

Chair Report May 2020

I am going to by-pass the usual format as these are not usual times. Especially as our attention span may be limited (or is that just me?).

So take it as read that we sang some things in public once long ago. And that we will do so again.

I'm going to read a story which I've cobbled together from multiple sources. If this were a printed article I'd be sued for plagiarism. If you want to know my sources, just ask.

So – Are you sitting comfortably? ...

Once upon a time, we were all bidden to believe that we should aspire to become millionaires. Thenceforward we would all live happily ever after, isolated from our ugly sisters in a palace with high walls, private healthcare, private education and a private jet.

Then, flesh-eating monsters and a terrible plague patrolled the land. The world turned upside down.

The rulers stage-managed the crisis. They turned it into an unavoidable tragedy and filled our screens with heart-warming tales of heroism. Theirs was, in fact, a story about an unfathomably greedy system overseen by cowardly, criminally negligent leadership that placed the economy before lives.

Hands clapped extravagantly while simultaneously failing dismally to provide their 'heroes' with masks and capes. Casino capitalism took precedence while tens of thousands fell.

Even those in power recognised (in public at least) that we had never needed the state apparatus more: healthcare, education, an economic safety net, etc. etc.

But then the people came to understand that horror films and fairy tales aren't real life.

They began to realise that community and state are intertwined.

Instead of turning us into predatory zombies or hedonistic princesses, the pandemic turned millions of people into good neighbours.

Something - the unexpectedly thrilling and transformative force of mutual aid - took root.

Some of the people rallied. They realised that many practices had been masked; practices that were now getting uncovered. They began to tell an alternative story – one of hope and love.

Could there be a happy – or at least a radically different – ending to the story? Could the world become a better place?

The people came to believe it might be possible.

They weren't so foolish as to imagine that they could magically make all things well. Their restless discomfort about easy answers and half-truths made them angry: angry at injustice, oppression and exploitation. At times, this made some of them despair. At times, some of them shed tears for those who suffered and (with shame) tears for themselves, even those who were comfortably cocooned.

But then it came: that dull morning when they woke and found that they had had enough.

I will give up, they told themselves, retreat to the hills, the coast, to Netflix; some place out on the edge of it all. Anywhere but here. Anything but this. Let the rich have the world for themselves; leave the less fortunate to their own devices. Much good may it do them.

At these times, others reached out their arms to comfort them and transformed their anguish into a renewed desire to seek justice, freedom and peace. Boldly.

Every individual contained the whole range of emotions, strengths and challenges. They were like complex musical scores from which certain melodies could be teased out and others ignored or suppressed, depending, in part, on who was sharing the harmonies.

Some sang only weak melodies; others martial songs; still more hummed tunes of despondency. They took turns until finally those who remembered a finer refrain sang louder. Eventually, sufficient numbers joined in to drown out the growling, prowling monsters.

And then, one day, it came. That morning which had always been written into their bones; that morning when they woke and found that they had had Enough! Basta!

And they rolled up their sleeves and buzzed like bees and set to once more.

They remembered that in the dark times there was also singing.

Together they determined to continue striving for a better future.

They recalled that evil only prevails when it is mistaken for the norm. They reminded each other of all the good in the world. They celebrated this. They refused to give in.

They didn't know precisely what was happening as the monsters, both human and pestilential, ravaged the land; or where and when it would end. But they - together - recognised the possibilities offered by that astonishing time. Together those ordinary folk embraced those possibilities (not forgetting the challenges, for they were sensible people) with critical thinking, courage and hope.

They grasped the opportunity to envisage the world anew.

The pandemic was a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. They could choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of prejudice and hatred, of avarice, dead ideas, dead rivers and smoky skies behind them. Or they could walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world.

And ready to fight for it.

They noticed that an epic conceptual awakening was happening. The homeless were under hotel roofs. Children were learning in their own way at their own speed without the threat of tests. Many had a guaranteed income. Private hospitals were being, in effect, nationalised and new ones were being constructed in weeks.

Wild life was returning with innocence and ebullience. The air was perfumed by spring.

Many people were becoming more serious about the truth. Accurate scientific, economic, political and social information was suddenly valued. It was a matter of life and death.

They recognised that well-being isn't individual but social: that we can make each other sick and we can try to make each other well.

