

We Must Stop Talking to Ourselves in Climate Jargon

Guest Speaker **TOM RIVETT-CARNAC**

“[We must] stop speaking in jargon, explain things in language that makes sense to people who don’t have the time to try to engage in all these conversations that we often do, so that they feel there is a way for them to get behind meaningful change, and face the risk, and call for a different future.”

Nik Gowing

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

Hello. I'm Nik Gowing. When it comes to the climate emergency, biodiversity, and our collective abuse of nature, have we all chosen a bleak future, or are there positives to celebrate? We have to ask because, despite the screeching brakes being applied by President Trump in so many ways, we are heading in the right direction. That's even if the scientific realities continue to be bleak and heading in the wrong direction.

Well, I ask that question because I'm joined by Tom Rivett-Carnac.

In 2020, Tom and his co-author, Christiana Figueres, the former UN Secretary for Climate Change, who he used to work for as a political strategist, published a compelling little book, *The Future We Choose*. They labeled it *The Stubborn Optimist’s Guide to the Climate Crisis*.

The book starts: The world is on fire. The hour is late. The moment of consequence is long delayed.

What Tom and Christiana have run Global Optimism since 2016. This includes almost 300 compelling Outrage and Optimism podcast episodes, in which, to quote them, they take you behind the scenes of the politics, investments, and actions in meeting the climate crisis.

Tom Rivett-Carnac

First thing to say—this isn't 2017.

This is a lot worse than 2017 when Trump was inaugurated the first time. Thirty-three executive orders have now rolled back so much of what we've been trying to achieve on climate.

Nik Gowing

Well, Tom, welcome.

So that word—optimism—must underpin our 18-minute discussion. But I did watch you describe Trump's 33 executive orders rolling back climate and nature as heartbreaking.

Is optimism still possible?

Tom Rivett-Carnac

Great. Well, delighted to be here and lovely to see you, Nik.

So, I think there are two ways of answering that question.

One is, if you pay attention to what's happening now, you have to accept the fact that there are both good and bad trends. There are these two exponential curves that are unfolding ahead of us that are going to determine so much of our future—one of impacts and one of solutions.

The impacts curve is clearly getting worse. Last year was the hottest on record. January was so warm that scientists cannot explain the feedback mechanisms that are creating this impact. We know that winning slowly on climate change is the same as losing, and by many metrics, this is beginning to run away from us.

At the same time, wind and solar are the cheapest forms of new power in 189 countries around the world. We're seeing battery storage double every two years. There is a tremendous amount of momentum around the solution. So yes, you can be optimistic about the solution.

So that's the first answer.

The second, though, is what we refer to when we talk about stubborn optimism. It is more of a choice around how we show up at this critical moment.

It's true—we are in a moment of profound jeopardy, and success is not guaranteed. But failure is not guaranteed either. And by some counts, that makes these moments the best possible times to be alive.

The coming few years will determine the quality of life on this planet for the next 50 years, 500 years, and 500,000 years. So when faced with a moment of such consequence and jeopardy, what is it that falls upon us to do?

And I would say that, at this moment, we have a responsibility to show up with determination, courage, and energy while we can still make a difference—because that energy can directly affect the outcome.

Rebecca Solnit famously said that hope is not a soft thing that is about wishful thinking. It's an axe you break a door down with in an emergency.

And I've seen how this impacts the world.

When Christiana and I were at the UNFCCC trying to create the Paris Agreement, there were hundreds—thousands—of people who could tell us in exquisite detail why it was completely impossible to reach the kind of agreement that we knew was necessary.

But what we saw shift was the attitude. When we went from a collective belief that this was impossible to a collective sense that there might be something we could do, that optimism built itself into a wave of momentum that ultimately crashed over us and carried us forward. And that attitude is most relevant when the outlook is the darkest.

So I would say, yes—optimism and hope are fundamental to this critical moment.

Both because we can achieve the outcome we want, and secondly, because it's a strategy for success.

Nik Gowing

But I have your book in front of me from five years ago, Tom.

What future have we chosen? Is that now clear?

And I quote to you when you say: Our greenhouse gas emissions must be on the decline by the early 2020s and reduced by at least 50% by 2030.

