

Preface to the Second Edition of Rocky Road

This booklet was first printed in April 2008 and we are pleased to be reprinting it as there have been many requests for us to do so. The questions we raised in *Rocky Road* have provoked many debates; on web forums (for which we have included links below) and in many face to face discussions and workshops, and we hope these have had constructive outcomes. It seems that the questions that we asked tap into some much wider discussions about the deeper politics that underpin transitioning and how we can best act and achieve our goals in these deeply unsettling times. We reprint this booklet in the spirit of continuing these debates and actions and not shutting them down. We believe that now, more than ever, is time to discuss, debate, disagree (if necessary!) and take action. Given what continues to be revealed about the severity and likely huge impacts of climate change, we may well be the last generation that has a decent opportunity to act. We do not think that there is one analysis or perspective that will work for everyone. We are not intending to rewrite our text here to respond to all the responses that we have received, we just want to briefly update a few areas.

We are standing at a crossroads. Like the period of the English civil war, when the king was beheaded and a new 'agreement of the people' was floated, it really does feel like the 'world has turned upside down'. In the last year, the credit crunch has spiraled into a full blown recession, the corruption and greed of both the economic and political parliamentary system in the UK have been exposed, along with MPs expenses. Meanwhile, the prognoses of climate disaster from scientists continue to arrive, thick and fast. The 100 months that the New Economics Foundation suggested we have left before we reach the tipping point of runaway climate change is currently just 88 months. Bob Watson, the UK Environment Department's chief scientific adviser, said earlier this year that we have to prepare for 4 degrees centigrade of warming, not 2 degrees. The UN Humanitarian Forum has called climate change a 'silent crisis' that is responsible for 300,000 deaths a year, putting 500 million at risk with global annual costs of £125 billion.

As the global economic recession bites, we see the costs of dealing with climate change increasingly portrayed as a luxury that we can't afford. We look set to miss targets for emissions reductions and increasing renewables as we hurtle towards the desperate and urgent prospect for a global climate deal in Copenhagen in December 2009. We see the borders around Europe and North America reinforced, continuing brutality against those fleeing the war on terror, and international obligations to provide asylum increasingly flouted as the far right's anti-immigration policies permeate deeper into mainstream politics. The mainstream message is clear: it's not the super rich paying themselves record bonuses despite being responsible for an immense financial and environmental crisis that we really have to worry about, it's illegal immigrants. The main priority is to get the economy growing again and to hell with the consequences. The current context shows the deep seated difficulties of achieving social change, the complexities and contradictions of building a movement that tackles the root causes of climate change, and the underlying political differences about what they are. It certainly feels like humanity collectively stands at a crossroads, but we certainly don't know which path to take.

We want to briefly draw out a few of the points that we have learned from discussions and reactions to *Rocky Road*. Firstly, we agree that tackling climate change and

associated human suffering will need a range of tactics and actions on many levels. While community level sustainability initiatives will always be an essential and empowering entry point, we must link these to wider strategic questions. Where do we want to get to in the coming years? What kind of political system will get us there? What does social justice mean for those interested in transitioning? What and who are we actually 'saving' from climate change? What awaits us on the 'other side' of a transition? For us, there must always be a clear social justice imperative to transitioning, and the struggle against climate change has always also been one for greater equality and freedoms for all, not just a privileged few.

As we have continued to talk with people, a healthy diversity of perspectives within the Transition movement has become apparent and this was reflected in the responses we received to 'Rocky Road'. While some welcomed the intervention as it resonated with the conversations happening within groups others felt it was unhelpful or 'missing the point'. Some people told us that although they were very much coming from the same original critique as us, they were using Transition as a really effective tactic to get people involved, which is of course to be welcomed. One interesting case is in Glasgow, where following months of discussion, they adopted a social justice model which recognised the effects of the last 'transition'. This economic and labour restructuring in the 1970s deeply affected Glasgow and has continued to scar the city over the last 30 years. Groups in Leeds are also talking about 'Just Transition Towns.' Groups will inevitably have to deal with these complex issues as they grow in size, learn more about their communities and try to build a better world from the bottom up. Adapting to local conditions is something central to a permaculture approach. The interactions between transition initiatives working in different areas from poor, inner cities to relatively affluent market towns makes us re-examine class issues in an era of climate change and highlight just how much some people and places are more able to adapt than others. One practical suggestion is to keep the cost of attending UK wide networking events low so that they are accessible. If national Transition network meetings cost almost £100 to attend, as they have in the past, then the claim that this is a process for everyone to take part in is undermined.

