are having conversations with clients about how they are thinking about the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis; what their expectations are from others (like their advisors) in their value circles; and changing expectations of them on the part of their stakeholders. We are looking at how contracts may be drafted so that the parties to them can work together to optimise the environmental impact performing the contract may have, rather than simply using bargaining power to offload risks wherever possible. We are exploring the questions that need to be asked before transactions are entered into to ensure inadvertent harm is not caused simply by continuing with established – but no longer fit for purpose – practices. And we are sharing what we learn widely with the aim of its widespread adoption, rather than treating it as valuable proprietary property ripe for exploitation.

Something else Jonas Salk said was: *'If all the insects were to disappear from the earth, within fifty years all life on earth would end. If all human beings disappeared from the earth, within fifty years all forms of life would flourish.'* While recent history suggests he could be right, wouldn't it be great to ensure our descendants never find out?

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You can find out more about our B Corp journey and what it means for our commitment to lessening our environmental impact here: <https://bateswells.co.uk/the-uks-first-b-corp-law-firm>