That's on page nine of your book from five years ago.

Where are we now? Because I would suggest to you—we're nowhere near that. Correct?

Tom Rivett-Carnac

Absolutely.

So we're halfway through the decade, and the emissions are still going up. Still going up.

So from that perspective, we are absolutely not doing the big jump that we need to do in order to get on top of this issue, and denying that reality would be completely irresponsible. So the big jump has yet to be made.

And honestly, you know—we're this year, 10 years since the Paris Agreement was put into force. If you had told me 10 years ago where we would be on emissions 10 years later, I would have been heartbroken.

But if you told me where we would be on the deployment of solutions, on the cost trajectory, on the opportunity to actually really make a difference—I would have taken this future in a heartbeat.

10 years ago, it was a fantasy that the solutions to climate change would be more economically beneficial than the incumbents technologies that were causing the problem.
We are there now.

We have all the solutions available to us to deal with this issue—and do it in a way that is good for people, that is good for our economics. It's good for the future of our countries.

It's all there to be done.

But peculiarly, what I would say is—we believe back then that if you get the economics right, the politics will follow,

And we might get into some of this. But what we've seen is that even though we get the economics right—and you create jobs and you create economic opportunity with the solutions to climate change—the politics has lagged.

Look in places like Southern states of the United States, red wall counties in the north of England, the south of Australia.

These are places that are generating significant amounts of their economic growth from the solutions to climate change.

And yet the political dividend that should come along with that kind of transformation hasn't yet arrived.

So politics has entered a very confused and messy state as a result.

Nik Gowing

Let me, let me put you—one word you use several times is the word surmountable.

Tom Rivett-Carnac

Yes.

Nik Gowing

If addressed collectively, the scale and threat are surmountable.

So let me ask you— about is the determination and the momentum still achievable through collective action?

Or is there still a mood to be collective on this?

Or has Trumpism?—Is Trumpism now shredding that?

Tom Rivett-Carnac

Well, I mean, the last several weeks since Trump took office, have been devastated for our agenda. There's this is a heavy defeat. There's no way to deny that.

Is the is, are the is the trajectory that this has put us on to slow us down, going to be enough to prevent us from keeping to 1.5 degrees? I don't know it possibly will.

However, I would also say that the underlying momentum around the costs, around the ambition that exists in most governments around the world, even today, the pushback that is coming in the United States—it's late, but it's coming—I believe, will temper the worst excesses of what we've seen in the early weeks of the Trump administration to the point where we are likely to continue to see meaningful climate action.

Now there may be a little pause at this point, but let's remember in 2017, the US kept reducing emissions all throughout Trump's first term. That's the long term economic trajectory.

So that's not guaranteed. Right now, the narrative has run away from us with a sense that we're not dealing with this issue anymore. We're throwing it out, along with all these other concepts that Trumpism is so negative towards, such as equity and inclusion.

But I would say that that will have a backlash pretty quickly.

There are reasons why society is moving in the direction to deal with this issue, and those reasons remain true.

Now, Trump will know.

Nik Gowing

But let me put to you, I mean, let's think of big ideas where we can move positively forward, not to distort the arguments, but to actually encourage people to think that all is not lost.

You've made very clear, we must choose regeneration as the overarching principle of our lives and our activities.

How do you achieve that when you still got a political class who are reluctant to commit—not just in the United Kingdom but elsewhere—simply because of the societal, social problems, the pushback from people who are losing their jobs?

Tom Rivett-Carnac

Well, the political class are confused about how to manage this messy transition, and I think that that's probably fairly natural, right?

Because this is a difficult transition to manage. None of us have ever decarbonized a global economy before, but we do have multiple levers of change we can pull on to try to create that transformation. It doesn't all have to happen at the government level.

We saw this before, when Trump came in, and I believe this will strengthen in the coming years. I mean business ambition, investor ambition, mass mobilization of citizens, litigation. There are a whole range of different tools and levers that we can still pull in this moment.

And to your point about regeneration as you take it down to an individual level, what we often have said in the past—and I would say is relevant here—is each individual. I would say there's three things that lead to a regenerative way of showing up that I would encourage everybody to embrace.

