WHAT IS TO BE DONE?
We live in extraordinary and uncomfortable times.

The tumultuous events of the past year are well documented and have been subject to so much commentary that we do not need to re-tread them here. But we do need to ask ourselves what happens next – what is to be done and how can we, together, be the change?

Three years ago, we created Jericho to help large organisations navigate the messy space between business, politics and civil society. We realised then that the world was in difficulty and that, without progressive thinking, new models and significant intervention, optimism and hope would be defeated by cynicism and despair.

We have not lost hope but we need to re-build it from a very dark place. A better society cannot allow intolerance and xenophobia, rancour and division to triumph. But nor can we escape the harsh fact that much of this is of our own making: our failure to tackle root issues related to globalisation, inequality and injustice – to listen to dissenting voices before their cry became a roar.

We have a new responsibility for business here, just as there is for politics.

Since the summer – and accelerated by events of the past months – many clients and friends have turned to us and asked us “what is to be done?”. This is the question we are asking friends and partners of Jericho to help answer.

In order to facilitate an open, positive and generative conversation, we are committing to transform Revolutionary Times into a forum for new ideas and a new hope. This will bring focus to the wider Jericho community – and we would like to work with you to find better pathways forward.

We will create a new platform on-line and publish off-line also. Critically, we need to be much, much more than another Talking Shop. We need ideas but we also need action – in our workplaces, in our communities and in the organisations we lead. We have a collective responsibility, for sure, but each one of us needs to be an agent for change.

Jericho continues to work at the junction of business, politics, citizens and society. Our programmes with clients on Responsible Tax, Public Interest and the Future of Work is Human speak clearly, we think, about the kind of society we want to see and be. At the heart of our work is a belief that greater vulnerability builds greater trustworthiness and that embracing dissent is essential: none of us can learn if we do not listen. The echo chambers of the past half-century have in many ways brought us to the point we find ourselves at today. We live in a febrile and activist world – and that world needs positive activist leadership more so now than ever before: activism with common good at its core.

Entitled “What is to be done?” this volume of Revolutionary Times gathers 8 essays from clients, partners and friends. It will be the first of several and we hope our contributors will signpost better ways forward and include tangible, deliverable ideas for change. We will follow this up with meetings of the Jericho community, so we can gather thoughts and convene the debate. We are looking for actions, not words.

We cannot afford to simply be bystanders or commentators any longer. These are revolutionary times indeed and we need a revolution of our own. If you would like to get involved in future editions and/or have a specific passion point you would like to champion, please let us know.

Robert Phillips, Co-founder, Jericho Chambers, author of Trust Me, PR is Dead and a Visiting Professor at Cass Business School, University of London.

robert.phillips@jerichochambers.com

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robert.phillips@jerichochambers.com
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By Margaret Heffernan
As the views of the ‘metropolitan liberal elite’ have now been so comprehensively rejected within the last six months on both sides of the Atlantic this may be time for pause. For us all to button it for a while. Find some humility. Try to understand. Stop fulminating on Twitter. Hand over the airwaves to the JAMs from Lincolnshire, the ‘forgotten’ angry white males from the rustbelt Mid West and their mouthpieces like Milo. Let them take back control.

This is a tricky one if you believe Brexit and Trump’s election remain profoundly wrong decisions both of which are, in leftist jargon, hard to ‘normalise’. Both are events that are highly unlikely in the long run to be of benefit to very many of those that voted for them. (Outside Trump’s immediate grimy avaricious family it’s genuinely hard to see any American being better off in four years time by which time he may even be in Sing Sing.) Palpably false premises have been used to encourage millions of disaffected voters – cheesed-off since 2008 and before – to back very bad ideas. Even the OBR – which is not allowed to have an axe to grind – has said that Brexit will blow a £58 billion hole in our public finances in just the next few years.

The side of Brexit that I find most infuriating is what a total waste of time it all is. If a stop could be put to the process now it would be worth all our while. When there was so much everyday knitting to be done on all sorts of worthwhile and worthy projects in government, all attention has been diverted to an impossibly complex and difficult negotiation that could go on for years. All for what? All those thousands of civil servants scratching their heads trying to work out how to find a plausible way forward without pissing off the Daily Mail.

It’s not often one finds oneself agreeing with Polly Toynbee but she’s right when she says: ‘Everything that moves and breathes from now on will be infected by Brexit. It’s a dry rot whose tendrils will creep into every last aspect of national life, twisting around every newborn baby and frail pensioner’.

Over the last few weeks I’ve heard senior folk from business – pragmatists all – start to chastise the Financial Times and The Economist for their unrelentingly negative views on first Brexit and now Trump. They are out of touch with popular opinion, it is said. And, anyway, what’s the point in having an extended ‘whingeorama’ about it all? We are where we are. There is no going back. We just have to make the best of it.

Indeed, there is something that is starting to feel utterly futile about reading AC Grayling’s elegantly reasoned correspondence with HMG or the 16 essays in this week’s New Yorker about what a calamity Trump is – Hilary Mantel’s one, incidentally, is sublime. What actually works, makes things happen, gets its way is the savagery of the post-truth world. We lost. It feels like we’re in our own echo chamber. We yelled to each other, the sound waves bounced off the metal and nobody outside listened. But that doesn’t mean we just stand by and say nothing. You have to keep on telling the emperor and the masses that support him that they are all stark bollock naked. Lenin, of course, always knew exactly what was to be done. But what we actually do for the time being is hard to fathom. Wait for 2020 and get behind Tim Farron? (Don’t laugh.) Get Blair back on the road in his Ford Galaxy? (How way out of time he feels now.) Spring Sadiq from the mayorage to depose Corbyn? Fume quietly while working out how to get a second referendum?

Matthew has been editor of Management Today for the past nine years.

matthew.gwyther@haymarket.com
Blizzards, Baboons and Bullies

It’s no use accusing ‘them’ of dodging complexity while cowering in our own bunkers

By Christine Armstrong

AA Gill told Sunday Times readers last week that he is riddled with cancer: “the full English”. While other people look to the Bible, Bowie or Beethoven to transform their world view, for me it is usually AA Gill. Since my teens his magical words have transported me to the desperation of refugees, the hallucinations of alcoholics, the amiability of porn stars, and the terror of the best and worst restaurateurs in the world.

The news crushed me. So I stupidly went on Twitter, where I found him being described as the “noted baboon murderer”: his soul entombed in the slumped body of a primate.

Clare Fox talks about our young, sensitive and easily offended “Generation Snowflake”. But why limit ourselves to one flake? There’s a whole a blizzard of people shutting down anyone imperfect, bruised or tainted by anything less than fragrant. At a primary school football match last week a child said that another player had said something racist. No one else heard and the child’s account made no sense. But the match was stopped. Some allegations are so powerful they are true regardless of evidence.

A therapist once told a corporate workshop I attended “if we stop listening, they stop talking”. Which came to mind when an American mother my kids once went on a playdate with came out as a Trump supporter on Facebook. The vitriolic, self-righteous rage of her angry friends had descended on her wall. For a while she made her case and in the end she gave up:

Socialists [she means anyone with a passing acquaintance of The Guardian] are the most oppressive people. They claim they believe in freedom of speech but in the end if you don’t believe what they do they want to stop you. Bullied into all thinking the same way.

So yes, of course, we are battered, bloodied and bedevilled by Brexit and Trump. But when we can’t listen to the people who voted for them – listen and understand without just seeking to tell them why they are wrong – then we’re as foolish as the no-platform students who are offended by Germaine Greer saying that everyone is born one gender or another, or as those who rescind invites to Milo Yiannopoulos.

