The 'big picture' and complacent capitalism

Why does it take a crisis to focus thinking? Surely when things 'seem ok' is the best time to ponder the risk of disruption and work out how best to avoid it or how to respond?

As Brexit, Covid and now Ukraine have all demonstrated, once our equilibrium is shaken the links that hold it together are seen to weaken and even break. Worst, links we did not even know existed expose the fragility of our due diligence and ignorance of what really makes things happen, invariably delivering our goods and services. As a country we realise too late that we were 'asleep at the wheel', we took too many things for granted, we were complacent.

But this is just the beginning. An exit agreement, a family of vulnerabilities and an invasion have served to expose what our 'localism' has done to weaken our wider view. 'Global Britain' may sound like a good slogan but the reality is that we may be more insular than ever.

So how well prepared are we to really tackle climate change or, more accurately, man-made consumption far beyond the planet's capacity to supply sustainably and safely. Is it society's voracious appetite for goods and services that fuels consumption and the consequent production that causes global warming, not production alone. No amount of emotion or advocacy about the effects of increasing carbon and methane emissions will alter the causes without re-engineering the means of global production. This is the reality of what is required to have any chance of achieving net zero across the planet. It is an inconvenient truth that success at a national level whilst welcome will not move the global dial unless the top six major emitters achieve it together first. As we move into the second half of 2022, we have around 7 years left to reach halfway to our 2050 ambition of reducing carbon emissions and UK globally, and in spite of all the worthy talk delivery is just too slow.

Failure to deliver the 'big picture' for the UK opens the door to understanding risks more widely. Determining what must be imported to meet demand sparks the revulsion we feel for being forced upon us by then who, how and how much? Hitherto we have become used to being able to source pretty much anything we feel. A 'just in time' world of interconnected and interdependent supply chains is a wonder to behold until – like a broadband signal – it fails.

As a country we now realise too late that we were 'asleep at the wheel', we took too many things for granted, we were complacent.

More transparency and more engagement with stakeholders is vital as we drive change, raise standards and continue to improve perceptions.

So, what about our house? The UK minerals and mineral products industry?

Call me naive but isn't it that Governments with the limitless access to the brightest and best minds are there to do? To contemplate population growth, consumption per capita, what can be produced independently to supply demand and what must be imported, whilst at the same time considering the economic, environmental and social impacts?

Such deliberations might conceivably convert into a political manifesto which compiles key strategies for ensuring that what society needs and wants can be sourced from land with consequent non-energy mineral resources. All to ensure delivery for the long term.

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Why is the 'big picture' debate about land and what best to do with it?

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Virtually everything we do involves the use of land. Virtually all use of non-agricultural land is governed by the planning system. So where is the 'big picture' debate about land and what best to do with it? Right now, we don't seem to really know what we are trying to do with land. Is it to produce food, energy or generate carbon offsets? Is it to build on or to preserve? The debate about planning is predominantly about housing and a failed 75-year mission to make the system faster, simpler and cheaper whilst creating more process and involving more voices.

The legislation and regulation of land is fragmented within and across Government in four different national administrations and increasingly expected to be delivered locally. Regional strategies and inter-regional dimensions in England are cold-shouldered by dogmatic policies. Ever changing models of local government with stretched and inadequate capacity compete rather than cooperate to join up the dots on development, transport, resource use and waste management. Local plans are not sufficiently up to date, nor in step with neighbouring plans to create an approach that's greater than the individual parts. It's a bit fragmented and, well, hit and miss.

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Localism may serve current political thinking, but it is in reality a drag on innovation. There cannot possibly be development with those closest to the problem influencing outcomes, but taken to the extreme if everyone thinks only locally, the regional, national and global realities are inevitably harder to see and harder to respond to.

If land use planning were a tripod, I think that we would have more than enough weight on the local leg but we really need a lot more weight on the regional and national ones. Consequently, the current approach is imbalanced and unlikely to succeed, let alone fail over.

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