Nik Gowing

But first of all, but first of all, Tom just very quickly, do you think people understand what regeneration is? Even?

Tom Rivett-Carnac

I think in general, probably a mixture. Probably many listening to this podcast might do the idea that we regenerate into a future that actually can then create many of the qualities and opportunities that we want.

I think it's probably not very well known more broadly. I think much of what we talk about is not broadly understood in society, and I think that's a big part of our challenge.

Nik Gowing

You had three points, sorry to interrupt you.

Tom Rivett-Carnac

Oh, I mean, in terms of a regenerative approach this moment, first is how we show up matters. Actually, the attitude that we bring to this is really critical and important. And I would say showing up with a sense of stubborn and determined optimism brings an energy and optimism and possibility that can lead to breakthrough.

The second is your own impact on the climate really matters. That's because everyone listening to this podcast is probably like you and I, in the small slice of people who are really creating this problem. So, mapping your own impact to say, "I want to reduce my impact on the climate by 50% in five years." Actually, that's enough time with energy and planning and thought.

And third, map how you touch power. This is the critical one. Everyone touches power in different ways, whether it's on the board of a school, or holding a pension, or through your employer. Map the ways in which you touch power and then identify how you can leverage that power to deliver an outcome and a change that.

Those three ways of showing up enable people to feel like they're part of a great generational endeavor, rather than stuck on their own and disempowered against a great challenge they have no leverage over.

Nik Gowing

Now, you've been committed on this for so long, not just with Christiana, but before that as well. Why do you think it is so difficult still for, and I'm using a phrase from one of your articles, why is it so difficult here for so many people to shift from being self-centric, in other words, selfish to nature, centric to being nature-aligned, when so many things like heat, like flooding, are now affecting people's lives in ways which, frankly, many of them don't really want to understand until it hits them?

Tom Rivett-Carnac

Well, I think there are, there are many problems with our society. And actually what you're talking about there—the sense of an emergence of a self being right at the heart of everything that I do to elevate—I mean speaking as a as you know, as a former Buddhist monk and someone who has, over the years, spent time exploring these things that that attitude of selfishness in our lives actually makes all of us pretty miserable a lot of the time. But it's what society tells us is a manifestation of success.

And now, with social media and the Internet, we have voices coming at us all of the time. The elevation of the self, promotion of ourselves online, all of these different things, is a big part of how we then manifest and project our own success. So, climate coming in and saying, we then need to have a collective sense of the whole planet and act in service of the whole is, to a certain degree, counter cultural at this moment.

And that, I think, is a place where it may not be possible for everybody to embrace a psychology of collective, shared responsibility. But we can understand risk. And this is somewhere where I think we've really fallen down in the climate movement. We have not properly invested in an in a shift of narrative that helps people see themselves inside this critical moment of transformation, understand the risk that is coming at them and their children if they don't do something about it, and help them feel empowered to actually step in.

I think a great example of this is the LA wildfires that happened a couple of weeks ago. This is a devastating impact, as all of your listeners will know—losing major parts of a major American city. And yet, because people who care about the climate crisis weren't front foot on the narrative shift, what we saw in the media was all this stuff about how this was caused, because diversity, equity and inclusion meant there was no water in the fire trucks.

I mean, that's a ridiculous narrative to come out of that, when actually, we know that the fingerprint of warming was on those fires. And that should have been a moment of wake-up to millions of people around the world, around the risk we're facing. But we weren't ready, as the climate movement, to capture that moment and speak to people in their own language—to help them

understand that this is a manifestation of a future, and we lost the narrative, even though the physical manifestation was so evident.

So, that's one example of the types of change that I think we're going to have to make. We need to stop speaking to ourselves, but stop speaking in jargon, explain things in language that makes sense to people who don't have the time to try to engage in all these conversations that we often do, so that they feel there is a way for them to get behind meaningful change, and face the risk, and call for a different future.

Nik Gowing

Tom, I mean, you use the word "heartbreaking" because of what Trump has done with his 33 executive orders. We have to assume there'll be others coming. The Inflation Reduction Act is clearly going to be shredded. So many issues are going to be shredded. Is there a way of somehow people like you mobilizing people, and I'm not talking about a mass movement or anything, but mobilizing people to understand the impact on people's health?