In response, I’m rebelling against my echo chamber “liberal metropolitan profile” on Facebook anyway by gorging on every pro-Trump piece I can. What do you know, more of my American friends are Republicans than my newsfeed admitted before. And we should listen to them because, whatever we think of Trump, they see something worth a vote and they too believe they are on the side of the angels.

If AA Gill were allowed to fly, he’d be going to the rust belt and lasering Trump fans’ fears and prayers with his mental 12 bore so we could all better see what we’ve long been blind to.

So if you see him, wish him well. And tell him I don’t give a monkey’s about the sodding baboon.

Christine is co-founder of Jericho Chambers, contributing editor of Management Today and Chair of the Maternity Liaison Committee at University College London Hospital.

christine.armstrong@jerichochambers.com
Relationships of Value

*Human value cannot be subordinated to market value*

By Loughlin Hickey and Charles Wookey

When, as citizens, we make far-reaching decisions, it is all too familiar to see the headlines reporting how the markets have reacted. The risk is that we are being drawn to the markets and financial value to define what is good and bad for us as people. In short the benefit to us as people, the “human value”, is in danger of being subordinated to market value. We need to think carefully about the values system we choose to embrace.

This is not simply a topic for momentous events of public democracy. It is lived in the everyday interactions between institutions that shape the market economy and the society that bears the consequences of decisions made by those institutions. This article concentrates on the institution of business, its role in society, and how business can bring human values to the fore.

Let’s start with the good news. Many businesses recognise that their value derives from the value they deliver to society; through the goods and services they bring to market and the responsible way those goods and services are produced and sold. They recognise the mutual benefits of genuine relationships with customers, suppliers, employees, communities, regulators and investors. And there is increasing evidence that these relationships generate the human value that in turn gets translated into superior operational performance and consequent financial value (see a collation of evidence at [Blueprint for Better Business](https://blueprintforbusiness.org)).

You could conclude that by showing the links between financial value and human relationships we are proposing exactly what we are seeking to declaim – that financial and market value define what matters most, and that human value is just a means for achieving it. Such a conclusion misunderstands the relationship between the two; financial value is an outcome of creating human value in a business context, not the measure of it. Human value – understood as the value the business delivers to society – is what matters more.

This hierarchy of relationships and outcomes is not new and neither is it outside the mainstream; see the Johnson & Johnson Credo and the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan as past and current examples. Whilst mainstream and growing, it is not as widespread as it could and should be. Part of the reason is that the businesses and people leading the change are challenging an orthodoxy about business, and also about people, which makes it a more risky venture than it should be. If broadly summarised, this orthodoxy maintains the purpose of business is to maximise shareholder value and that it is possible to put people in service of that goal by appealing to and rewarding their self-interest. This credo needs to be challenged if we are to change.

Business is a creation of society and so should be in service of the society that created it and that supports it. The reality of the human person is that we are mired in self-interest when we are in fear or disrespected and/or have no means to express our latent desire to be fulfilled as a whole person. We seek meaning in what we do, seek relationships to give context to that meaning and want to co-create something which has benefits beyond our own self satisfaction.

If a business demonstrates respect for people and enables their latent desires to be expressed, then they can add to human value. The business outcomes are more engaged and innovative employees, customers as loyal advocates, reliable and collaborative suppliers, welcoming communities and thoughtful regulators. The joy of business is to innovate ways to demonstrate that human value is at the heart of the why and how of their existence. There are myriad ways to give people a genuine voice – from employee councils to transparent “critical friend” reviews by NGOs with industry, sector or issue experience. Giving people voice enables co-creation by encouraging customer and employee involvement in areas where the business has set a social goal, either through direct engagement or indirectly through the purchase of goods and services. It also allows people to be in relationships based on transparency and collaboration with suppliers, through a mutual and genuine care for the planet that sustains us all. Additionally, it means involvement with local communities to share knowledge, resources and opportunities.

The opportunity is there to show genuine respect to people by giving them a voice, giving them a chance to use that voice through acts of co-creation, and to show impact using evidence everyone can trust. We can all contribute as citizens, as customers, as academics and as people in business; the first step is to understand and call for the proper relationship between human value and market and shareholder value. The market is at the service of society, not the other way round.

Charles Wookey and Loughlin Hickey are founding members of A Blueprint for Better Business. Charles is CEO and Loughlin is a Trustee and Senior Adviser.  

loughlin.hickey@blueprintforbusiness.org  
charles.wookey@blueprintforbusiness.org
I spent the day of Donald Trump’s election to the presidency of the U.S. in – of all places – Las Vegas, Nevada. The slot machines garishly blaring in the lobby, and the Trump hotel down the block, were apt symbols for the kind of world we in the U.S. felt ourselves rudely thrust into. I was in town for the annual gathering of the ESOP Association, a membership meeting of hundreds of companies with Employee Stock Ownership Plans. In the post-election moment, that gathering proved apt in a different way. The dialogues I took part in showed me that advancing employee ownership need not be imperilled by a Trump presidency. Indeed, this approach to rebuilding the middle class may be uniquely suited to the new political world. It is one of the most promising paths forward for progressives at this moment.

Here are three reasons why:
1. Support for employee ownership is bipartisan; both Ronald Reagan and Bernie Sanders were proponents.
2. Employee ownership in the U.S. does not require new federal policy; handsome tax advantages are already present in the law.
3. What is needed to advance employee ownership, primarily, is increased awareness. That work can advance, no matter who occupies the Oval Office.

Most importantly, employee ownership directly addresses the issue of wealth inequality that has driven populist sentiment on both the right and left. It is a powerful way to improve the fortunes of ordinary workers and to build an enduring, just economy that is not subject to the whims of electoral politics.

On the final day of the conference, Janet Boguslaw of Brandeis University, recounted the story of Henry, 55, whose life was transformed by the power of employee ownership. Henry had grown up in a large family where his mother worked in a grocery store and his father took on odd jobs. Henry himself was working for minimum wage at a company when it shuttered its doors. He took on a new entry-level position at a different firm, which within five years became employee owned. Henry found the company paid the tuition for him to get an associate’s degree, and he advanced. Today, on top of his paycheck, he enjoys an ESOP account balance of $460,000, plus a company-sponsored pension plan of $80,000. He has medical insurance and can help his children attend college. He told Boguslaw, “I feel more comfortable talking to my kid’s teacher, and more comfortable coaching my kids’ teams.” He plans to retire in ten years and possibly travel. As Boguslaw put it, “Here is a man who started at minimum wage and became part of the middle class.” The reason is employee ownership.

While often missing from the progressive agenda, employee ownership is far from marginal. In the U.S., there are more than 7,000 companies with employee ownership, covering more than 10 million employees, who collectively have assets of nearly $1 trillion. Analogous to the ESOP structure in the U.S. is the trust structure of the John Lewis Partnership in the UK, which is 100 percent owned on behalf of its 88,900 employees. The mission of the firm is “to serve employee happiness”. And while navigating the same pressures in the wake of the Brexit vote as other retailers focused on driving down wages, that chain distributes up to half its profits to employees each year as a bonus. And this is the third-largest company by sales in the U.K.

To move beyond a society controlled by and for the 1 percent, we need broad-based ownership of assets. It is assets that create family stability and, collectively, economic power. As the National Center for Employee Ownership notes, workers at employee-owned firms have more than double the retirement accounts as at traditional firms, and they one-fourth as likely to be laid off.

Movements for employee ownership are growing in the U.S. and the UK. In the U.S., The Democracy Collaborative has joined with other organisations to launch a campaign, “50 by 50,” aimed at catalysing 50 million employee owners by 2050. If achieved, this would mean one in four workers become workplace owners, and substantial wealth would be enjoyed by millions of families. It’s a glimpse of true economic democracy. And as we are seeing, without economic democracy, political democracy fails to thrive.

