



Addressing Tipping Points for a Precarious Future

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(p.169) Part 6 Politics, The Markets, and Business

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In designing the contributions for this volume, we knew this would be a difficult Part to get right. It deals with the heart of addressing tipping points. This is the nexus of markets, politics, corporates, and social mores, all of which are meant to produce betterment for both the planet and all of its human family for all time. Lying within this challenging mixture are the powerful themes of the modern age: the social value of markets, the effectiveness of democracies, the benign intent of business, and the strength and clarity of leadership.

One pivotal chapter is that by Sara Parkin (6.3). She stresses that the economy, democracy, and politics are social systems designed for collective betterment so are not beyond human engagement and improvement. But she bemoans the intellectual failure to fuse social and environmental outcomes as the purpose of economics. She finds the denial and fear of politicians as they struggle to resuscitate conceptually and practically bankrupt economies understandable, but questions the capability of leadership to reconfigure the environmental challenge as one of social and economic opportunity. Promise lies through new strategies to build confidence around a new logic for how the economy *could* work. A logic that has a good story to tell about the long term, can guide decisions in the near term, and which builds on the best of people. She is optimistic that multiple social tipping points could come about, but only if the guardians of all the intellectual and evidential elements – universities – concentrate effort on supporting this civilization-determining effort.

Chapter 6.1 grapples with what is inevitably a highly contentious issue. This is the effectiveness of the markets to foresee, to anticipate, to avoid, and to adapt to tipping points. There will be many readers who see in already well-regulated but essentially liberated markets the qualities for **(p.170)** achieving this. They will extol the propulsiveness of creative competition, innovation, and enterprise. They will champion the scope for technology, communication, and rapid data processing at the touch of an interactive phone, to open up whole new vistas of prosperity and social betterment. This has been the way of the markets over the years.

Others will share the feelings expressed in Chapters 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3, namely that there is no guarantee of deep learning and transformation in modern markets and politics. Paul Ekins (6.2) sees the likelihood of repeat failures of financial markets, as the sobriety of contrition gives way to a false euphoria of renewed bonuses and hence repeated mistakes. We take the view that only

the spectre of real economic trouble coupled to the continued costs of maintaining international security, national social order, and containing the scope for socially disrupting economic migration on a mass scale, will cause politicians to rethink, and local communities to regroup.

But we recognize that this is not a widely held perspective. So we asked a number of business leaders and commentators to offer their perspectives on the discussions of the contributions in the book as a whole, as well as the controversial interpretations of markets and politics outlined in Chapter 6.1. Their overall reaction was both positive and optimistic. Two former chief executives, Amanda Long (6.4) and Keith Clarke (6.5), offer the pragmatic necessities of short termism and of the need to hold on to valued employees and to feed their families, whilst creating real wealth. Both see the scope for transformation, Keith Clarke through enlightened regulation with equal opportunities for creative competition within agreed and monitored frameworks. Amanda Long and John Elkington (6.6) as well as Thomas Lingard (6.8) from a company perspective, all see the unleashing of a breakthrough revolution towards sustainable capitalism, as information is better organized as to the possible malign and benign outcomes of their actions on social and ecological well-being. They hold a vision of a new form of ecologically framed and socially improving capitalism which can indeed flourish as sustainability science offers better advice and guidance. It is vital that they are right.

The other pivotal commentary (6.7) in this collection is that by Charles Clarke, a former UK cabinet minister. With the wisdom of perspective he offers seven reasons why it is so difficult for governments to grapple with tipping points even when they are menacing on the horizon. He identifies the monumental struggles of analysing and articulating issues when they are not fully nested in the public and media mind. He points to the power **(p.171)** of disenchanting lobbyists when their interests are threatened, and the ever-present meddling of oppositions, often with opportunism as their guide. He also emphasizes the need to respect international treaties and obligations, not least associated with the European Union. These slow down and often weaken the kinds of spearheading initiatives which the challenge of tipping points often demands.

Charles Clarke calls for the same kinds of bold and determined leadership advocated by Sara Parkin, but echoed by all of the contributors to this Part. What is missing is the politics and economics of the long term, the ethics of the compassion for those generations to come who have no democratic voice at present, and the sensitivities and scientific scenarios for estimating the resilience of the planetary life-support processes in times to come, especially if actions are taken now which are unpopular and unwelcome. This is why there are moves in both politics and markets for better capacities for evaluating the well-being of ecosystems and societies in the trajectories of addressing tipping points. This could amount to formation of an 'ombudsman for the future', or for processes of policy evaluation which explicitly encompass resilience and restoration of both ecological and social well-being.

But such ideas lie mostly in the domains of political institutions and processes. They do not nestle in the hearts of business and the many collectivities of people we loosely refer to as 'society'. When a systematic care for a better interconnected ecological, social and economic future in the round becomes embedded in markets, politics, and a real fusing of the private, public, and civic sectors: maybe then, this will be seen as one test of successfully addressing tipping points. **(p.172)**

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