For example, temperature in Dubai was up to 62 degrees. They had water up to 10 feet deep. That's never happened in Dubai before. Are people not realizing the uniqueness of what is now happening at a speed they've never thought about before?

Tom Rivett-Carnac

Well, this is the point I'm making is that people aren't making the connections you. If you look, actually, a lot of the evidence on extreme weather is that people normalize their sense of what is usual every two to five years, and anything before that is kind of outside of the scope of our natural frame of references to what's normal. So we are literally like the frog in boiling water, where we just think back the last few years, and as things change over the decades, we don't generally deploy long memory to remember how things used to be, whether that's insect populations or stable climate or whatever else it might be.

So the reality of the kinds of catastrophic events you're talking about has to be combined with thoughtful, intelligent, well-targeted, well-constructed, well-resourced communication strategy to help people understand what's really happening. We live in such a noisy world. We're distracted by things yelling at us all the time, whether it's commercials or narrative or whatever else it might be, the climate movement has not engaged with that to the degree that it needs to.

And one of the things I'm hopeful about is that philanthropy, which holds so much of the key now to identifying where the strategy goes for the climate movement, is beginning to understand that we are not going to make this shift. The extreme weather that keeps hitting us isn't going to lead to the political and economic shifts and public opinion shifts that it should unless it's married with proper communications to help people understand what they've seen. So that's a place to think we need to move.

Nik Gowing

Tom, we got about three minutes left. We're talking not long after the drama at the Munich Security Conference, which, of course, in many ways, is nothing to do with climate except it is. It's about the security of society. And we're talking about thinking the unthinkable. And I can tell you, having been there that where I saw diplomats, politicians and others shaking their heads, saying, "We've never really even thought about the kind of things that Trump is doing and the implications for Ukraine."

Let me ask you to extend that to climate—about thinking differently. About whether you think there's a political class, a corporate class, a civil service class, a public service class, which can be changed at the speed that is necessary to meet the kind of warnings that you put in your book five years ago?

Tom Rivett-Carnac

Look, the ease it's both the easiest and the hardest thing right? To see what is before us and understand the moment that we're in. If we can all sink into that, if there can be a collective moment that we precipitate in which everybody deeply understands that... I know it sounds simple, but that's what it's going to take for people to find the determination and the courage for this to turn into the greatest political movement that his, that we've ever seen. That's what it should be. It should be the great unifier. We're all facing a common challenge. We all need to rise to it. We all face a common destiny if we don't deal with it.

And yet, topics are moving against that, though, aren't they? But we've allowed it to let us splinter the communications and the narrative that brings us back together, that makes this a unified approach, so that we don't devolve into geopolitical fighting, into nationalism, into fascism, into all these other things that we appear to be on the cusp of. The only way we're going to avoid that future is if we can see what's before us—and for the first time, or for a rare time—rise up as humanity and take action before we go down this difficult road. We are capable of doing it. Whether we will or not, will be an interesting thing to watch.

Nik Gowing

One final thought in 30 seconds, if you can: it's all very well talking about the being the stubborn optimists. But what about the Enlightened optimists, many of whom may be watching this, this podcast, and saying to themselves "I want to be energized. I want to be encouraged. I want to be excited seeing there is a possibility of a way forward," in the way that you and Christiana have been looking at here for the last 15 years?

Tom Rivett-Carnac

Well, I mean to them, I would say, and if bad about what's happening with Trump at the moment, my experience of sitting in inside governments and between them, governments never lead. They take up the rear. What leads is economics, people, business, the world moves forward, and government takes up the rear. There's nothing stopping the world continue to move forward right now.

Nik Gowing

Tom, Tom, that's a really important message—that governments need to be told by the public.

Thank you so much for joining us, and you can reference every detail that Tom gave us.

A transcript of the podcast is posted in parallel on our website, along with contact details for us and Tom at Global Optimism, so please join us when we have our next conversation about Thinking the Unthinkable.

Subscribe to our YouTube channel, where you'll find all our podcasts, including this one, of course, and from me, Nik Gowing, until the next time, keep thinking unthinkable.

More than ever, it's both possible and necessary. From Tom and me, bye, bye.