Marjorie Kelly is a Senior Fellow and the Executive Vice President of The Democracy Collaborative, a U.S. nonprofit working to create an inclusive, sustainable economy. She is author of Owning Our Future and The Divine Right of Capital.

mkelly@democracycollaborative.org
Now is not the time for measured diplomacy. Now is not the time for hiding behind computers, issuing another petition, and staying in your echo chamber. Now is not the time for silly stunts wearing fancy dress. Now is not the time to be looking at the balance sheet and urgently sending out some Chuggers into the street, to acquire “supporters” in a half-hearted effort to respond to the complete upheaval of our times.

Civil society has been asleep at the wheel, and the train crash we’re now witnessing is the inevitable result. As civil society got ‘professional’ it lost its connection to the very people it professes to try to support. Civil society, to a large extent, has become a shadow of its former self, at times little more than a collection of beleaguered bureaucrats, biding their time.

With our eyes closed, we’ve been slowly, quietly facing a full-on assault to human rights and progressive values. The current government has gradually curbed the freedoms of civil society through a variety of legislative means – from controls on campaigning during elections (including the referendum), to contractual agreements that mutes the voices of civil society. Extreme surveillance, meanwhile, has just become law. Our membership institutions are decimated: in the UK trade union membership is less than half of what it was in 1979. In the US, just 11% of people are members of a trade union.

So here we are. I hate to passively throw words away like “we have a war on.” But we have a war on. Brexit and Trump follow naturally from the 2008 financial crisis, that’s leaving chasms between the have and the have-nots, and washing away any civility that we’ve been building for over 300 years. The post-truth world includes a letting go of the traditions that have been around since the British 1689 Bill of Rights and the American 1791 Bill of Rights were founded. Both are now being ripped up and torn apart and their intent – to uphold principles of fairness of all humans – erased from modern memory. We expected it in despotic countries, but not at home. Populism, lies and our failure to engage effectively have all brought us to where we are now. This is War.

Civil society needs to return to its roots: at its most basic and critical form, civil society isn’t a group of branded organisations, each competing with each other for a share of the charity pie. As eloquently expressed by academic Michael Edwards, civil society is the arenas in which citizens talk to each other about the great issues of the day. We need to reclaim those arenas from the digital space that has supplanted our ability to talk, to discuss, to debate. How many conversations – I mean proper dialogue – were held in the run-up to the referendum on the real issues like immigration, refugees, employment or trade? Few, if any. We left it to the politicians and the tabloids to shout their opinions and stir up anger amongst the disaffected.

A recent survey found that across Europe, 63% of people feel that recent political developments have increased polarisation between different sections of society in the last year. Well no kidding.

The most important role civil society can play now is to create a sense of connection and community. Civil society needs to shun the concepts of supporters and clients, and embrace citizenship. It needs to connect people to their shared values getting out into the world, building bridges and spreading hope. This is King and Mandela, not Farage. And it needs to fight aggressively to maintain its right to do so.

We can avert the next Brexit/Trump if we dare. People will value each other, their differences and their civil society if we all learn to be more civil. And who better to lead it than a healthy, active and reinvigorated civil society.

Deborah is a partner at Jericho Chambers, working across civil society. She also writes for the Guardian on international development and civil society issues.

deborah.doane@jerichochambers.com
Of the many charges levelled against political and business elites, perhaps the most damning is that they have abandoned the public interest. Its tattered flag hangs limply over the deserted ruins of western politics. We can only hope that a new generation of responsible leaders will emerge from the ashes.

This is particularly resonant for those who would advise government, or have dedicated their careers to safeguarding our economy and constitution. In the rush to depose Saddam, Blair resisted sound legal advice and well-founded diplomatic doubts. Throughout 2016, Eurosceptics preferred to rubbish the considered advice of Carney and Lagarde than to proffer reasoned rebuttals. More recently, members of the Privy Council signally failed to defend our most senior judges against a craven press, which wanted to “take back control” but only if the judges gave the “right” answer.

Such behaviour has become the norm. When earnest experts speak an inconvenient truth, they are denigrated. Trump may yet turn his back on the Paris Climate Agreement because he knows that faced with a mountain of scientific evidence, the merest pile of sand is enough for anti-scientists to bury their heads. This is not just irresponsible: it is profoundly reckless.

During The Enlightenment, populations challenged traditional authority with a simple idea: that reason trumped religious orthodoxy as a route towards human progress. In the era of dizzyingly rapid and disruptive change, we need the rational instincts of the Age of Reason more than ever. And yet, western populations are challenging authority not with reason, but with blatant untruths. Welcome to the new and dangerous Anti-Enlightenment.

If you still believe that progress rests on evidence-based policies and actions, then don’t expect much from politicians, at least for now. Their greatest contribution ought to be to set us on course for a sustainable future. Instead, as a collective, they look no further than the next election. As individuals, too many politicians have their sights lowered on the latest Twitterstorm. We must instead look to professionals to safeguard the public interest. Most, if not all, professions have a code of ethics that goes beyond mere compliance with the law. Many have a Royal Charter, obliging professionals to act in the public interest; something beyond the profit motive and broader than individual client needs.

What can professionals do?

First and foremost, they must stick to their established values of integrity and expertise, thereby rejecting a race to the bottom. Second, the professions should take the long-term view, so that our actions today do not prejudice public health, the social fabric, and built and natural environments of future generations.

Third, the professions need to come together and boldly plant a flag on the moral high ground. They must re-define the public interest in a way that the public understands and values. And they should take pride in doing so. Fourth, the professions must find their voice. Too often the narrative of self-interested trade bodies dominates the debate and reinforces the divide between elites and a disillusioned public. As the voice of public good, the professions must remain apolitical. But this does not oblige silence on politically sensitive matters. On the contrary, where politics is undermining society’s wider interests, the professions have a duty to speak out most loudly.

Finally, the professions should do more than reflect market forces. In the built environment this might include actively finding ways to place higher value on low-carbon developments, insisting on resource efficient building techniques, and turning down contracts for work on environmentally harmful projects. Modest steps, but a start nonetheless.

Now is the moment for the professions to stand tall in the face of un-reason, to proudly march beneath the banner of public interest. A powerful signal of intent would demonstrate professionals’ renewed relevance and could set us on course for rational progress in a turbulent 140-character world. Ethical leadership from professionals has the opportunity to (re-) inspire responsible politics and responsible business and become a force for good.

John Kraus is a former career diplomat and physicist. He believes that governments, business and civil society must adopt a determined and collaborative approach to global challenges.

johnkraus@hotmail.co.uk
Profits Uber everything? Reflections on a Case
We need to get real about the language we use to categorise good and bad corporate behaviour

By Professor Joep Cornelissen

A few weeks ago I took a cab from Amsterdam Schiphol airport on my way home. A few minutes into the ride, the taxi driver started a rant against Uber; how he had waited six hours for me, his first customer, to arrive. Rides for regular taxi companies have dried up in this city. At first the conversation felt like the usual complaining of a cab driver (and the Dutch do like a good moan), but when we collectively started to unpick the “business model” that he is now forced to operate, whilst also paying for his training, license and cab company, it all seemed grossly unfair. He seemed to be hovering just above the minimum wage whilst supporting a young family at home. I was of course vaguely aware of this, but as a business school academic I had perhaps not felt or seen the situation as starkly prior to my conversation that day. You have to understand that in business schools, Uber is taught as a case of real disruptive innovation and as a technologically superior solution to the age-old problem of getting people from A to B. MBA students in business schools in fact often wax lyrical about Uber, and dream of projecting its technology and business model onto other industries, where they believe it can also, in a technologically progressive way, disrupt the system, and result in significant financial gain.

