
COSTING LONDON'S GROWTH 07/10/14 – Q&A session.

Speakers

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ROGER MARTIN(**RM**), Chair, Population Matters

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IAN CHRISTIE(**IC**), Research Fellow, Sustainable Lifestyles Research Group, Univ. of Surrey

DAVID FELL(**DF**), Economist, Brook Lyndhurst and London Remade

Question.

A question to Roger Martin – you mentioned that the British population might grow by 20 million by 2050. Where is that population growth coming from? Then, a general question to the panel. I am personally deeply, deeply pessimistic about changing peoples' attitudes. I think most of us are greedy and selfish by our nature. It is not necessarily a criticism of humanity. I think it is just a fact of who we are - we care about ourselves and members of our family and that is about it. Personally, I'm totally signed up to what we are talking about but - one of you mentioned about the fact that 2 or 3 people out of 100 really care - I'd say it is potentially much less than that. If we are all so greedy and selfish - and I think everyone in the room would agree with that – is the solution not less of the carrot and more of the stick? So, if we are not inclined to change our lifestyles in any particular way, do we not just require governments to say no - we are going to increase the cost of flights or whatever it is and forcibly change our lifestyle?

Panel Responses:

RM – That figure comes from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) – that colossal range forecast for 2080 and the 20 million range forecast for 2050 are simply ONS limits of their projections. The last response said that direct migration is only 40 % of the increase, if you include the higher activity of women born abroad it is 60%. And the rest is excess of births over deaths. We are just below the replacement of that rate on births - about 1.9 children per woman. But, people are living longer at the moment. Therefore, each year there are fewer deaths and therefore more births. So, that's roughly the situation: about two thirds direct and indirect immigration. And the remaining third is actually an increase locally.

DF – Firstly, on greed and selfishness. Most people associate, in my experience, greed and selfishness with this kind of red tooth and claw Darwinian competition. But really, kindness and collaboration also evolved under exactly the same Darwinian pressures. I see no reason at all why they should not be prioritized in our dialogue, in our actions, in our language and our stories. So, I think it is an assumption that we are greedy and selfish. Simply carrot and stick: yeah, there are occasions where I agree with you. There used to be a wealth tax in this country - 95% taxation of the highest income, goods deemed to be only available to the wealthy had an actual tax on them. VAT still has a residue of that - negative VAT on certain kinds of goods. I don't think it's sustainable in the long run. It comes back to the 2 or 3 - if we can get to 20% of the population. And we will.

KT – Firstly, the problems are just way too massive to not use both - I would be grasping at every stick and absolutely every carrot I can find and very quickly. We are bumping up against those tipping points. Everyone is a victim. I think there is a lot to be said for creating enabling conditions and the way that our economies operate and the government's role in showing that - through things like systemic poverty and pressures to consume through status anxiety. Things like type of work, people being overworked and then being pushed into taking time saving but high carbon shortcuts. Remember that diagram I mentioned before with all the hundreds and thousands, all the sprinkles on top. There are a gazillion policy changes and lifestyle changes that all need to happen at once to get us into that doughnut. And to start saying it or we're going to be selling ourselves short. Through interaction and then inter-linkages between policy changes and then what people can step into. So, people adopting say more carbon lite activities. Say on their Saturday morning kicking a football around the park instead of going shopping. There is a lot of policy that could enable that. We do what we can where we can. That sense of discomfort that people are increasingly feeling about unsustainable choices is a shift and is something I notice more and more now. I do buy it.

IC - On greed and selfishness, I think if we start from that point, then okay there is some evidence for that but there is actually just as much evidence, in fact I think more evidence, for human being going the other way - collaborative capacities. That means we need to have policies. I think policy makers are beginning to come around to this which means, as Katherine said, much more enabling. There is a lot of work coming out of America at the moment on the idea of collective value, which is based on bottom up, grassroots initiatives taking an issue exactly as David said and being enabled to be their best at it by policy, which is not directed.

The other reason I am optimistic is that there is now a breach opening up within capitalism itself. I am more optimistic than David about companies like Unilever. Some of those corporations are acting out of self-interest, sheer fear of the consequences of the worst case scenarios being realized. They are now looking into asking for the stick to be applied to them by government. They want it. They are in battle with other fossilized capitalists who don't want that. So there is a very interesting breach opening up within the capitalist system.

Comment.

