

Climate: Bold Leadership Now? Or a Lost Future?

Guest Speaker **SANDRINE DIXSON-DECLÈVE**

“The antidote to despair is thinking through, well, what are the answers across the globe—not just in the US—to solidarity, to coming together around the knowledge that actually we are, at 1.5, we have most of the technologies that we need. What we're lacking now is leadership.”

Nik Gowing

Welcome to the Thinking the Unthinkable podcast, our latest leadership conversation.

Hello, I'm Nik Gowing. The climate and sustainability realities are ever harsher after their regular warnings. Even scientists have been shocked by the news that January 2025 was the hottest January on record. That's according to the EU's Earth observation agency, Copernicus.

The fear is that climate warming is accelerating, not leveling off, as some scientists hoped. So, what are the positives and the opportunities now? Yes, they are still there, as we're about to hear.

And I'm joined by Sandrine Dixson-Declève, a formidable, leading thinker on climate change, sustainable development, and sustainable finance, as well as complex systems—a thought leader, in other words. Until recently, Sandrine was co-president of the Club of Rome.

50 years ago, they published the incredibly perceptive limits to growth, warning of the predicaments mankind was creating for itself then and what we would face now, they were so right. Among a huge number of commitments—too many to mention here—Sandrine is a key figure in Earth for All, a new survival guide for humanity. Earth for All describes itself as an antidote to despair and a roadmap to a better future.

There are five extraordinary turnarounds to achieve prosperity for all within planetary limits in a single generation.

So, Sandrine, welcome. In these 18 minutes, what's your audit? What's identifying the antidote to despair? Is it having a positive impact? Is there a new, heartening way ahead for a better future?

Sandrine Dixson-Declève

Well, I think the antidote to despair is first of all taking stock of where we are.

So Nik, yes, we are getting a variety of signals from the United States, which is going completely in the opposite direction of dealing with the 1.5 degrees that is on our doorstep as we speak. And I think the antidote to despair is thinking through, well, then what are the answers across the globe, not just in the US, to solidarity, to coming together around the knowledge that actually we are, at 1.5, we have most of the technologies that we need.

What we're lacking now is leadership. So who's going to step up to the plate? That's the key question. Who's going to bridge the immorality that we're seeing in the United States, the denialism of climate change, the denialism of the huge inequality gaps that we have?

Because one of the key outputs from Earth for All: A Survival Guide for Humanity, was the knowledge that we will not actually meet our decarbonization goals or stay within the operating space of the planetary boundaries unless we address inequality and poverty.

And I believe that this is the moment where Europe, working with China, working with Africa, Latin America, and so many other countries, can actually demonstrate a new way of moving forward while we look at the immorality that's happening in the United States.

Nik Gowing

What about what the human race broadly is doing, faced with all these negatives?

Do you think we all understand the enormity of what is really happening, as was warned about 50 years ago in Limits to Growth?

Sandrine Dixson-Declève

I don't think so, and I think that the global populace is going through two key reactions. One is the ostrich—really the denialism and just not wanting to deal with what is happening. Of course, this is being exemplified by the fear-mongering and the way in which people are heightened in terms of anxiety.

But I think the other is a growing sense that actually maybe this is the moment to rise above and do things differently.

What we're seeing in many of our surveys—and we did a large-scale Ipsos survey across the G20—is that actually most citizens in the G20 believe that we need a new economic system that truly takes into consideration their needs. They all, 80%, believe that actually climate change is here and it is impacting their lives.

The key now is, as leaders—business leaders, economists, scientists, but obviously governments—that we need to start offering a way out, alternative futures of what it looks like actually to rise above the current disasters that we're seeing with regard to climate change.

Change, but also the denialism that we're seeing in the US, not only in terms of climate change but in terms of human needs.

Nik Gowing

What we want to do is get over a positive message here, Sandrine, but I heard you say in Davos a few weeks ago you were flabbergasted—as you put it, flabbergasted—at the lack of provocation.

We're going back, not forward. People got stuck on snooze. They went into a trance on many of these issues.

How do we break out of that?

Sandrine Dixon-Declève

We need to wake people up, but we also need to give them something to hold on to, and this is why we have so many positive solutions.

I just come, actually, from a meeting in the European Commission, in the Directorate General for Research and Innovation. And really, the conversation there is: how can we anchor a green economy, moving beyond growth into really ensuring that we innovate for people, planet, and prosperity at the same time?

And we can do that. It's actually channeling all of the capital that we have into what really services people's lives and what really services the needs of the planet.

That's not what we're seeing right now, Nik, right? I mean, in an over-financialized economy, we've got capital that's predominantly going to shareholder value.