But the conversation with my taxi driver that night resonated. Especially so, perhaps, as it came in the wake of the ruling the week before by a UK employment tribunal that had lambasted Uber’s description of itself as utter “fiction”. As the judges wrote in their ruling; “The notion that Uber in London is a mosaic of 30,000 small businesses linked by a common ‘platform’ is to our minds the faintest ridiculous”. What the judges pointed to was the way in which companies such as Uber beguile themselves to their customers and the general public with neutral terms and metaphors, such as being a “platform”, “network”, or “marketplace” that simply connects buyers and suppliers. These labels offer images that not only externalise, but reject outright any direct responsibilities that Uber has or might be seen to have as an employer towards its employees, such as a duty of care, salary or social insurance payments. Uber reasons that their drivers are in fact not their employees.

The company has on the same grounds been trying to fend off any perceived attributions that it is somehow responsible for the actions of its drivers, including accusations of rape and a shooting in 2016 that left six people dead and wounded scores of others. In relation to these incidents, the company has highlighted its extensive background checks, suggesting that their internal procedures are in order and that they could not have foreseen the actions of particular individual citizens. With the rape allegations, the company directly responded to media reports and reported that the five official rape allegations it has received between December 2012 and August 2015 represented only “0.0000009% of customer journeys in the period covered” with “legitimate” sexual assault claims accounting for one in every 3.3m trips. The company in this manner obviously tries to deny, clarify and downplay any accusations of wrongdoing by its drivers, who again as the company stresses are in fact not its drivers (or Uber employees), but citizens using their app.

But again, returning to the verdict of the employment tribunal, the judges wrote: “We are satisfied that the supposed driver/passenger contract is a pure fiction which bears no relation to the real dealings and relationships between the parties. It is not real to regard Uber as working ‘for’ the drivers ... the only sensible interpretation is that the relationship is the other way around”. In other words, Uber cannot have its cake and eat it, effectively profiting from its taxi operations without any duty of care towards its employees or the customers who use the services. The “fiction” that the judges point to is instructive; what is at stake is that we need to roll back on the language and imagery that we use when we discuss companies like Uber and become more real.

Specifically, the neutral metaphors (networks, media companies, platforms) that are currently in swing are somewhat one-sided portrayals and do not speak clearly to the power and impact companies such as Uber have on society, let alone what real responsibilities they have in transactions and relationships with their stakeholders, including customers and employees. Just as the progressive movement in general is in need of new labels and images, those working in business schools similarly have to explore and discuss alternative framings of Uber and companies like Uber, as a way of bringing other aspects and other assumptions back into the classroom. Academics, like everyone else, have been lulled into the neutral language of platforms, business models and profits, and to break out of this mould we have to press ourselves to embrace a different vocabulary, one that is more progressively centered around human and society concepts such as consumer protection, worker welfare, and public and legal accountability. Having such a language will at the very least help provoke new and alternative interpretations of cases such as Uber in a business school setting. Alternative framings may not provide any definite or immediate answers or any “final” interpretations, but they would bring more balance to the discussion. A new, more real, language might also prompt a new generation of business students to use technology and organisations towards other, more socially progressive ends, and to gain a heightened sense of reality about the actual impacts a business has on society.


cornelissen@rsm.nl
We should be kind, while there is still time

We will not defeat harshness and extremism with even more unpleasantness. It is time to bring back civility to public life

By Stefan Stern

We have forgotten what our parents taught us. They told us to be modest, to be generous, not to take too much, not to contribute too little. They told us to be patient. And, occasionally, they warned us that life isn’t always fair.

We were told. But exciting modernity tantalises with offers of infinite and instantaneous pleasures. The science fiction of our youth has become everyday reality. The world is open to us, at our fingertips. Almost anything is possible, if you can afford it. And even if you can’t afford it, well, modern finance may find a way round that too, for some.

The story for those who are on the highest incomes, or who have inherited wealth, is good. But for the great majority things look different. Is it any wonder that people are unhappy? Their economic futures are uncertain. The robots are coming, apparently to take 47% of the jobs if you believe the most extravagant of the forecasts. Official data may say one thing about Gini coefficients and relative inequality. But most people see only this: huge and growing wealth at the top, a struggle for the rest. Some worry about how to spend it, the majority worry about where it is going to come from.

This all applies, with added intensity, to younger generations, who will have to take on large amounts of debt to receive a university education and will not, without a parental hand-out, be able to buy a home for decades, perhaps ever.

Of course people are anxious and angry. They naturally seek simple solutions and are seduced by those who offer them.

Who has time for nuance, elaborate arguments, or complicated speech? Take back control. Make America great again. That is what many people want to hear, and vote for.

This is where the financialisation of life and intense (global and domestic) competition have brought us. In developed economies there are only a few winners in this game, and many losers. As Margaret Heffernan has argued, there is in fact a bigger prize to aim for – a more collaborative approach to achieving worthwhile things in business and in life. Less comparing ourselves with others, more seeking happiness in simpler and sustainable activity. Fewer attempts to scramble up the career ladder, more time spent with family and friends. A return to restraint, to modesty, and a curbing of excess. Less materialism, more humanity.

This may be too much to hope for. But there is something we could do about one of the most obvious and unappealing consequences of the harsh times we are living through. And that is to reassert the need for civility, and kindness, in our dealings with others.

Farage and Trump are appalling role models. Of course racist attacks and hate speech have risen in the wake of their successful electoral campaigns. They have stirred up and exploited populism of the ugliest kind.

But we do not have to succumb to it. We can refuse to sink to that level. We can choose to be kinder to each other. Not in the sense of the once briefly fashionable “random acts of kindness” way. No: a conscious and considered decision to be civil, to listen more, spout less, and be kind.

A well-known Quaker saying goes like this:

“I shall pass this way but once; any good that I can do or any kindness I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer nor neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.”

Selfish, thoughtless individualism has brought us down. The prime minister is right: the economy is not working for too many people. Something more collaborative, more sustainable, more human, more kind, is needed. It is up to us to bring it about.

Stefan Stern is a management writer and business professor at Cass Business School. He has been banging on about leadership and management over two decades and sees no reason to stop now.

stefanstern1@aol.com

We should be kind, while there is still time

We will not defeat harshness and extremism with even more unpleasantness. It is time to bring back civility to public life

By Stefan Stern
What is to be done?

By Margaret Heffernan

“I feel kind of temporary about myself.”

The words are Willy Loman’s, in Death of a Salesman. They capture perfectly my reaction on learning the result first of the EU referendum and then the U.S. election.

Born in the USA, I grew up in Europe: first the Netherlands, then England, at a time when the street fights of the civil rights movement and Viet Nam protests made me ashamed to be American. At an early age, I hated being identified with a country known for discrimination and violence. So Europe became my home, a place I associated with greater tolerance, a visceral discomfort with discrimination and, I thought, a longer, more nuanced worldview.

So now? After Brexit and after Trump, I’m feeling kind of temporary because I’ve lost both my homes. Many others feel the same: brought up to believe in equality, to respect thinking, truth telling and compassion, we feel lost, though grateful to be, for now, refugees in mind only.

And it’s no consolation to me to reflect that Wilful Blindness was right: that its delineation of causes were demonstrated, then amplified beyond my wildest imagining. We could, as everyone has, devote more time and energy analysing the deceitful campaigns, irresponsible media, bad economic policy. Our troubles have so many accomplices. But the deep underlying cause, the one we must look straight in the face, is inequality.

Of course I’m talking about economic inequality – the kind we turned a blind eye to until Thomas Piketty slammed his doorstopper book onto our desks. The kind some dismissed by conjuring up the deceitful campaigns, irresponsible media, bad economic policy. Our troubles have so many accomplices. But the deep underlying cause, the one we must look straight in the face, is inequality.

