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Systemic Change

To Be a Leader: Reimagining Society

What does it mean to be a leader? To have a vision for the future? An ability to bring people with you towards that vision? Both, probably. And much more.

So, as the first session of the Institute of Directors Conference commenced, I was intrigued to see what visions of the future would be presented to us.

Kwasi Kwarteng was first to speak; representing the UK Government's perspective on the future we are building towards. He proposed an ideal of 'green growth', where our economy continues to expand alongside a reduction in carbon emissions. It painted a very nice picture that both encouraged me to relax and made me uneasy – could it really be that simple?

Kate Chambers (2050 Climate Group) responded by conveying a different reality - one in which much of the UK's carbon emissions have been pushed onto other countries (mostly in the Global South) while we continue to drive environmental catastrophe through the consumption of their goods. A reality in which the climate crisis is about more than just carbon emissions: most life on Earth is collapsing and the gap between the world's richest and poorest continues to expand with devastating consequences.

David Miliband (International Rescue Committee) worries about phrases like 'net zero', which allow us to believe we can continue polluting as long as there are sufficient carbon sinks. 'Happy talk', he says, will be our downfall. But solutions do exist. For example, shifting to 'decarbonisation' as our framework for assessing progress and an effective combination of government regulation, business innovation, and mass mobilisation of civil society. These will all require leaders ready to fight for a just and sustainable vision of the future. Luckily, they are not in short supply (*nods to 2050 Climate Group*)

Dr Katherine Trebeck (Wellbeing Economy Alliance) laid out the ways in which we can move beyond reliance on economic growth towards a society that has wellbeing and justice at its core. She says, this is about societies learning to measure what we value rather than valuing what we measure. So, what do we value? Equality? Happiness? Environmental stewardship? As we start to redefine success, who knows what shifts will occur?

Business models such as social enterprises, workers' cooperatives, and B corporations are driving change in the way we balance profit and values. Beyond that, everyone can start to actively engage in politics, support civil societies fighting for institutional transformation, and educate ourselves on the intersection of environmental and social crises.

I have often struggled to understand the role that businesses have to play in reshaping society when they operate within a system seemingly designed for extraction, exploitation, and profit above all else. However, it has become clear to me that we are not beholden to a system that does not serve us – let's design a new one. And in case you need a starting point for inspiration, remember David's words: 'if you look at the statistics you get depressed, if you look at the people you get hope'.

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