

# The 'big picture' and complacent capitalism

**Why does it take a crisis to focus thinking? Surely when things 'seem ok' is the best time to ponder the risk of disruption and work out how best to avoid it or how to respond?**



VIEWPOINT by MPA Chief Executive  
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**Call me naïve but isn't that what Governments with the limitless access to the brightest and best minds are there to do? To contemplate population growth, consumption per capita, what can be produced indigenously to supply demand and what must be imported, whilst at the same time considering the economic, environmental and social impacts?**

Such deliberations might conceivably convert into a political manifesto which compiles key strategies for ensuring that what society needs and wants can be provided safely, securely, and sustainably. That manifesto might identify how certain supplies which are 'strategic' should attract greater attention and appreciation along with strong policies and adequate resources to ensure delivery for the long term.

Amongst those strategies would be those for food, water, energy and non-energy mineral resources. All sourced from land with consequent environmental impacts, all in need

of reasonable and proportionate of regulation and consistent and fair taxation. And yet...?

Apolitically speaking, I am not sure any UK political party has yet set out a manifesto which starts with such a 'big picture'. Normally it is just the usual downstream 'no brainer' policies and an auction of promises relating to health, education, housing, and social provision. These are the policy areas which we are 'conditioned' to focus on, they are in our news management DNA. But what about the primary resources and foundation industries without which those aims and aspirations all become academic? What about the fundamental factors which enable us to have a quality of life – comfortable, convenient and civilised.

## ***Virtually everything we do involves the use of land***

Virtually everything we do involves the use of land. Virtually all use of non-agricultural land is governed by the planning system. So where is the 'big picture' debate about land and what best to do with it? Right now, we don't seem to really know what we are trying to do with land. Is it to produce food, energy or generate carbon offsets? Is it to build on or to preserve? The debate about planning is predominantly about housing and a failed 75-year mission to make the system faster, simpler and cheaper whilst creating more process and involving more voices.

The legislation and regulation of land is fragmented within and across Government in four different national administrations and increasingly

expected to be delivered locally. Regional strategies and inter-regional dimensions in England are cold-shouldered by dogmatic policies. Ever changing models of local government with stretched and inadequate capacity compete rather than cooperate to join up the dots on development, transport, resource use and waste management. Local plans are not sufficiently up to date, nor in step with neighbouring plans to create an approach that's greater than the individual parts. It's all a bit fragmented and, well, hit and miss.

## ***Where is the 'big picture' debate about land and what best to do with it?***

Localism may serve current political thinking, but it is in reality a drag on enterprise. There's nothing wrong with those closest to the problem influencing outcomes, but taken to the extreme if everyone thinks only locally, the regional, national and global realities are inevitably harder to see and harder to respond to.

If land use planning were a tripod, I think that we would have more than enough weight on the localism leg but we really need a lot more weight on the regional and national ones. Consequently, the current approach is imbalanced and unstable and is, unsurprisingly, falling over.

Failing to deliver 'the big picture' for the UK opens the door to underestimating risks more widely. Determining what must be imported to meet demand sparks the questions "if not produced by us then who, how and how much?" Hitherto we have become used to being able to source pretty much anything at will. A 'just in time' world of interconnected and interdependent supply chains is a wonder to behold until – like a broadband signal – it fails.

As Brexit, Covid and now Ukraine have all demonstrated, once our equilibrium is shaken the links that hold it together are seen to weaken and even break. Worse, links we did not even know existed expose the fragility of our due diligence and ignorance of what really makes things happen, what really delivers our goods and services. As a country we realise too late that we were 'asleep at the wheel', we took too many things for granted, we were complacent.

But this is just the beginning. An exit agreement, a family of viruses and an invasion have served to expose what our 'localism' has done to weaken our wider view. 'Global Britain' may sound like a good slogan but the reality is that we may be more insular than ever.

So how well prepared are we to really 'tackle' climate change or, more accurately, man-made consumption far beyond the planet's capacity to supply sustainably and safely? It is society's voracious appetite for goods and services that fuels consumption and the consequent production that causes global warming, not production alone. No amount of emotion or advocacy about the effects of increasing carbon and methane emissions will alter the causes without re-engineering the means of global production. This is the reality of what is required to have any chance of achieving net zero across the planet. It is an inconvenient truth that success at a national level whilst welcome will not move the global dial unless the top six major emitters achieve it together first. As we move into the second half of 2022, we have around 7 years left to reach halfway to our 2050 ambition of reducing carbon emissions in the UK and globally, and in spite of all the worthy talk delivery is just too slow.

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I am no longer optimistic. Not because I am a 'doomster' but because of how badly we appear to respond to

comparatively simple domestic issues we can control. So how confident can we be of dealing with the complex big-ticket issues of decarbonisation and primary resource use. Issues which are long term and dwarf political cycles? Pledges come cheap; action is all that counts. I predict that the 'scrutiny industry' will be expanding in the next few years as the gap between rhetoric and delivery gains traction. The sooner the better.

## ***More transparency and more engagement with stakeholders is vital as we drive change, raise standards and continue to improve perceptions***

So, what about our house? The UK minerals and mineral products industry? I can testify that we were immersed in precisely these issues more than two decades ago when we still had time to limit temperature rise to less than 1.5°C, now most unlikely. We have built a solid record of our action on sustainable development over the intervening period. We have also documented the tremendous work our members have done for nature through quarry restoration over the last 50 years which is unparalleled across any industry.

The industry prepared its own strategy to ensure that our economy and quality of life could be supplied sustainably for the next 25 years with the essential mineral products it needs. The UK Minerals Strategy was formally launched in 2018, founded on the three pillars of sustainable development and acknowledged by Government, to their credit. It is a live text which can be regularly reviewed by each generation as the challenges emerge and evolve. The industry must hold itself to account if it is to retain its licence to operate as the public's resistance to mineral extraction – despite their demand for mineral products – is likely to increase over the coming decade. More transparency and more engagement with stakeholders is vital as we drive change, raise standards and continue to improve perceptions.

One thing is certain – when it comes to the 'capitalist engine' that drives

most of the global economy and which underpins development and civilisation, the limits to that growth will be governed by our use of land and the environmental consequences that stem from this. Food, water, energy and non-energy minerals, and mineral products. These are all strategic resources with local and global impacts. They all must form the foundations of 'a bigger picture'. None of us can ever, ever assume supply. All supply must be planned, monitored and managed. We all need to think more long term and more strategically to see the 'big picture'. We may have seen the last of this phase of capitalism as we are now living in a more protectionist and parochial environment, just as we need a greater and more collective approach to solving global problems. There can be no room for complacency, there simply isn't the time to go down the wrong path.

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No major political party is gripping the need to think about demand and supply as part of their route to power. It remains tediously more about party politics, performance, personality and media and news management. We ignore raising our eyes to the horizon to see the 'big picture' at our peril. The past three decades have been the complacent phase of capitalism despite the Brundtland report "our Common Future" way back in 1987. We have gone for growth, talking a good game on sustainability, and whilst there are shining examples of good and best practice, none of it is sufficiently at a scale to make a real difference. I believe we have now entered a different phase, possibly era, of capitalism which must demonstrably balance the three pillars of sustainable development far better and prove it at scale. We cannot continue saying one thing and doing another as the time already wasted now cruelly exposes. Pledges must be delivered and proven and not just marketed.