But I’m also talking about deeper, inchoate inequality: the inequality that says some people matter more than others. The existential inequality that says: My children are worth more than yours. I am entitled to a home – and you are not. I deserve the truth – while you can be fobbed off with buffoonery, beer and lies. The inequality that is implicit and explicit in racism. In sexism. In xenophobia.

The tortuous irony of Brexit and Trump is that those who opposed them may benefit while their supporters stand to lose most. This is a confidence trick on a scale that leaves Bernie Madoff, Enron and BHS in the dust. But if we truly believe in equality, we must now stand beside all of those individuals and groups who feel most under attack and vulnerable. Immigrants. The unemployed and under-employed. Children assaulted by messages of hopelessness. Women. The marginalised and trivialised. We must stand by the weak, the unprotected and unprivileged and make it obvious that they do not lack for friends and defenders. That everyone matters.

But how can I take this out of the abstract and make it real?

Inequality takes many forms. As an educated, well-employed, affluent executive I have power and access to power. I know stuff. I know people. I get opportunities – to go places, meet people, learn more. Rich in these, I get richer. There are many forms of inequality and they compound: the rich get richer in everything. But what if we put our privileges at the service of those who don’t have them, instead of those that already do? Share that wealth with those who need support.

A simple example proffered by the economist Kimberly McKnight. Her little daughter had a school friend failing in the bottom math set. McKnight proposed a simple deal: she would coach the girl as long as the child would make the appointments and do the work. In the bottom set, only 75% of the curriculum was taught – the assumption being that such children could never manage the whole syllabus. McKnight taught the whole syllabus. When the school blocked promotions into upper sets, McKnight negotiated every stage until the child reached the top set, getting an A in GCSE, an A* at A level before going on to university and, today, a Masters. This economist was putting her resources – knowledge, time, a confident understanding of the system – at the service of someone with none. Which of us cannot find ways to do likewise?

When I’m invited to meet amazing people or visit remarkable places, I now ask myself: who do I know to whom this invitation would be helpful? Educational? Inspiring? How do I share my privilege?

Everyone in this country gets an education but too many lack the experience and access they need to make good choices. One terrific woman I met years ago – Jane Delfino – worked with her local school to make sure that every single poor child visited design offices, media and software companies, law and accounting firms to see firsthand all the opportunities inside. Forging links between the school and local businesses, she determined that every child would leave school with the confidence to walk into any company, able to present themselves well. They couldn’t get this from their parents, any more than they could get help with their homework. But thanks to Jane, they gained access, experience, knowledge. Why did Jane have to make the running? Does your company do this? Do you take an interest? Do you care? Enough?

I’ve spent most of my life in business
so I think about this as simple business strategy: Where is the need? Where are the resources? And then there’s a third, important question: where do you have passion? The Venn diagram in which those three intersect is where you start: with the people whom you know have need, with the resources you can share, with the passion that is who you are. Why does passion matter? Because to be consistent, you will need to love what you commit to. There’s heat there. And energy. Stand by the vulnerable with your resources and your commitment. And when you’ve identified what you can do, tell people. It will give them hope and help them to see that they need not be bystanders. Good ideas are as contagious as bad ones.

Treating people as equals means seeing gender or religion. Imagine what would happen if every one of us gave up our seats to someone not like us.

You will argue that these are small steps – and you will be right. But each one of them can build social capital: the everyday norms of generosity, reciprocity and trust. And we need those now. Unlike financial capital, social capital doesn’t divide, it unites. It doesn’t fragment society but reinforces the bonds that make it robust and resilient. We need that investment now. We have always needed it and we always will.

You may be able to do more than this: house refugees, train the unskilled, care for the elderly, coach the unconfident or hire the more challenging intern. You may be able to do less than this and instead write cheques to homeless shelters and foodbanks, defend a woman’s right to choose, adopt a craftivist or support the survival of truthful journalism. But you will be able to do something and in whatever you choose to do, you will find that you are not powerless.

-00- We can do all of these things – and so many more – alone. But we all know that we have more impact at scale. Nowhere was that more obvious than last March, when companies as diverse as Apple, Unilever, Delta Airlines, Salesforce, Hilton, Walt-Disney and Coca-Cola came together to oppose legislation designed to discriminate against the LGBT community in Georgia, Indiana and North Carolina. You could argue – and many businesses did – that these corporations were economically self-interested and they were. But this initiative was a value statement, demanding equality for a large and diverse community. In rejecting discrimination, these companies were not seeking to dominate society but serving it. And that is the business of business.

The big black book of corporate scandals has added many chapters in recent years – VW, GM, Wells Fargo, BHS, Sports Direct. Like democracy itself, business has a significant repair job to do on its reputation. But in its capacity to stand as a bulwark against the racism, sexism and xenophobia lies its greatest opportunity.

When everyone matters, financial capital and social capital aren’t segregated but united. This will, however, require change.

Companies that reject hate- and fear-mongering, don’t invest in organizations that do. When LEGO withdraws from its relationship with the Daily Mail because of its hate-mongering, then IBM, Microsoft, Armani, Browns, Net-a-Porter, John Lewis, Virgin Media and Schroder’s must reconsider how coherent their financial and social aspirations really are. When Kellogg, Allstate Insurance and AppNexus withdraw from Breitbart News (sample headlines: Would you rather your child had feminism or cancer? Gabby Gifford: The Gun Control Movement’s Human Shield) then surely Uniqlo, Millenium Hotels and The Body Shop need to reflect on whom they think they serve.

This requires forging a new language of transparency and honesty. A language free of abuse and lies. If I deserve respect, and you do too, then we both deserve to be told the truth. And in environments where it is easy to tell the truth, where trust is high, ideas move fast. Trust is always more efficient than bureaucracy. Insight and creativity depend fundamentally on safety. So responsible leaders tell the truth – and create environments in which it is easy, commendable, even rewarded to be a truth teller. If, after 20 years of spin, this feels awkward, even dangerous, then that is a sign of progress.

Everyone is supposed to be equal before the law. Yet the fines levied against large corporations – for PPI, for LIBOR and ForEx manipulation, for environmental degradation, sexual harassment and discrimination – have become the price some companies pay to place themselves above the law. It’s no different from the millionaire who parks in the disabled bay. Fines erode social bonds, dividing the world into those who obey the law and those who can afford not to. Corporations that believe in equality, that seek to serve the society in which they are freely given...
a license to operate, cannot believe they are above the law.

So they must also pay tax, our simplest social affirmation of each other: the membership fee of a democratic society. When the roads run smoothly and the schools are full of energetic, optimistic teachers, and hospitals replete with doctors who aren’t exhausted or harassed, everybody thrives. When tax is paid on all jobs then everyone’s work counts. Zero hours contracts are just another form of tax avoidance. They were never about flexibility but about power: who has the power to avoid tax and who does not? In a world where everyone matters, everyone pays tax.

Inequality has frayed our social fabric and these measures are some of our means to repair it. But repair it we must. For the intelligent and automating technologies emerging over the next ten years will exert even greater pressure than we experience today. Climate change too will put every connection to the test. If the fabric holds, it will be only because everyone cares enough, and matters enough, to contribute.

A place in which everyone matters is called a society.

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No snowflake feels responsible for the avalanche.
–Voltaire

When I first read Hannah Arendt on the origins of criminal states, I imagined other countries, far away in time or place. I didn’t imagine my time, my place. Now I do. And my words feel inadequate. Arendt understood the power of willful blindness, its gravitational pull and the sanction it provides to those who do nothing. So we must start where we are. Do everything we can. Learn from our mistakes. And repeat. Because this is how complex systems like society change. Because this is how all creative work is done.