I was really just going to try and raise an observation that I made during the speeches and prior to the speeches. Which was that we're talking about the wealthy 1%, however many people there are, who hold the most wealth in the world. Now, firstly these people, the wealth that they hold is essentially power – power over the powerless, for want of a better word. And what drives them to be wealthy, to be powerful, is I think intrinsic to the human species itself. So, if we were to get rid of these wealthy, powerful people or make them almost irrelevant. I still think 50 years on you would be looking at the same thing again and I wonder whether if we are just fated to go down the same route again. I don't think it is a question. I just throw that in.

Comment

If I've understood the previous point ...the idea that removing one hierarchy would necessarily mean another just sweeps in and takes over is disputed.

Comment

I think it is our behavior. If you look at Biology, look at behavioral science - it is our behavior.

Comment

There is another perspective: it is the system

Comment

But we generated the system! We are here, I suppose, like the followers looking at the leaders in this scenario. There are people who like to lead and there are people who prefer to follow. There are more often than not more people who follow than lead. That natural dichotomy between the leaders and the followers just lends itself to leaders and followers.

Comment

One way of looking at it is there are different kinds of leaders. So, maybe we would evolve in a way where we value different things. Power can inevitably corrupt. I think it is also a huge psychological transformation that needs to occur. There has been a lot written about humanity currently functioning at a stage of adolescence and being essentially nihilistic and narcissistic (adolescents have good traits too!). You know really quite self-serving and destructive. But yet - I'm a therapist myself - thinking about adults and adulthood. One of the things that I think signifies progression into adulthood that we all struggle with I think is the ability to take responsibility for oneself and for others and the environment that we live in. I think for us to be able to do that there is a lot of psychological work that we need to do as well, that needs to accompany this and that is perhaps where the social movement and those kind of aspects have real weight as well because it is not one thing or another. So I guess the process of transformation and this development and progression we might want to see is really multi-faceted and comes down to looking at how we are parented and dealing with our own childhood issues. There is this part of all of us that is greedy and selfish and we all have that. Nobody is one thing or the other. It's looking at that ugly part of ourselves and going well, we're there but what are we going to do about it. That's just my thoughts.

Comment

Just wondering...that we are so far into overshoot and we're so lacking in sustainable government or global government mechanisms, that we can only hit a great fatal catastrophe.

Question.

I guess I count as a policy maker. I was Ken Livingstone's Deputy Mayor for several years. I was very involved in the congestion charge but my background is basically community action. The congestion charge in central London was in the face of fantastic hostility from the press. And the majority consulted didn't want it. We would not have done it unless there had been a progressive minority who were behind it. It does seem to mean that leadership is very important. If you can build up enough of the water-butts people, hairdresser consultants you can actually then allow the policy makers to make radical decisions. They really do influence

behavior and of course once you influence behavior you influence attitudes. So, I think the congestion charge was an interesting example of that. What do you think about the idea of a progressive minority as a force for action?

Question

I brought along my dissertation tonight because I was writing there about steady state economies. I've contrasted there a sort of ecological emancipatory approach which took in steady state economies. I was glad to see that Katherine talked about some of the things I talked about especially criticism of GDP. I also looked at ecological traditions which I called ecological modernization which was an attempt to persuade the government and policy makers to do something about ecology. We seem to have tonight a bit of a debate about big business. Somebody mentioned the position of Unilever. There is a bit of debate there whether Unilever is going to be not so much a decisive minority but a decisive economic interest. This shift in capitalism: can you explain a bit more about why Unilever should come over to this?

KT

On the first question – is this challenge too massive, that we are hitting those planetary boundaries too hard, too fast? I think the work of Paul Gilding speaks to that quite nicely and his argument would be - I'll get it wrong! – is that basically it is going to take this huge disruption to force us into the change we need. My concern is that if we let it get that bad is that – as we are already seeing this around the world - the poorest, more vulnerable people would be hit hardest and hit first and did the least damage to cause the impact on the planet. I think if we give up, to the extent that it is all going to hit catastrophe then we are going to see a world of much more profound inequality. People with resources buying to hoard etc. in a literal and metaphorical sense. So that is why this sense of urgency. We need every hairdresser, every taxi-driver, every person who is an agent of change to be talking about the extent of change that we need across every level.

