

BUSINESS & FINANCE

Sustainability and... diversity

By Doug Shanks

*It's just a jump to the left
Then a step to the right
Let's do the time warp again*

As we reach the turn of the decade, what great changes have happened over the last ten years? The sea change is how sustainability or corporate social responsibility and diversity have gone from aspirational to mainstream.

In the aftermath of the excess of the eighties we were taught that marketing isn't branding and branding isn't a pretty logo. The last decade has seen sustainability address core values, a welcome jump to the left in a divisive decade of steps to the right represented by Trump'n'Brexit and the insidious rise of nationalism in the noisy north; paradoxical alliances fuelled by a variety of hatreds, of which perhaps the demonization of the centrist consensualist Tony Blair by the unholy axis of left and the right wings is the most complex and elucidating; at once reductively logical, but on analysis inexplicable.

Counter-intuitively, sustainability has made its way to centre-stage, something of a relief in this divisive, environmentally catastrophic decade in which over 70 million Americans voted for a democracy-undermining climate-change-denying Stalinist strongman.

Amidst all the total extinction reality there is hope represented by Greta Thunberg. There is no compromise on the environment, burning coal and bugging the future. We've learned that we are all guilty, slyly backing Trump's absurdities with our behaviour. Seeking normality in lockdown I espouse Chanel scent for day-wear and Tom Ford for the evening. I have swapped a Jag for the back of an Uber Mercedes, while touting tree-hugging.

During the 2000s sustainability became the new Investors In People. Prince Charles gets great credit for using his position to raise the profile of Business In the Community, rightly so. BITC promoted the idea that "if you could save money and save the planet you would, wouldn't you" can be extended to saving the cost of a scandal in the supply chain, which is deceptively simplistic. Watching the measured analyses of Jameela Jamil, the



British actress, radio presenter, model, writer and voice activist, discussing key diversity topics on YouTube as prep, I know I'm a dinosaur, appropriate in an article touching on extinction.

"Going For Gold" was my firm's branding weapon in the nineties; before you laugh, what would you call a charitable organization raising money to help athletes move up a medal? The programme branded us (internally as well as in the marketplace) as investing in our people, identifying creative business solutions as well as engaging with the community in a good cause. The commercial payback was pretty instant and the ethical symbiosis was justifiable if not quite unimpeachable. It was of its time and felt cutting edge; sustainability seemed the next step along that path, with diversity self-evidently a good thing if only because it increased the labour pool.

That's where we were fifteen years ago. The Kyoto Accord on climate change introduced legislation and predictably enough carbon credits became a major trade. What we've seen over the last decade is leading companies embracing sustainability at the higher level, not only corporate responsibility in their own backyard and immediate supply-chain but across the globe,

sustainable habitats for our decreasing wildlife (which Attenborough tells us in *Extinction* is 4% of life on Earth, a drop of 50% in 40 years).

The statistics around the sixth mass extinction are numbingly cataclysmic. One million species are threatened with extinction. We're not going to reverse that by trading carbon credits. The government will never get it right; there's a reason fascists get the trains to run on time, although even that is a myth. So it's down to us and by extension business. At the exciting end of challenging.

Whatever has been wrong with the 2010s, business is embracing environmental sustainability (big bold carbon neutral targets, moves to zero waste to landfill, and scope being beyond companies' direct impact), and the workplace (social mobility, diversity, inclusion, wellbeing, fair pay, progression etc), engaging with the supply chain (prompt payment, diversity, transparency, treatment of small business), and the community (impact on local community in terms of business and relationship). These are huge steps inspired by stakeholders and more importantly driven by leaders, themselves individuals committed to saving the planet.

One thing we can all do, whatever our budget or wherever we are, is to chat to members of our trade associations and see what others in our sectors are targeting. Most businesses are aware of gender diversity but what about ethnicity pay differentials? This is important not urgent (on Covey's matrix) so perhaps we should start with a policy to develop a policy.

Shareholders are conditioned to short term payback mirroring the five year electoral cycle. We can't blame the system. As Churchill told us, "democracy is the worst form of Government

except for all the other forms", and that is under threat from the travesty of democracy that is the plebiscite of social media driven referenda. Or to borrow from The Jam:

*"And the public gets what the public wants
But I want nothing this society's got"*

As for big business, that's easy: it'll do what the shareholders want. A little less than 15% of shares are owned by individuals, but that's a strong block. You might think that overseas investors including foreign governments dominate the UK market, and you'd be right, but UK individuals and funds own just under half, so it's hardly out of control. The message is that the planet will die unless we all accept that it's down to us. This government is only marginally more clueless than all the others so we can never rely on those clowns, or their academic lackies, but the big change over the last decade is that business is getting the message. Corporations can't fake woke branding for long or the woke generation (and thank God for that) will call them out. The rising generations are too smart to be fooled into thinking that sponsoring the five rings to flog a sugary drink is sustainable.

Doug of Loxley is planning public transport in the shrinking greenwood, smelling less expensive and sending heartfelt congratulations to *KCWLondon*, an independent publication surviving 10 years and reaching its 100th, especially with all the challenges of small businesses.

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MATTER**