Pessimism is an indulgence for the powerful: if you believe everyone matters, optimism is a moral requirement. To make our work, we must believe in it, before knowing how fares. Many of us are among the best educated, most experienced, most connected, best resourced people in history. It cannot be that we have nothing with which to stand against the forces of nationalism, racism, misogyny and deceit. It cannot be that we lack resources with which to protect the people and the values we say we believe in. At the least, and to the last, we stand together with the poor and the vulnerable because everyone matters.

Will that be enough? No. It will be no more than a beginning. But the contingencies of history recede so rapidly from view that we forget how much of today’s normality was once implausible. Gay rights? In the middle of the AIDS epidemic, death felt closer than freedom. Votes for women? Stymied by war. Economic growth and prosperity in Viet Nam? A cruel joke in the 1960s. Norms change, not through a single policy, one great leader or a miraculous event. They change through the concatenation of what people do, how they think, how they vote, the gestures and friendships they make, the meetings they attend, the questions they ask. Conversation by conversation, gesture by gesture. Singly and through partnerships, alliances, arguments and rows. The world is changed when fallible people see the freedom they still have.

Defenseless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

~September 1939, W. H. Auden

Margaret Heffernan is an entrepreneur, CEO, writer and keynote speaker. Her motto: ‘Let’s not play the game, let’s change it.’
margaret.heffernan@jerichochambers.com
I am not yet 12 months into the position of Global Head of Tax for KPMG International, and find my views of global tax, or the globalization of tax, evolving quickly.

I happened to hear Nader Mousavizadeh, author and speaker on geopolitical and macroeconomic issues, and former special assistant to UN secretary general Kofi Annan, give a keynote address at an event in Prague recently. He made me stop and think about the realistic possibilities for more responsible tax policy at a global level and ask the question, “can we find harmony and cohesion in a world of fragmentation and competition?”

I came to this job from a UK and then Europe & Middle East role where, with other colleagues, I helped develop the idea of responsible tax for the common good. It was a process based on clear principles and an open and empathetic practice – involving and engaging with all key stakeholders no matter how critical they might have been. We actively embraced disagreement and dissent in order to build a new and more relevant dialogue.

Moving into the global role, the idea was broadly to see if the same process could be successfully replicated at a worldwide level – a difficult task given that there are no clear institutions to enact global legislation. But out of the OECD, the UN, WTO, World Bank etc., – something could be fashioned, given the will and ambition.

Step forward Nader Mousavizadeh who outlines what he calls Globalization 3.0. His thinking may be the key to unlocking the problem.

If Globalization 1.0 was “imperial”, best characterized by the British Empire, so Globalization 2.0 saw the emergence of the global institutions mentioned above, developed in the 20th century and whose growth accelerated after 1945.

Globalization 3.0 is a dynamic new phase that instead of integration and uniformity, suggests protectionism, populism and nationalism as the key drivers. In some ways, this is counter-intuitive. In the future, Mousavizadeh suggests there will be different models of globalization running in tandem in terms of values, power and interests. He suggests we could see, for example, the development of separate and competing internets, forms of cash transactions, trade and presumably tax – based on bilateral deals and fragmentation, not universal conformity.

One speech in and of itself might tell us little or a lot. But the observations of Mousavizadeh resonated with me precisely because of first Brexit, then the Apple/Ireland case, and lastly, the result of the recent US election. All feel relevant to the kind of globalization described by Mousavizadeh – as he says an “archipelago” of competing interests, in search of a new balance.

Does this mean, in a fragmented, competing world, that we cannot have global tax standards? Certainly not. But it does mean that we need to be aware of the emerging different models of globalization and the tensions between them.

Our world is much more unpredictable and complex, which is why some of the post-1945 legacy institutions seek renewal. Just as some forces are driving countries, continents and corporations apart, others, such as technology and a globalized sense of cosmopolitanism, are drawing us closer together. In an increasingly messy landscape, there are many polarities and paradoxes that our Global Responsible Tax goals must now seek to navigate.

Jane McCormick is Global Head of Tax, KPMG International, and a Jericho Chambers client. The global website for the Responsible Tax initiative is now live: https://responsibletax.kpmg.com/home

jane.mccormick@kpmg.co.uk
Your truth, my truth, the truth

By George Pitcher

Three decades ago, I defamed a knight of the realm in The Observer. We spent some expensive time taking counsel in chambers, where it was decided that we should settle out of court and apologise.

“But it’s true!” I wailed, meaning my story, which was now to be withdrawn as a lie.

My editor fixed me with a doleful stare. “George,” he said, “there’s your truth, there’s my truth, the truth.

A national newspaper may be an unusual place to receive an object lesson in moral philosophy. But that’s where I learned what the subjectivity and relativity of truth really mean in the cruel and real world. So allow me a smile of world-weariness when “post-truth” was voted Word of the Year for 2016 by Oxford Dictionaries.

I didn’t think I was telling porkies in my Observer piece. I do think the Brexit campaign of last summer had mendacity written through it like Brighton through rock and that Donald Trump must still be dabbing his scorched nethers in lanolin from the raging fire that consumed his pants.

But, then again, there’s my truth, there’s their truth and there’s the truth. This is not a new problem. When Pontius Pilate had the world’s worst day at the office, he famously asked: “What is truth?” We can’t know if he said it wistfully, staring into the middle distance, or rhetorically or facetiously. What we are told is that the alleged offender before him, Jesus of Nazareth, made no reply. We can reasonably assume that this isn’t because he didn’t know the answer.

The trouble is that we invariably don’t know the answer. Partly because of that relativity to which I refer, but more usually these days because of fake news, the internet’s polemical echo chambers, political impressionism trumping policy and, er, Trump. A tad patronisingly, this is called populism, as if this is what the populace ordered.

The thing is that a post-truth era in politics implies that it follows an era of truth. This, to coin a phrase, is not true. What’s actually happened is that we’ve moved straight from a pre-truth era to the post-truth. It’s precisely because we struggle so much with the Truth with a capital T that we go with what we can manage: both pre-truth and post-truth are manageable because they demand producers and a market, the pre-truth era characterised by spin and the post-truth by artifice.

The pre-truth era was apparent not only in politics, but also in the business world, where corporates and their PRs constructed the required narrative ahead of the event. Boardrooms and agencies echoed to the phrase “what is the story we want to tell?”

There’s nothing intrinsically wrong with that. We all plan our narratives and there’s no reason why corporates shouldn’t do the same, if they’re run by humans rather than bots. It’s also right that some of these narratives can be “made up”. Importantly, this isn’t lying; it’s more like a story that reveals a profounder truth about who we are.

No one believes the Oxo family were real, but they were a rich sauce reduced from reality and fiction, a recipe worth more than the sum of its ingredients, a nourishing paradigm, a story. And it’s the artistic mythos combined with the rational logos that makes our stories make sense. From Homer to Socrates, if you like.

Where pre-truth went wrong in politics (and actually in corporatism as well) is when the logos became indistinguishable from the mythos. Higher truth is revealed when they are in concert; if they become one, then there is no truth at all. New Labour did this in politics – rapid rebuttal became pre-buttal became pre-truth. And that gave us dodgy dossiers, the Iraq war and WMDs gone AWOL.

Pre-truth spawned its bastard child, post-truth. One neat reason for this is that if you treat your voters like idiots they’ll behave like idiots. Like all good mythos, there’s some truth in that, but it’s not quite right. As the former Labour campaigner Spencer Livermore writes in PR Week, politics is just a visible expression of consumerism, so voters behave as consumers. I’d go further: disillusioned consumers make erratic choices. So pre-truth politics gave us the climate in which post-truth could prosper.

Livermore notes that that this has alarming implications for corporates. The feral voter will turn on the corporates. I don’t much care about the reputation management opportunities that arise from this process, but I mind very much about how stories are told, because they reveal who we are and what our society is like (mythos and logos again).