Which brings us to the second question, which was really helpful - the idea we can go beyond populism? It brings all sorts of questions about how our democratic institutions are set up in ways that act against that sort of leadership, to step away from the focus groups. My concern would be that something like the congestion charge and the leadership you were able to show is perhaps the exception that proves the rule. And so I very much agree with you that we need it. Particularly at the nation state level, nation states seem to be lagging on this. We see great action at the city level, great action at regional level, some really interesting stuff happening there by enlightened businesses. Then you have to ask that question about what is broken about our democracy in that. The question just raises more questions which can potentially seem overwhelming.

In terms of business I am a big believer in businesses as agents of change, both good and bad. Oxfam has a good and very long relationship with Unilever which we have been able to use to do a lot of good but also retain that right to challenge them as and when, often very, very critically. I sense that we need a new sort of business - that is not about private ownership or profits. We need much more – to use an ugly term - pro-social business models. I'm sure you all know what I mean, we clearly need a better term - things like cooperatives, community interest companies, benefit corporations, social entrepreneurs, various kinds of not for profits. So I think we need to look at those sorts of businesses models and again they maybe won't be recognizable to the sorts of business that we have now.

IC

I'll just say something quickly about the overshoot issue, that we are too far into overshoot. If we did all the right things we would never know the level of threat we managed to avoid. That is because all the threats we face are in the future, they are all modeled, all based on scenarios. We have no reason to assume that we are already too far into overshoot. It would always be early enough to do some good and therefore we should do it. I don't think we could possibly know enough in advance of the action that we need to take. We should just go ahead and take it and not worry about exactly how far we are across particular planetary boundaries. They are a useful guide, they are a compass tool.

The point about progressive minorities is completely right. In democracies very few people care enormously about most policy agendas. So, if you have a substantial group – 25- 30% who really do care they can actually shift everyone else, provided there are not too many vested interests, which can veto plans. Cities have got an advantage – they don't have to aggregate as many interests as nation states do. This is why nation states are blocked apparently. They are partly owned by corporations, they are partly blocked by the fact that so many people now in prosperous countries have so much to lose. They are very cautious about reform. There is much more room for maneuver in corporations and in cities. That is where the action is, particularly radical thoughts on climate change. That doesn't mean to say that nation states cannot move. What it does mean to say is that they won't move until they have got permission to move from a sufficient groundswell of action which I think it will be at the city level and from corporations that start demanding that nation states act. A good book to read on this came out last year by the American academic Ben Barber a book called: *If Mayors Ruled the World*. It is a review of all the fantastic work that is being done in cities around the world. Far in advance of what nation states can do. He has a fantastic proposal for a world parliament of Mayors. If they started doing it, it might propel nation states to start competing and catch up. A point about whether big business can really fit into a shift in capitalism. We don't know, we've got no idea. Tim Jackson would be the first to say he doesn't know what a modern capitalism will be like. That is why we are doing the research. Even when we have done the research we still won't know for sure until people start trying. What I find fascinating is that many big companies look like they are taking the issue seriously. They will often radically review their business model in order to cope with what would amount to a rebooting of capitalism. That is the language they use. Now, why should Unilever be taken seriously? I think they and some of the companies who are talking in this radical way have got one thing they have in common: they are starting to feel the effects of climate disruption, up close and personal. They see no way of carrying on their business in a climate disrupted world. The other issue is that their future market growth will be in the global south. You cannot run those product markets in the same way as you've done in the West. So, they know they have to change radically. Whether they will change radically enough is the sixty trillion dollar question. I don't know the answer. I am not cynical about the shifts and the discussions taking place at the top of organizations like Unilever.

DF

I'm not cynical - I am just deeply suspicious. On overshoot, I think I'm pretty worried actually. I'm most worried about phosphate. I saw a presentation by some Scandinavian chemists who have done hard work on that and are suggesting there is no substitute for phosphate. Survival on the basis of substitution can last us for however many years but there is no substitute for phosphate.

The point about progressive minorities – brilliant – I think it takes us to the next step in the sense that I think it is a very difficult position vis a vis mainstream parties possibly because they have become so trapped by the global media, by the internet, trolls. And their memberships are so small that they are dependent on focus group thinking about peoples' behaviors. So, they have lost touch. They seem more scared of doing that much. In which case we have to see it on the basis of the progressive minority you describe. The water butt people are a precursor to that. We are in a bit of a cycle where the political system has really become very weak. We therefore need civic action before the political can pick up again and do what it should.