So this is a message about giving people hope and anchoring people back into a process of governance and of creating the future they deserve.

Nik Gowing

Well, you use that phrase—people are stuck on snooze—but you've also said very clearly, we've now got to get citizens, people, us, in other words, on this journey.

Where is the failure? What is the big idea that you've got to make this happen?

Sandrine Dixon-Declève

I think part of the failure—and I've done some analysis, working again, from a European perspective, in comparison, for example, to the IRA in the United States—part of the failure, at least the Inflation Reduction Act, exactly, part of the failure in Europe is that we haven't been able to individualize the benefits of shifting towards a Green Deal or shifting towards an economy that is looking at decarbonization and is really reducing emissions.

Instead, what people have heard is that actually, it's going to be an economy that's going to make them suffer, that will not enable them to be able to meet their needs on a monthly basis. And we have to reverse that. We have to do it, though, in a very systematic way.

We have to first reach out to citizens, start to engage citizens in the conversation, whether it be in the US or in the EU. I think it's very important, and across the globe, that we have more citizen assemblies, more types of town hall meetings, come back to real democracy, where it's not just hijacked by the needs of multinationals and shareholder value, as I said.

I think the other key is we need to use our social media channels to really start to show what an alternative future looks like.

I mean, I grew up in Silicon Valley, and anyone living in Silicon Valley in San Francisco is either homeless or frightened because of the number of homeless and crime and drug addiction in the wealthiest area of the United States. How can we show people that actually we can reduce crime, enhance democracy, create security for all that is based on really shifting our economy to start to reflect not only planetary needs but people's needs?

And there are so many intervention points that are possible, but we got to wake people up.

Nik Gowing

But aren't they awake anyway? Because the kind of polling you've quoted shows very clearly people understand where things are, and the ominous signs of what is happening and the speed at which it's happening.

I quoted what's happened in January with the hottest January ever.

But how do you mobilize the public if they don't really want to get out and go to citizens' assemblies? Are you saying that politicians will only listen if there's a very firm hand now from the public to support everything you're saying?

Sandrine Dixson-Declève

I think there needs to be a firm hand from the public, but that needs to also be induced by a firm hand from progressive business. I think what's often seen is that those businesses that are doing the right thing are getting on with business and just doing it, whereas those incumbents that are trying to make sure that we go backwards or hold on to business as usual are really lobbying hard to create a business-as-usual at this time.

But I think what's really lacking, Nik, is also we need charismatic leadership that is showing the way forward, that has brave leadership. Anchored in terms of the types of messages. It's not necessarily going to be 100% easy, but what we need to translate is that the cost of inaction is much worse than now the cost of action.

And then we need to figure out, how can we buffer the pain of people? How can we ensure that we take the perversities out of the market, the subsidies that are enabling continued fossil fuel production or continued high industrial agriculture, and instead translate those subsidies into supporting the just transition that we need, and bringing people on the journey, so that they feel it themselves.

So for example, the people that are wanting to invest in insulation in their homes are wanting to reduce their energy check. How can we directly ensure that they are not paying the cost? But it's the incumbents that are actually making huge windfall profits right now that are paying the cost.

I mean, we need to tax the right things and sanction the wrong things?

Nik Gowing

Let me try the question in a slightly different way. If people are feeling the pain, there are floods. There are dramatic increases in temperatures. In Dubai, a few months ago, the temperature was 62 degrees centigrade. They had two big rainstorms with water up to three meters deep.

If people are feeling the pain in that way, why is it so difficult to achieve change, and the commitment to a transition, which is so necessary because of the science?

Sandrine Dixson-Declève

Because I think a lot of large-scale, part of our leadership is actually not telling the truth. I think that the leadership, both business leadership, and many of our incumbent leaders are sitting on huge profits, while actually they're penalizing people who have huge energy costs, agricultural costs, food costs, and so it's actually making people's lives harder, whereas the wealthy are getting wealthier. That's number one.

I think the other issue is that governments are not telling the truth. We need to put in place the right plans, adaptation plans and mitigation plans that really make people's lives and livelihoods better. This is not necessarily at a cost to people. It shouldn't be. It should be at a cost to the incumbents. It should be at those that are actually not paying their taxes, that is the issue. Those are hard decisions to take, but Nik we don't have a choice, and that's why I'm saying we need brave leaders that say, "Okay, enough is enough."

Yeah, we don't want 60-degree temperatures. We cannot live through 50 or 60-degree temperatures at all, and that is going to become the norm. So we're going to need to start figuring out how we actually transition. What are the mechanisms, the regulatory mechanisms, the fiscal mechanisms that we need in place and the new technologies that are going to enable us to move forward? We have most of them, but we have not seen bravery in our leadership that puts those packages together in order for us to move forward.