I’d contend that we need to re-learn to tell our stories. Both personal and corporate (and by corporate I don’t just mean businesses but any corporate body, including political parties and the voluntary sector). We need to do that in a safe environment that incubates us from the habits of pre-truth.

Rowan Williams has written that what we might call proper truth “is not discovered merely by attending to the profundity of the heart’s affections; it asks to be tried at the bar of reason.” Fair enough, but it works the other way round too: the logos of reason is insufficient and truth must be won by the heart’s mythos too.

There has never been a greater opportunity for corporate storytelling than is offered by the digital era, all too often wrongly blamed, with its innocent
inanimate techno-tools, for the post-truth era. The internet has delivered corporates with the means of production to own their own media, rather than to pay expensive (and today largely useless) PRs to influence the mainstream media. But they are unaccustomed to the disciplines of storytelling, no thanks to pre-truth habits.

We need to re-learn those disciplines in order to develop better corporate habits and learn to tell our stories again. It can be done, but it’s not easy, because it’s not just about the stories. It’s how we tell ‘em.

George Pitcher was Founding Chairman of Jericho Chambers and is an Anglican Priest. His latest novel, A Dark Nativity, is currently crowdfunding via Unbound.

mail@georgepitcher.com
2017: The Year of Tomorrow – Telling the truth is a revolutionary act

By Robert Phillips

We are living through an interregnum, as my colleague Neal Lawson likes to call it. The old order is not quite dead. Nor has the new yet been born. Trust and truth are the interregnum’s most high-profile victims.

World leaders in business and politics continue to trumpet trust – fusing over the sobering findings of the Trust Barometer while spewing seemingly endless corporate promises from the mountaintop at Davos. The World Economic Forum remains a powerful symbol, bereft of self-awareness or irony, of the dying world of old elites – with leaders still obsessed by risk-averse, message-drone delivery often rich in platitudes and poor in substance.

The fight for truth, meanwhile, is likely to be the pre-eminent battleground of 2017 – framed early-on by President Trump’s constant attacks on the media and the farcical post-inauguration White House Press Conference hosted by Sean Spicer. Both men are profoundly guilty of ‘gaslighting’ but the fourth estate is not free from blame. The media’s own agenda is frequently as distorted by corporate imperative as a CEO’s selfish needs, an automaker’s emissions data, an NGO’s attack on the media and the farcical post-hostage deal that released the terrorist bomber from prison. The old order is not quite dead. Nor has the new yet been born. Trust and truth are the interregnum’s most high-profile victims.

“In a time of universal deceit”, wrote George Orwell, “telling the truth is a revolutionary act”.

There is a truth, for sure, in the Trump or Farage assertion that “power” needs to be returned to the people because the old system is broken and is not fair for all. In this sense, these men are revolutionaries. But then so were Hitler, Stalin and Castro. To replace one truth with another – one elite with another – and to establish a new tyranny of the minority does not provide the pathway to greater truth or trust. This seesaw of elites can only prolong the interregnum and delay or destroy any hope for the restoration of trustworthy behaviour.

The positivity of the Women’s March on Washington (and elsewhere) offers a hopeful pivot point from old to new. But, like Occupy before it, optimism will stultify if the new world fails to become rooted in actions, not words. We all need to be the change to end the interregnum.

Common Good should be the marchers’ lodestar. Common Good must be stripped bare of remaining political overtones, mischievously imposed by the free-marketers and libertarians of old. The public or common good is historically rooted in Thomasian and Greek philosophical thinking and should be celebrated as such. Common Good is not the property of the progressive left.

In the workplace, common good can prevail. CEO Paul Polman has called for Unilever to become the world’s largest NGO and, while he has his cynical detractors, he also has a point. Organisations such as his enjoy the privilege of collective power and scale and can properly stand for everything – openness, tolerance, fairness, equality and justice – that speaks to the common good. Common purpose can be defined, spoken and shared in a new negotiation between employees, customers and stakeholders, rather than conveniently bought off-the-shelf in an alternative excursion of conscience. The world urgently needs an enlightened network of corporations that prosecute the Polman ideal.

I am proud to be working on a number of initiatives that can help us all be the change and champion Common Good. The global Responsible Tax project recognises taxation as the social compact – at the heart of the relationship between government, business and society. It understands that there are no easy answers – and demonstrates real courage to look and listen beyond conventional echo chambers. A corporation, in this case KPMG, is rightly playing an activist role because “men on mountaintops, shouting through megaphones” is not the way to find a fairer tax system for all. By embracing dissent and demonstrating vulnerability, greater trustworthiness is emerging. This thinking runs to the heart of the Jericho model.

The Future of Work programme challenges the (misplaced) orthodoxy of shareholder value and champions human value instead. A community of over 700 has been convened to celebrate the human at work – as evidenced by last October’s Big Tent and its optimistic outlook for a progressive, human future. The community, set to grow in 2017, again has the bravery to develop radical new thinking around social inclusion, lifelong skills, risk & reward and to question the fetishisation of Google and the near-religious fervour that is building around technology and automation.

The Future of Work programme is determined not to give up on humans as little more than “bad robots” or to simply retreat as old industries inevitably disappear. Diversity of thought is as important as diversity of gender, orientation or race. None of us should be fearful of embracing brave new ideas – for example, banishing crass and competitive measurement systems; placing oracy alongside numeracy in the schoolroom; and promoting a Citizen’s Income or universal basic wage. The new is desperate to be born and dynamic thinking is needed to facilitate the birth.

CIPD – originator of the Future of Work is Human – is of course one of many professional bodies living in the disrupted world of the interregnum.

RICS is also asking important questions around the nature of Public or Common Good, as it approaches its 150th anniversary in 2018. Like many organisations born of
the Victorian enlightenment, it is thinking
through what its original public advantage/
public interest/ usefulness charter looks
like and means in the context of the 21st
century and the extraordinary challenges
facing professional bodies and organisations,
together with cities and the built environment,
today. Cities sit at the epicentre of many
critical global issues – migration, affordability,
shelter, resource scarcity, carbon reduction.
It is no accident that cities are themselves
everyday crucibles of the common good.

2017 needs to be a year of activism and action.
We all need to be participants and march
(metaphorically) in our workplaces as well as
the malls. Being by-standers is no longer an
option if we are to salvage something from the
crash of truth and trust. If you want to join us
and help negotiate a more optimistic future,
the time is now. As these three initiatives show,
you will not be alone.

Robert Phillips is the co-founder of Jericho
Chambers; author of Trust Me, PR is Dead
(Unbound, 2015); and a Visiting Professor at
Cass Business School, University of London.

robert.phillips@jerichochambers.com
On 21st January, several million people (and counting) marched through streets around the world protesting the Trump presidency. While women’s issues and equality were at the fore, concerns about other cracks in the system were also voiced: the unequal paying of taxes, climate change, refugees.

We all know things aren’t quite right at the moment, and we probably all have lists of policies we would rather see governments implementing. But we don’t know how to get there. Beyond marching, few of us, if any, know what we can do about it.

I was once in a privileged position to ask Bill Gates, the world’s richest man, about the underlying problem of global inequality. His answer was simple: “Well, I can’t do anything about the global economy.”

Is there really nothing he can do?

The difference between a mere ‘progressive’ and an ‘activist’ is that the latter sees a way to bring ideas into practice, and then does something about it. We all have agency to change the status quo, only sometimes it’s hard to put into action. We often bury our head in the sand because it’s uncomfortable to do otherwise. I’m fortunate to be among a community of activists and change agents who feel they do have the power to change outcomes for the better. Sometimes we’re successful, sometimes not.

But whereas I can comfortably see myself as an activist or campaigner, and have ‘kindred spirits’ for support, many people in the corporate sector don’t. Those who seek change inside companies often find themselves alone, constrained by business models, shareholders, or risk-averse leadership. Those who want to see more transformative change often end up simply jumping ship in frustration (if they can afford to), or risking their careers as whistleblowers. Others simply give up, parking their political and ‘values’ hat outside the office door, leaving their activism to don a pink ‘pussy’ hat over a weekend protest.