On Unilever: to use an example -this is my kind of anxiety stroke political perspective rather than cynicism. In the good old days of waste management circa 1998 when the UK was at the forefront of the EU league table for domestic waste recycling. During the subsequent five years we saw an enormous increase in the number of not for profits, community led organizations, small community scale start doing this recycling. There was an enormous surge of optimism at that time around overhauling how waste resources were managed and strategies to support it. All that stuff and all of them were eaten alive by a relatively small number of big corporates, three or four years later! So it is not necessarily whether businesses think they can transform themselves but their predatory behavior during the transformation period. If you come up with a good idea they can see it, they will either copy it or they will do it more cheaply than you or buy in. Make you an offer you can't refuse. They will literally snuff out the true potential or the seeds of the new economy or cut it down before it has a chance to grow.

JB

I agree pretty much with everything that has been said, particularly on overshoot. I think one of the issues is it is very easy to go into overshoot – like with a bank balance we can always go into debit there and build up a debt. Talking about businesses in particular, I did some work on peak oil, looking at the oil crunch which came about at the same time as the credit crunch was in the news everywhere. Virgin, Stagecoach and other big transport companies were really starting to hit buffers in terms of their key resource was, they needed to move people around. Some of these limits we were talking about were soft limits. Some of these limits are hard limits. Ecological footprints is a hard limit. It might be awfully hard to imagine but it is literally what we have coming in compared to what we have going out. It is a limit we can't get around. So, that's my point on the overshoot. In terms of cities, particularly with ecological footprints, the fact is London has not that much higher an ecological footprint as you might expect with its income wealth generation and the movement through London might seem to suggest. There are things like public transport in particular - it is a lot easier for people to drive not so far to get their shopping and so on. When people come together as a city or as individuals, as organizations there is a lot that can be done just through that concentration of resources, concentration of attention. And the fact that when a lot of people come together something can happen. As has been said nation states have so many disparate interests pulling them in different directions and not necessarily coming together to take decisions. Or to make a change in direction.

RM

I'll just add on overshoot, that the trade-off between human numbers and consumption per head is an obvious one we produce an overshoot index - all the countries in the world by the amount to which they are equal to be overshoot in percentage. The UK is about number 17 and

is about 75% overshoot, taking the data from the global footprint. However that means we have to reduce our population or our consumption by 75% to achieve sustainability. I'm not taking these numbers literally; it is a very imprecise science. The point is these are radically huge figures for us but the more we reduce our numbers the less we need to reduce our consumption and vice versa. As an add on- the international movement on that -I went to the Rio Earth Summit two years ago which was extremely depressing. I came back with many unhappy thoughts one was that I appreciated the extreme tension, not to say conflict, between sustainability and democracy. Because I only met two people there who were genuinely interested in how the planet would be in 25 years' time, who were not environmentalists. One was the MD of Unilever. The other was a girl from the Pentagon who really wanted to be able to bomb people in 25 years' time and was really interested in what kind of world to make that possible.

Question

This is more an ethical question. The position of western economies, developed economies compared to emerging, developing economies. Do we change to a steady state? We want to enjoy a similar standard of living to developed economies. Why can't we have that? We are told that is not going to be sustainable. Hard sell: an ethical question really rather a logical one.

RM

The Rio Summit was meant to be about sustainable development. Tragically, the Obama administration rolled back on language that George Bush (the first) had agreed twenty years previously. The only people who walked away smirking from the Rio Conference were the corporate sector. Their power had grown so much in the intervening years. What got beaten most was aid: every single planetary boundary was taken out of the end document there and leaving only one extant in the UN system. And that's the 2 degrees centigrade for climate change. All of the other planetary boundaries were excised at the request generally of the corporate sector and governments under their control. On aid, I commissioned a paper from a graduate student last summer and she came up with a very interesting fact: the 20 highest fertility countries in the world were also among the 20 poorest. If you look at the amount aid they have had in the last 20 years it has risen very sharply to reduce poverty. Only 0.2% of that aid was spent on family planning. And the upshot was the numbers of people in absolute poverty had risen quite steeply over the same period.

KT

To me, if we are going to progress on population I would really like to apply a socioeconomic lens to that and look at who is consuming and why, rather than look at fertility in poor countries. To go to a developing country and say you should stop having kids when that is the best insurance that they will have. If that aid is spent rather than on family planning on women's education then fertility will come down. I want to look squarely at consumption in rich countries by rich people way before we start having that population conversation because there are enough resources to go around and we are really crap at sharing.

CLOSE