The Financial Times – not the most revolutionary of commentators - asserted *that Governments must view public services as investments not liabilities. Radical reforms will need to be put on the table, reversing the prevailing policy of the last 4 decades*, the paper declared.

The people sang. They were idealistic, but not foolish. They knew that singing, indeed none of the arts, can't forcibly induce a change in behaviour. It isn't a re-education pill. Empathy isn't something that happens to us when we listen to Joan Baez. It's work, for which art can provide us with radiant stimuli.

Singing can't win an election or bring a PM down. It can't cure a virus, raise the dead or stop the climate crisis. What it can do is serve as an antidote to desolation in times of chaos. It can provide a route to clarity and it can be a force of resistance and repair, offering new registers, new languages with which to think and act. It's not just a zone of enchantment, entertainment, escape. All art can be a zone of resistance and solidarity.

My Friends, do not lose heart. Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to affect the part of the world that is within our reach. Any small, calm thing that one person can do to help another will help. We will never know which acts or by whom, might tip the critical mass to cause an enduring good. Let's sing out, even if we have to continue at home for much longer than anticipated. Let's sing our commitment to a happier ending to this sorry tale.

This is the time for us to be beacons. In Dr Seuss' immortal words: ***Unless someone like me cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not.***

Let us light candles.

The PiH Book Group was fired up after reading Counterpower by Tim Gee and drew up the following list of actions we can take.

SO, ACTION. BUT WHAT, WHERE TO START?

A better future for all. The Motherhood and Apple Pie bit

- **Constantly re-assert our core values:** e.g. anti-nuclear weapons, Refugee support, Climate and Social Justice?
- Increase **taxes** and reduce the gap between the richest and poorest
- Fund the **NHS** properly
- Challenge the UK/US **Trade deal** and getting the NHS Off the table
- Fund **Councils** properly. Maintain & encourage community connection
- **Universal Basic Living Income** (keeping up with inflation): benefits, care workers, gig economy, no zero hours contracts
- Welcome **international collaboration** (Brexit?!)
- **Lobby** Parliament, political parties
- **Adopt Green policies:** transport, trees ... Active participation in **fossil fuel disinvestment, e.g Pension Funds**

- Reinstate SureStart

Personal choices I can make today:

- A Pledge on my personal commitment to Global Justice on how/where I will/won't spend my money
- Choose to use an ethical bank
- Boycott air travel (this will be very hard; non-ethically or non-locally sourced/over packaged goods etc.
- Pledge to contribute a percentage of my personal finances to specific campaigns
- Ensure my will includes specific beneficiaries/charities
- Plant trees.

Ideas for changing to a new normal in personal behaviour, society and economy.

- An annual Carbon Card from which points are deducted with each tank of petrol or plane ticket purchased.
- Regulate AirBnB so that the housing is available for sale or long-term rental.
- Fast food outlets to be polystyrene and plastic free.
- 'Useful unemployment' and how to promote it.
- Working from home.
- A four day week.
- Universal Basic Income.
- Wealth and employment require society-wide upper limits, without which all talk of lower limits, such as the eradication of poverty and unemployment, is futile. (Ivan Illich)
- A universal differential of one to ten in terms of pay, with a tax system used to enforce it.
- Art: what art can do is serve as an antidote to times of chaos. It can be a route to clarity, and a force of resistance and repair. (Olivia Laing)
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Committee Business:

Liz Beevers is stepping down after 5 years on the committee. We shall sorely miss her insight, ability to cut through the crap and all-round kindness. Thank you, Liz. Sit back and enjoy!

Margot Duffy so loved being on the committee a few years ago that she is returning. Hooray! She is responsible for the art work on the posters and cards – and a whole lot more. Welcome, Margot.

You, too, can join in the fun. We meet once a month (in 'normal' times) and would welcome newcomers.

Kathy Jenkins has been Treasurer for a long time and would be keen to step down in 2021, as I will as Chair. Please let us know if you feel you could shadow one of us over the coming months.

Kathy thanked those of us who are continuing to pay subs to support our marvellous Song Leaders who work so hard even when we are not meeting regularly.

Finally – another BIG Thank You to Shereen, Penny and Jane for leading us with so much love, with and enthusiasm.

Best wishes to everyone.