

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Reflections on the Current Climate – A Role for Third Siders?

John Sturrock (Core Solutions Group) · Sunday, March 29th, 2015

This follows my blog last month about mediation and sustainability. In the run up to the vital COP meeting in Paris in December, what role for mediators and other third siders?

What should we say?

I started this piece a few weeks ago with these words: “From my balcony at nearly 2,000 metres, I can see seven vapour trails above, and as I look to the west, several more. The sky is a patchwork of misty white lines on clear blue. Below, the mountains are also a patchwork, this time a mottled white and grey. Even at this altitude in January, the snowfall is irregular and quite a few slopes are exposed. The main ski runs are open though, and that is a relief. We’ve paid a little extra to come high up in the Alps so that we would be guaranteed snow to ski. It’s our first ski trip in four years and we want to make the best of it.

I can’t help but ponder on the connection between those vapour trails and the absence of seasonal snow. Intellectually, we know there is a problem with our climate. It’s been coming for years. The science is more and more clear. In fact, a news item caught my eye on the Internet as I searched for the weekend football results. “2014: Hottest year on record”. Climatologists and others agree that global warming poses a clear and present danger to civilisation, an “absolutely unprecedented emergency”. And time for serious action is apparently very short, in “Decade Zero”.

We are on a short holiday with our adult children. One of the joys is hearing them talk about their dreams and ambitions. But what sort of pretence are we engaging in? Dad going on about climate change, and the threats to the very fabric of society as we know it, has become a bit old hat and can strike a depressing note when we want to enjoy our time together. What should we say?”

Pondering on capitalism

Some time later, I can’t stop the pondering. I have been reading Naomi Klein’s latest magnum opus: *This Changes Everything: Capitalism versus The Climate*. In a sense, she is telling me nothing I didn’t know already but the clarity and precision with which she joins up the dots is compelling. There is effectively a conspiracy of vested interests. Ah, but she’s a left-winger? Anti-capitalism? Maybe she is on a crusade. I pick up (or rather open up on my I-Pad Kindle) Jeffrey Rifkin’s *The Zero Marginal Cost Society*. He makes the same points about the eclipse of capitalism, but from a completely different angle. **Mediator’s reflection:** There are often many ways to approach problems.

Klein argues that the major corporate interests, an elite minority, are well aware of the threats posed by climate change. Threats not just to our future as humans but to the deregulated capitalist model and the minority's own ability to continue to generate profits and pursue its core cultural narrative under the present economic paradigm. A paradigm which both sustains them and is a major cause of the wider problem, based as it is on "extractivism", or the burning of fossil fuels. And a paradigm, based on unsustainable growth, which is winning. Klein describes it as "systematic sabotage". Climate negotiations have stuttered while free trade and the corporate globalisation process has thrived and prevailed. "Our economic system and our planetary system are now at war," she concludes. But the laws of nature won't change. ...we "need an entirely new economic model". **Mediator's reflection:** A fundamental and classic clash of interests....

Rifkin sets out his stall: "The entropic bill for the Industrial Age has arrived. The accumulation in carbon dioxide emissions in the atmosphere from burning massive amounts of carbon energy has given rise to climate change and the wholesale destruction of the Earth's biosphere, throwing the existing economic model into question. The field of economics, by and large, has yet to confront the fact that economic activity is conditioned by the laws of thermodynamics. The profession's glaring misunderstanding of its own subject is what's forcing a rethinking of the paradigm..." **Mediator's reflection:** A need for complete re-orientation of approaches – and acknowledgment of the difficulties that will create....

Rifkin points to an extraordinary ("unprecedented – and unimaginable") concentration of power and wealth in just a few corporate hands, built significantly on extracting and refining localised fossil fuels. He explains how this state of affairs arose. It is a logical extension of the economic structures we have created over the centuries, particularly in the First and Second Industrial Revolutions. It brought benefit to the lives of millions of consumers in industrialised economies. With it (as with socialism) came a command and control, centralised style of management – and bureaucracies. These powerful interests tend to block further progress in order to protect their own capital value. Klein describes the oil and gas industry as the richest and most powerful the world has ever known, and it is the subject of the Stern Review observation that the failure to charge the industry for its disposal of waste "represents the greatest market failure the world has ever seen." And now Oxfam report that, very soon, just 1% of the world's population could control over half of its wealth. Remarkable. **Mediator's reflection:** Strongly embedded interests....and an apparently significant power imbalance. A key will be to identify underlying needs and concerns.

Most extraction must stop?

At a time when governments are calling for measures to shore up the oil industry and protect it from falling prices, little is said of another report (from the journal, Nature) that tells us that we need to leave unextracted most of the world's present and still to be discovered fossil fuel reserves if dangerous global warming is to be avoided: "Over 80% of coal, 50% of gas and 30% of oil reserves are "unburnable" under the goal to limit global warming to no more than 2C". This point, in the sense of the lack of future value in currently highly valued assets, was recently touched on also by the Governor of the Bank of England, and nicely sums up the Catch 22 situation described by Klein: the war between our economics and survival. **Mediator's reflection:** There seems to be real value in reality testing. What if...?