We fully appreciate why many people personally gain a lot from the "positive" elements of Transition initiatives – after years of being against things, or feeling like we have to struggle, it's a breath of fresh air. In our debates emerging out of the booklet we have recognized a lingering and widespread discomfort which polarises positive alternative building on the one hand, and negative, confrontational activism on the other. But for us, these are false dichotomies. It is entirely compatible to be involved with both, and one often leads naturally to the other. Creativity always contains elements of resisting. We argue that there is no one tactic that will succeed alone and we want to encourage the natural solidarities and affinities, which can be used together to work towards the broader strategic aim of building grassroots, bottom up change rather than relying on top down approaches. We acknowledge the type of language used whilst having these discussions is really important, and that hints of confrontation and antagonism is off-putting to many. Finding ways to build co-operation between different styles, languages, values and tactics amongst those working on these issues is a first point for us all to work on.

One interesting example here has come from the issues of new coal fired power stations and open-cast coal mining. Transition Initiatives have a clear role in both

promoting alternatives while also resisting policies which expand them. The recent acquittal of Greenpeace activists at Kingsnorth power station in Kent, who used the defence of causing criminal damage to prevent the greater crime of climate change, is a good example of how evidence on the severity of climate change can be heard by the jury, the court, the media and the general public through a 'criminal' trial. This greater awareness can catalyse individual and collective action.

Finally, the issue of inclusivity has come up repeatedly. Transition groups, as initiatives open to all, have to deal with the reality of their local political scenes. There are some difficult questions relating to inclusion that need to be addressed. What stand should transition groups take to far right groups, especially given their interest in issues of localism and environmentalism? (The BNP have been asking the London mayor questions about peak oil in London!) What happens when those with radical libertarian or anti-capitalist views, those long associated with transitioning, are excluded or marginalised within groups?

We feel it is also appropriate to make a few brief responses to a few of the points that Rob Hopkins raised on his blog (www.transitionculture.org). From the outset we want to make it clear that we respect his work and his tremendous book. He has helped an amazing movement to flourish. Where differences do emerge is, as he points out, how we see change occurring. If the last year has showed anything, it has showed the need to constantly endeavor for the change we want, and to be vigilant over protecting the gains that we make. While Rob doesn't like using labels like 'us' or 'them', this unfortunately doesn't diminish the huge oppressive differences between those with power and resources and those with less that continue to shape our world. We are seeing more and more bloody resource conflicts throughout the world from struggles over indigenous land across Africa and the Americas to the right to control energy resources in Nigeria and Bolivia and Ireland. We are also seeing 'developing world' style structural adjustment right here in the UK as money is shifted from the public sector and welfare state to the banking sector in huge amounts, while we are forced to accept cuts in public sector wages, pensions and services. What we are seeing is the socialization of risk, and the privatization of profit, as the saying goes.

One thing that Rob also perhaps misrepresents in his critique is that we do not feel that anyone **chooses** confrontational politics - it is a response to the often brutal forces people find themselves up against. And if it seems relatively peaceful in our part of the world, then we simply need to stand back to see that this relative peace actually rests on a fair amount of bloody chaos elsewhere in the world. We need to break out of the bubble we live in. Given what people in the developing world the global south are up against, environmental movements in the west should work in solidarity with groups there on issues of land, food, war, human rights and freedom of movement. They are front-line communities in terms of repression and violence. Many of these global movements identify neoliberal capitalism, and associated free trade agreements and structural adjustments, as one root cause of their problems. So while it might not be tactically useful for Transition groups to talk about struggles against neoliberalism or global capitalism at the outset, we have to be aware that in other parts of the world this kind of analysis is shared by people who are part of our struggle and are our natural allies. If we are serious about solidarity and understanding root causes, we can't avoid this analysis.

