



# Ahead of Time

birthday letters to **Mayer Hillman**

Dear Mayer - We met all those years ago in the early 1990s. You were already a veteran of thinking and campaigning about what was then known as 'sustainable development'. I was just a middleaged musician in the first throes of the deep anxiety that a new awareness of these issues had unleashed in me.

With three friends from the UK Green Party I had just formed the Global Commons Institute, or GCI. With a focus of humaninduced global warming and climate change, our global mission was summed up simply as 'equity and survival'. International agreement to reduce the emissions of the greenhouse gases causing climate change was obviously needed. GCI took the simple position that the international sharing of this task would have to be based on recognising the principles of precaution and equity, or fair sharing under limits. This is what we subsequently came to develop as a call to the UN for international emissions 'Contraction and Convergence', effectively a deliberate convergence on equality per head of the emissions shares of the rich and the poor.

Demonstrating your own effort to avoiding emissions from motorised transport, you had cycled across north London to my small flat so we could talk about these concerns. The journey from your home in Hampstead to Willesden was mostly downhill. You obviously knew this and therefore that the journey home was going to be uphill. You didn't appear to mind this in the least.

Perhaps it was allegorical. After a moment's downhill, it was refreshingly easy for us to find common cause in our concerns. And afterwards - in fact ever since - it has been difficult really for all of us to go home. This is because we knew that it would be an uphill struggle to persuade people that this sharing under limits, or global equity, had to be locally, but also widely, accepted as normal and necessary for global survival.

In those days 'efficiency' was the dominant culture at court. Mammon - in a large car - was effecting a hostile takeover in a universe of infinite economic expansion. The gods of Casino- Capitalism had become Cosmos, and Communism was disgraced in the ashes of 'evil empires' and other such dragons that had been slain at 'the end of history'. The beasts of growth and greed had slaughtered the God of fair play. Equity was dead and efficiency triumphant. Do you remember all that?

What was and has remained vivid for me all the years since then was that the ethic of equity and survival was obviously already quite 'normal' for you. And while I was only to discover later that you had been frequently punished for thinking this way and would be more, at that moment in my life it was comforting to me that someone had arrived from the blue yonder of Hampstead on a bicycle with a commitment to this simple, decent, yet logical attitude.

It is now 30 years since that link and our friendship through it was made. What was true then has remained true to this day. I suspect it has been true through the ages. The way to salvation is hard to find and like a razor's edge. It takes self-understanding to find it and persistent courage to focus this effort on a constructive gentleness with other beings, as distractions and provocations to do otherwise are frequent and pervasive.

However, you had spotted that global climate change was uniquely forcing a dilemma on humanity that made the thesis of 'equity and survival' the logical imperative within which context the purely moral impulse resides. Unabated, climate change says that any ideological resistance to the moral impulse is subsumed by the negative expression of the thesis, in other words 'no equity, no survival'. Opponents of the thesis face the problem of being not so much 'not good' as 'not smart', as not to survive is to lose.

Those who demurred were often nothing more than sceptics who had presumed that any power for change is in the institutions of realpolitik, and that they - indeed we all - are condemned to behave as just spectators or fatalists, sometimes acting as well-paid experts and as consultants, groomed in a none-too-subtle form of obedience.

You were never one of these. 'Equity and survival' says that now, if there is any power for change, it is first and foremost in the institution of the argument itself and its proper understanding and advocacy. I have felt for all the time that I have known you that this point was what we fundamentally shared and that with you it was more strongly shared than with any of my other nearest long-time campaigning colleagues. The power of this insight is fundamental yet also dangerous. Power is always awesome because of the challenge it issues and the responsibility that it invites.

The simple logic of equity and survival has remained at the heart of what I long ago came to see as a basis for realising a politics beyond ideology. And armed with this argument, and the confidence derived from this recognition of its power, I believe that you and I, and all of us who argued this way, helped to shape the struggle for the necessary institutional changes more decisively than those with purely moral and/or merely technological preoccupations. This insight has helped to keep the iteration and development of the argument persistent, effective and responsive.