The co-author of the UKERC report on unburned carbon, Christophe McGlade, says: "Policy makers must realise that their instincts to completely use the fossil fuel within their own countries are wholly incompatible with their commitments to the 2degree C goal. If they go ahead with

developing their own resources, they must be asked which reserves elsewhere should remain unburnt in order for the carbon budget not to be exceeded". George Monbiot wrote recently in *The Guardian*: "Researching Don't Even Think About It, which I see as the most important book published on climate change in the past few years, George Marshall discovered that there has not been a single proposal, debate or even position paper on limiting fossil fuel production put forward during international climate negotiations. From the very outset fossil fuel production lay outside the frame of the discussions and, as with other forms of socially constructed silence, the social norms among the negotiators and policy specialists kept it that way. I would guess that it is not altogether inconvenient for governments to ignore the role of fossil fuel companies in causing climate change." **Mediator's reflection:** There is a serious need to challenge some of the underlying assumptions and modes of working here.

The Internet of Things

But, Rifkin argues, it cannot last. Striking a different tone from Klein, he sees real change. The "Collaborative Commons" is coming (or returning, as it predates both the capitalist market and representative democracy); indeed is here already, engaging billions of people. The "Internet of Things (IoT)", namely advances in energy generation (mainly in renewables), hi-tech communication (for example MOOCs) and the means of production (or "logistics", such as 3D printing), will provide the operating platform for a fundamental paradigm shift from capitalism/corporatism to open-source collaboration, innovation and peer to peer interdependence, with a wide (continental and global) distribution of production and services in a near zero marginal cost society, an economy of abundance rather than scarcity. And wealth will no longer be about financial reward for the few but about enhancing the common good, advancing the social well-being of humanity. Social capital rather than market capital. Sustainable quality of life rather than self-interested accumulation of wealth. The so-called "third sector" will be the dominant force in organising economic life this century. Klein is on similar lines when she argues for a worldview that sees nature, other nations and our own neighbours "not as adversaries, but rather as partners in a grand project of mutual reinvention." **Mediator's reflection:** New and creative options are emerging with potential overlapping of interests.

Rifkin again: "What makes the IoT a disruptive technology in the way we organize economic life is that it helps humanity reintegrate itself into the complex choreography of the biosphere, and by doing so, dramatically increases productivity without compromising the ecological relationships that govern the planet. Using less of the Earth's resources more efficiently and productively in a circular economy and making the transition from carbon-based fuels to renewable energies are defining features of the emerging economic paradigm. In the new era, we each become a node in the nervous system of the biosphere." **Mediator's reflection:** We'll need help to underpin these ideas with some objective criteria.

So, it seems, Klein and Rifkin converge: the combination of taking necessary steps to cope with climate change, and this fundamental shift in economics and society, will push capitalism (or rather the making of significant profits by way of "economic growth") to the margins. It is a turning point in the human journey, says Rifkin. **Mediator's reflection:** It is often our job, in helping others with multiple interests, to make the seemingly unpalatable palatable and the apparently undoable doable.

So?

Wilful blindness? Denial? Hypocrisy? Delusion...? George Marshall likens our “collective social norm of silence” about climate change to our response to that other great taboo, death. He suggests that they have more in common than we care to admit. Where does all of this leave us? What should we do? Are we all complicit? What about those of us who don’t – or can’t – walk our talk? What about those of us (like me) who fly, ski, pontificate....? Maybe Paul’s Biblical insights in Romans offer comfort: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.” **Mediator’s reflection:** A familiar refrain applicable to many of those with whom we work...and applicable to many of us. But, at the same time, many of us hope to make a difference.

A role for the “third side”?

All of this leads finally to a reflection on the role of the “third side”, those of us without direct, vested, interests in any engagement. William Ury’s classic work of that name points to the role played by third siders in human history from the ancient tribal functions of the village elders to the modern role of mediators and other intermediaries. These need not be only individuals. Often the collective or the community can play a role, society itself as a force for change or reconciliation between apparently conflicting, polarising, world views. The Collaborative Commons: maybe that is where our energies should be applied?

The BBC’s Robert Peston, commenting on the Oxfam report, makes the point that, ultimately, it is in our collective interests to address these issues. Mutuality requires a different approach. We are all in this together. Even the wealthiest 1%, unless they are hermetically sealed, are at risk. Third Siders, with no immediate interest in the outcome, are often able to help those with vested interests, who are trapped by their own biases, to see other perspectives and to identify where the real interests lie, even if counter-intuitive. Writing in another age, Bertrand Russell observed that: “The only thing that will redeem mankind is cooperation”.

In *Super Cooperators*, Martin Nowak also concludes that there is only one way forward: “The biggest issues of all – saving the planet and maximising the collective lifetime of the species *Homo sapiens* –require novel ways for us to work in harmony. If we are to continue to thrive, we have but one option. We now have to manage the planet as a whole. If we are to win the struggle for existence, and avoid a precipitous fall, there’s no choice but to harness this extraordinary creative force. We now have to refine and to extend our ability to cooperate. We must become familiar with the science of cooperation. Now, more than ever, the world needs Super Cooperators.” In other words, the world needs us, mediators and other third-siders.


Naïve? Perhaps, but what is the alternative? Nelson Mandela is a useful guide: “It always seems impossible until it is done”.

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