The term 'capitalism' has returned with some force recently in terms of understanding what is going on in society. Rob shies away from using the word, which is understandable on one level. But what this hides is an analysis of how the profit logic and market forces continue to shape our future – be it carbon trading markets, the lack of take up of carbon capture and storage or even local recycling, subsidies which perpetuate cheap flights, or the merit orders which determine what kinds of carbon-intensive energy get put into the national grid ahead of renewables. Behind almost every decision is the desire from corporations to make ever bigger profits from existing resources and to carve out new areas of profit be it bio-fuels or carbon capture. We also need to understand capitalism on a much more everyday level. Capitalism is not just a money system, it is a social relationship, which shapes the way we interact with each other and our environment. We are all busy under this system, paying rent and mortgages, working hard to produce surplus profit. While we might want to escape it, to do this we have to first acknowledge and understand how it shapes our lives and how we reproduce it everyday.

All these debates are part of much wider debates about the future of the state, government, economy and work. For example, the 'green new deal' that is being talked about in policy circles is a social democratic solution to the present crisis that will help kick start a new cycle of growth based on green energy and greater social responsibility. But it is unlikely to really challenge wage labour, ceaseless growth and profit and fulfill our desires beyond the dreary world of work and surplus labour. Despite talk of Green New Deals, as we write there is a worker-led occupation of the Vestas wind turbine factory on the Isle of White, furious at the closing of the plant due to lack of demand, and being abandoned by a government which declares that it wants to kick start a green energy sector. The urgency of climate change is also increasingly being used to call for a stronger state, a 'khaki green state'. We have already seen a new wave of police repression painting ordinary environmental protesters as the new national extremists. Transition culture is perfectly placed to challenge these top-down approaches and call for more localization. But this also means intervening loudly and urgently in how governments and institutions are being rebuilt after the crisis – demanding a complete overhaul, not to just getting them back on their feet as they were.

The scale of the task is huge and that is why we call for solidarity in thinking and action. When Rob Hopkins talked about radical left activism and transition initiatives he stated: 'I would argue that as distinctly different approaches they are both far stronger for standing on their own ground and by each doing what it does best.' This risks going against how people interact on the ground and what transition culture is really about. Ordinary people do extra-ordinary things in extra-ordinary circumstances. Stereotypes of radical and liberal activists creates a sense of people on different sides of a line hoping for different futures. The reality is much more complex and the danger is to divide 'good activist' from 'bad activist' in terms of the media, policing and surveillance. In the build up to the UN Copenhagen conference and beyond, we need to be bold in what we are working towards. Any solution to climate change and energy has to include those in the global north and south and address the needs of those in waged labour and also the huge growth the wageless in the exploding cities in the developing world.

There are massive challenges ahead, even more so now than when we first wrote this booklet. Our world is still ravaged by those who continue to oppress, dominate and make war, carve out new areas of profit and control the resources that are left. But any transition has to be based on a sense of hope and urgency that there is a better way ahead that is achievable and workable. Rather than getting stuck in adversarial politics, we recognize that new alliances, looking for answers in new places, working in new ways, building solidarity at the grassroots, and engaging with others outside our comfort zone are the lifeblood of any transition. We can only deal with the huge rifts and conflicts of our age through honest, open debate. But more important is listening and understanding people's differences and concerns, hopes and expectations. This is why transitioning is so difficult - it has to recognize and respond to conflict and repression, but also build shared understandings and workable relationships. There's no magic end point after the transition. It's a rocky road, and it's a road we all have to travel together.

Alice Cutler and Paul Chatterton, July 2009

Links:

http://www.metamute.org/en/content/a_climatic_disorder_class_and_climate_change_in_newcastle

<http://transitionculture.org/search/trapeze>

<http://www.stuffit.org/redandgreen/monbiot-social-smaller.pdf>

http://www.ukwatch.net/article/lost_in_transition

<http://www.peaceneews.info/issues/2504/25042714.html>