Last...

Nik Gowing

What do you want? Let me put to you the question: What do you say to politicians who say, "I've got to get reelected, and I can't get reelected on the basis that actually, I'm going to make it difficult for the cost of living?" You know all the arguments, but people are really concerned. They're facing enormous economic challenges at the moment, and the politicians are saying, "Can I take that risk?"

I would put to you that that's what's happening in the United Kingdom, where I'm speaking to you from, where we have a government which has five years of life but is still really concerned about growth versus sustainability. Can we persuade the public? They don't seem to want to at the moment.

Sandrine Dixson-Declève

So the re-election issue, for me, is a real problem—that's part of the morality gap. It's not a politician's role to get re-elected. It's a politician's role to do the right thing. Number one, that's your civic responsibility, and that's the problem: we've lost sight of what the civic responsibility of leadership.

The second key point is I totally agree with you that some of these decisions are difficult, but Nik, you and I circulate in so many different groups of expertise—economists, scientists, technology suppliers—that together have so many of these solutions. How difficult is it to truly bring in the right stakeholder engagement, to have those conversations, and come up with the right packages?

My worry is that what happens is it's traditionally the incumbents and those that are holding on to the power who are doing the most of the lobbying, whereas those that are doing the right thing are actually just trying to get on with it and do the right thing. Somehow, we have to bridge that gap of knowledge and expertise and enable our leadership to feel empowered by the data that they have, the knowledge that they have, and the solutions that they have at their fingertips—and then make the right decisions.

Nik Gowing

Sandrine, we've got three minutes left. Let me put to you, I mean, quite apart from what's happening in the United States with the new president, with Trump and so on, what is your belief about how committed business really is to this being a real business and economic opportunity where they can change their business models, change the form of growth, and therefore change the way in which the business and economic structures work to the benefit of all of us, but also in a way which will combat and create the transition which you and so many others are saying must happen now? Otherwise, we're sunk.

I think we're in a deep moment of a real pain point where we've noticed that schism between those businesses that are part of the transition and those that are really now digging in hard. The incumbents are making our lives difficult. Those of us who thought even two years ago that we were on the right trajectory, we have most of what we need, but it's clear that those that are

currently in power, in particular oil and gas sectors and the most incumbent industries, are really holding on to business as usual.

Sandrine Dixon-Declève

So many other companies are trying to do the right thing. The conversations that I have, I sit on a series of different boards, energy suppliers and, for example, car manufacturers. May we have to remember that BMW sold more electric vehicles across Europe over the summer than Tesla did. They have risen to the challenge, alongside many other European producers. It's not perfect yet, but they really have risen to the challenge. Our energy and utility suppliers are very much shifting towards green energy, and have put a huge amount of investment in this area.

What we need right now in Europe is to show how much this transition is in motion, we need to show how much we'll lose if we backtrack now for those companies that have shown the way, and that's where the tension is right now, and we cannot succumb to the power of the incumbents who are making our lives very difficult and supporting some of these populist governments that will continue to make our lives difficult, because they're not going to offer solutions for the future. They are offering predominantly profit-laden motives for themselves and also for their industries.

Now, last point, we need to figure out a way to heighten our collaboration, our research collaboration and our innovation with other countries. We need to address Africa that has the youngest population and so many innovators, or China. How can we, at this time, here on the European continent, ensure that we innovate together? Because, yes, this is a global problem, and Europe shouldn't be doing this alone.

Nik Gowing

So let's get a final thought from you. There'll be doomsters and those out there who are really quite depressed about this. And our aim always, in Thinking the Unthinkable, is, even if they're unthinkable and unpalatable, to think positively, to think realistically.

30 seconds, what's your, what's your sort of au revoir, what's your, what's your word of advice and also encouragement?

Sandrine Dixon-Declève

My first word is complacency is complicitness. We cannot be complacent at this time. We have what it takes to actually transform our economies. But the question is, do we have the brave leadership? But we need to be part of that leadership. We need to be part of the future.

Nik Gowing

Sandrine, thank you so much for joining us, and you can reference every everything that Sandrine has told us and given us a transcript of the podcast is posted in parallel on our website, along with contact details for us and Sandrine.

THINKING^{the} UNTHINKABLE

Do please join us when we have a conversation about Thinking the Unthinkable. Subscribe to our YouTube channel, where you'll find many podcasts from me, Nik Gowing.

Until the next time, keep thinking unthinkable. More than ever, it's both possible and it's necessary. Bye-bye.