If we want to bring about real change, one that counters the unfairness that has given rise to Brexit and Trump, then we need to get beyond armchair campaigning. We need to go beyond the comfort zone of online petitions, and we need to stop taking our values hat off when we get to work.

I was inspired by Ikea’s recent refusal to invest in renewables in the UK, thereby taking a stand against the government backtracking on pledges to create a favourable environment for green energy. Cynics might see this as a step too far: business should stay out of politics. But companies have never shied away from ‘activism’ when it comes to policies benefitting their shareholders. Why is it not the norm for company ‘activism’ to help society or the environment? Activist companies (and the leaders within them) should feel equally comfortable being vocal about issues affecting workers and their environment.

Traditional civil-society activists cannot change things alone. Until we all find agency – in our private, working and political lives – the leadership void will continue to be filled by the likes of Trump and Farage.

We need to know more about the processes that turn values into practical action and bring about change. The first step is to support each other in finding the ways and means to make changes happen. How can people inside companies think of themselves as activists? How do processes of change gain critical mass? What tools can be provided to support change-makers?

Deborah is a partner at Jericho Chambers, working across civil society. She also writes for the Guardian on international development and civil society issues.

deborah.doane@jerichochambers.com
Resistance is fertile

By Margaret Heffernan

Washington DC is a dreary city. Even at the best of times, it looks and feels as romantic and inspiring as a filing cabinet: grey, angular, heavy and lifeless. On ordinary days, it is either too cold or too hot, or the air quality too poor to stay outside for long. The vast stone buildings often stand lifeless, tidy but inanimate.

But not today. Today is the first time I have ever seen this city come to life. It bubbled with colour, alive with banners and balloons, hats, scarves and flags. On the jammed city metro, the trains heaved with people wearing pink knitted ‘pussy’ hats and carrying banners. The slogans covered everything: healthcare, guns, Muslim registers, immigration, abortion, equal rights, climate change, better education, sexual harassment, fair pay, civility, respect, bad hair, bad manners, homelessness, corruption, deceit. Bad-ass moms had come to DC to be heard and you could hear them as joyous shouts rippled across the vast concrete boulevards.

“This,” they chanted, “is what democracy looks like!” It looked young and old, able-bodied and in wheelchairs, Jewish, Muslim, British, French, Canadian, gay, heterosexual, transgender, nurses, scientists, letter carriers, lawyers. At first it was hard to see how many we were. The sound we made was immense but the flat hard city made it hard to see how far we stretched. After standing patiently for a long time, people started to move, eager to see where the end was. Was there an end to the colourful, inchoate but endlessly polite and calm crowd? We heard there were speeches but couldn’t hear them. We were told there were celebrities but we didn’t really care. What mattered was that preparations to celebrate Trump’s presidency were now being erased by thousands of wildly different people united by their passion for fairness, for joy and for hope.

Diane had come because her 90-year-old doctor had given her his air miles and asked her to march for him. His daughter had given her a bed for the weekend and at the airport, she bought a copy of the Constitution. The bookseller, she said, told her that everyone was doing that today. On the plane from San Francisco, both cabins were crowded with women, proudly sporting their pink knitted hats, making friends with strangers through common cause. John, a schoolteacher, came because he wanted to stand with women, to make sure we knew that Trump did not stand for him. A lawyer from Ohio told anyone that asked that her district alone had voted for Hillary; she seemed eager to reclaim her state’s reputation. So many parents and children. So many whose eyes and faces seemed to recall the 60s with quizzical sadness: really, here, again? We thought this was done. But it is not done.

Away from the euphoria and kindness of the crowd – their jubilant support when they learned I had come from England – I wondered how long this spirit can keep us going, pushing, arguing, insisting on a better government. What gave me hope was the immense sense of unity, something the women’s movement had so sorely lacked in the past. If we can join forces with all races and classes and identities, if we can truly galvanise around the deepest meaning of equality and the finest forms of hope, then perhaps at very long last the women’s movement will gain the impetus, focus and joy it has always needed. Perhaps we can finally make America think again. And think better.

So many people turned up, a formal march became impossible: everywhere you looked there were colourful protesters. When I finally wandered away and the crowds thinned, I passed people leaving their hotels in more formal attire: dark cashmere or mink coats. These were the Trump celebrants who had come to rejoice, now overwhelmed by a livelier, brighter crowd. Colour in itself became an identifier: a pink scarf, pink shoes provoked smiles between strangers. Where there was lack of colour, the atmosphere was more hostile. Outside of Trump’s hotel, its lavish entrance spoiled with police cars and barricades, a marcher complained that taxpayers’ money should be used to protect the President’s business and I wondered who would wish to stay there. Near my own more modest (and friendly) hotel, souvenir sellers were packing away their Make America Great Again inventory, ceding to the sellers of Love Trumps Hate buttons and pink pussy hats. Gradually, the march receded. By K Street – the epicentre of corporate lobbyists – it was gone. And I wondered how many lawyers were now changing the guard, the Obama loyalists no longer with clout, friends of the new regime moving in. Colour seemed to drain from the city as its grey concrete office buildings and brown grass waited for the furore of protest to pass and the bureaucracy of power struggles to resume.

But the next morning, women caught each other’s eyes and smiled. We could see each other, in a way we never had before. We had seen how many of us there were, how many allies we had. We saw that we weren’t alone and that we stand for the majority of people in the United States who believe in equality. It is a central, foundational belief in this country and it remains galvanising, inspiring and uniting.
Whether it has such huge rhetorical pull in the UK, I am not sure. Do we believe everyone is equal, really? Is that even possible in a monarchy? Mrs. Thatcher famously believed that “nations depend for their health – economically, culturally and psychologically – upon the achievement of a comparatively small number of talented and determined people.” The natural corollary of this is that it only small number we need concern ourselves with. She never seemed to ask what became of everyone else. Boris Johnson is no different, in his belief that some ‘cornflakes’ naturally rise to the top of the packet – and the rest don’t really count. We persist in dividing people into goats and sheep, the talented and the rest, the high potentials and the no potentials. It is, as the Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck told me last week, so much easier that way; we like it because it allows us to be lazy. We do not need to think about those who do not share our gifts, our opportunities, our luck. But it also wastes everyone’s opportunity for growth, economical, cultural, psychological – and political. We need everyone because everyone matters.

I have always argued that the failure of the women’s movement to achieve true recognition – equal pay, equal opportunity, equal access to being taken seriously, free from abuse and marginalisation – has stemmed from our inability or unwillingness to connect with other, equally marginalised and trivialised groups: the disabled, minorities and immigrants. I stopped going to International Women’s Day events that were full of women talking to women about women. And I noted that the few companies that had made any headway with diversity had overcome those divisions. If I take one strong belief away from this march, it is that women will not succeed alone. No one ever really succeeds alone. The true measure of a society isn’t the good fortune of the few but the everyday experiences of the many. If women can unite around that, if we can find common cause with others, nothing can stop us.

Margaret Heffernan is an entrepreneur, CEO, writer and keynote speaker. Her motto: ‘Let’s not play the game, let’s change it.’

margaret.heffernan@jerichochambers.com
Thank you

Contact Robert
Email: robert.phillips@jerichochambers.com
Phone: +44 (0)77 85 25 45 44

Contact Christine
Email: christine.armstrong@jerichochambers.com
Phone: +44 (0)207 253 6616

12a Charterhouse Square, London EC1M 6AX
+44 (0)207 253 6616
hello@jerichochambers.com
@jerichochambers

www.jerichochambers.com