

Principles of Emergence (Paul)

To dream of things as yet unseen.....

The problem is the majority of people still haven't really grasped the serious nature of our predicament. Even senior experts, scientists, NGO's and political leaders fail to appreciate that the most recent evidence on both climate change and peak oil reveals a situation more urgent than had been expected, even by those who have been following it closely for decades. A clear and widening gulf has now emerged between present policy targets and the rapid de-carbonisation the evidence from our most recent science tells us is urgently required.

Clear and robust evidence has emerged that our fossil fuel emissions are approaching the point where they trigger a range of very much larger, un-stoppable runaway climate feedbacks – a global catastrophe that would dwarf recent hurricanes or floods and last for tens of thousands of years.

In addition, our relentless fossil fuelled economies will soon be halted by the immovable facts of geology. Our reserves of oil and gas represent 100 million years of concentrated solar energy, and we have used the best half of it in a mere 150 years and the rate is accelerating. Although no one is talking about oil and gas "running out", we now realise that just as energy demand is exploding across the globe, our ability to annually increase production is, for the first time in our history, reaching a peak and must inevitably decline, with what remains being dirtier, harder to extract and considerably more expensive. We are now, quite literally, at the end of the pipeline.

It is now almost 40 years since a bunch of young idealists adopted a derelict slate quarry in Mid-Wales to form the 'Centre for Alternative Technology'. They were inspired by the notion of building a living community to test the emerging sustainable technologies, in order to find out which ones worked and which ones didn't! The original community set out to develop and prove, by a positive living example, new technologies that would provide practical solutions to the problems that are now worrying the world's ecologists. After the first five years of experiments and trials CAT had learned enough to create the very first 'Alternative Energy Strategy for the UK', presented to Government in 1977 showing for the first time, how an alternative approach could reduce energy demand and switch to new renewable energy sources.

After numerous shorter stays, I joined CAT full time in 1988. By the opening of the new Millennium I became deeply concerned that the people thinking about the challenges were not working in a joined up way. Those working on the climate problem not really talking to those working on the oil challenge, and neither party were really addressing majority world issues. Also there was an urgent need for a switch from exploring the problems to developing solutions.

Developing such an integrated solution requires a degree of urgency that is currently lacking in national policy. Although well ahead of its global peers, current UK Government targets fall far short of what is now known to be needed. The credit crisis has graphically shown us what happens if we see problems in the pipeline and don't take appropriate action. Left unchecked

our climate, energy challenges will synergise, resulting in economic collapse and dislocation unseen in modern times. The zero carbon transition demanded by the science is at the very boundaries of what is 'politically thinkable', and is every bit as much a challenge for our democracy and our culture as it is for our technology.

I became inspired to develop Zero Carbon Britain scenarios which integrate a wide range of cutting edge research and expert knowledge into a single document – illustrating how we can 'powerdown' our 'energy demand' and our 'power up' our renewable energy assets such as wind power, wave, hydro, solar, biomass to achieve the transition to net zero emissions in two decades. The report was widely covered in the national press. 1,500 printed copies have been distributed or sold and the full report has been downloaded 27,800 times and much interest has been generated. ZCB has influenced policy, it became the basis of a BBC Radio 4 Afternoon Theatre play, "Getting to Zero", it has inspired similar projects in other countries and was the call from the UK National Climate March in 2010. Requests for presentations have exceeded expectations, and we have been amazed by the enthusiasm with which the ZCB2030 message has been received.

This is the body of work CAT brings to the emergence summit. In engaging this story to the cultural industries we hope to discover new ways of presenting this positive, practical future. The challenge is Britain's cultural and political headlights are super dipped - we only view the way ahead within short timescales. We can more or less see the road as it emerges before us, but are unable to navigate our route forwards in any meaningful sense. Where we do express the future, in contemporary popular culture it is presented as dystopian and dark. A positive future is technically possible; the barriers are cultural. Our 21st century challenges can no longer be met with a 20th century mind-set. We must begin the process of unpicking the psychology of our current addiction to fossil fuels and challenge the very assumptions which led us into the habit. A habit, which now defines everything from the food we eat - to our foreign policy and military allegiances.

The transition to a zero carbon future will, of course, entail a challenging period in our history, requiring bold decision making and an urgent sense of common purpose, more akin to that which pertained during World War 2 than in any period since. Rising to the challenge will also entail a new approach to many of our current lifestyle choices. It will involve a lower meat diet, but that's something we have to do in any case. It may mean we get more exercise, but that too will be beneficial. It may curtail our retail therapy, but with the current economic crisis escalating, again this may be good for us.

By learning the hard lessons of the recent past, we can stay ahead of events through creating a new kind of future; stable in the long term, locally resilient, but still active in a global context, rich in quality jobs and running on indigenous, in-exhaustible energy. Living in a zero carbon Britain will mean ingenuity replaces apathy, and self-reliance replaces self-gratification, but it might just deliver a rich sense of collective purpose and individual meaning, which we find we have been craving for a very long time.

Paul Allen