It has been the new neutrality. And now, after these 30 years, we can all see that the argument has decisively taken root in institutions of governance and social policy, that back in the 1990s were still captive to the ideological obedience of 'efficiency' and the loaded neutrality of laissez-faire. Sustainable development is now pursued in a way that is quite uncontroversially guided by a constitutional foundation of equity for survival. About this we can feel some sense of achievement.

Yet what Tony Blair, then prime minister, said back in the year 2000, sadly remains true to this day. All these changes recognised, humanity continues to create its problems faster than it solves them. In real terms our progress remains too slow and it is difficult to escape from a persistent feeling of failure. Our future is now really being determined by the ever more emergent and frightening reality of global climate changes, and effectively a global security crisis now exists because of this. The rise in atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations and global temperature is still out of control because of uncontrolled pollution.

It is true that we have also known from the outset that no matter how rapidly we all made progress in the effort to institute the culture of equity and survival, and then the consequences of implementing 'Contraction and Convergence', changes for the better would never outpace the rate at which climate change-related damages unfolded during the final decades of our lives. What we didn't know then was just how badly the odds were stacked against us in the battle to make the rates of change for the better overtake the rates of change for the worse. This was the precautionary point we had been urging all along. In the face of uncertainties about how fast humanity is approaching the zone where sudden and traumatic outcomes become possible, prevalent and even completely unavoidable, playing safe and not unnecessarily running risks should always have been the priority. And equity and survival said this. It showed from the outset that structuring for change among ourselves in concert - in a constitutional and comprehensive way - had to be preferable to having it forced upon us by indecision, adversity and adversarial chaos.

As you know, formal 'Contraction and Convergence' procedures on global emissions were finally instituted by the UN eight years ago. Subsequently, a context has evolved that has protected and reinforced the value of the numerous local initiatives emerging around the world on transport and other planning issues (the sorts of things you have also so persistently articulated and championed all your life).

In the light of this I know it is a source of great satisfaction to you that not only has the global effort for resource conservation and sharing matured so visibly, but it has done so in such a way that the economic value of this conservation and sharing is recognised and rewarded as much as over-consumption is now discouraged and indeed penalised. For example, the agreement across Europe at the beginning of the last parliament to replace the tax and benefit system with citizen's income is probably the most radical transformation of social policy in the history of the European adventure. This is all quite amazing. One only has to remember how much of a status symbol large cars still were only ten years ago and to see how much of a stigma they are now, to recognise this. It seems that the work ethic is being superseded by the walk ethic and that perhaps we have not completely grown old in vain.

Yet in the last 20 years, because of the only partially retarded pollution of the atmosphere, humanity as a whole has added another 0.5°C temperature rise to the global average, 'Contraction and Convergence' notwithstanding. This is as much as humanity triggered in the previous 100 years. Conservation, sharing, global institutions of governance, enlightened social policy, high technology and the growing emergence of renewable and non-polluting sources of energy - welcome as all of these are - have not been able to prevent this rise in temperature. Extreme weather events and the damage resulting from these are still increasingly frequent and traumatic around the world.

This is a terrible legacy to leave to the children and grandchildren of today. Climate change will continue to worsen throughout their lives unless they are consistently more successful than we have been at slowing the rates of destruction and entropy in favour of overall ecological recovery and renewal. This dilemma remains at the heart of the human destiny. Our descendants will need the honesty to recognise this and persistent skill, courage and invention to deal with it effectively. But most of all they will need an understanding that without real and sustained compassion, all our efforts and theirs will be dissipated as they become locked into irreversible decline. I'm not sure at all that, if they find this too, they will be able to claim that they learned it from us or from history. But then perhaps that really is the power of equity and survival. It is quite new.

All these years I have loved and admired you for having had the skill, the courage and the compassion to speak and act in its name.

Aubrey