

### **‘Baby Steps’ on Climate Will Not Work**

Guest Speaker **KUMI NAIDOO**

**“And we have to acknowledge that the pessimism that justifiably emerges from our analysis, our lived experience and our observations can, must and should be responded to by the optimism of our thought, our creativity, our action, our courage and our sense of humanity.”**

#### **Nik Gowing**

Welcome to the Thinking the Unthinkable podcast, our latest leadership conversation. Hello, I'm Nik Gowing. The extremes of weather are multiplying and becoming more frequent. Weather intense heat, intense rain, storms, violent winds. This is everywhere on our planet now.

The trend is accentuating, not easing. It's affecting us all in some way or another. So why is it an enormous challenge to mobilize public voices and public pressure, and especially the political class to engage far more dramatically.

Well, joining me from South Africa is Kumi Naidoo. Kumi has made a career of being an activist, especially on the environment, social justice and human rights. He labels himself troublemaker in his memoir. He works to get things done, often in unorthodox ways. That's why I want him to share his radical perspectives for thinking the unthinkable. He's been head of Greenpeace International, and Amnesty International.

Currently he's president of the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative. So what can we learn? Kumi, a very warm welcome. Why are we not where we need to be?

#### **Kumi Naidoo**

Thank you, Nik, and thank you so much for having me and greetings to your listeners. So firstly, I would say for 30 years plus since the climate negotiations have been going on, especially since Copenhagen around the time that I met you for the first time in 2009, we were calling for a fab deal, not a fabulous deal, but a fair, ambitious and binding deal.

Each year though, what we get is a FLAB outcome, FLAB, full of loopholes and I'll let your viewers and listeners decide what the B could stand for. So the main problem is we have not been addressing the root cause of climate change. And 86 % of what drives climate change is our dependency on fossil fuels.

So what we've been doing for 30 years is we've been wiping the floor and mopping the floor without turning off the tap. So thankfully the fossil fuel treaty initiative, which is getting lots of momentum now, is going to the root cause. The second reason has been how we communicate about climate change. And if I might personalize this, our son told us four years ago, who was a

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musician, he said, problem with you folks is you'll aim all your messages at the brain and you'll ignore the heart, the body and the soul. And then he evoked Trump and he said, look at Trump, he bypasses the brain and he goes straight to the heart and weaponizes all sorts of hatred and so on.

I said, does that mean, you know, we should lie like Trump does? And he said, no, you'll just have to be less boring with the facts because we'll talk in a language that is part two scientific, part two policy wonkish and so on. And so the other part of my work therefore is sadly our son passed.

Shortly after the conversation, we set up a foundation in his name called the Rikirik Foundation for the promotion of artivism, where we bring arts, culture and activism together. And so we're doing a lot of work now to actually address how we communicate about climate change. We have to make sure that we...

### **Nik Gowing**

...And what changes are you introducing on communications and narrative? I've heard this so often, but people still find it difficult to change the way they express it all.

### **Kumi Naidoo**

And let's admit it, I'm glad you came back with that because it is a bit difficult because we can't be communicating about 1.5 degrees, 350 parts per million and all the science. We know that that doesn't cut through. So one of the things that we're doing is more like protect what we love, know?

Get people to understand that this struggle is about water, about jobs, about...food about our children's future and so on. And one of the things that we need to say more about is that the planet actually does not need saving. Because if we continue on the suicidal trajectory that we are on, we destroy our water, destroy our soil, gets too hot, we can't try plant food, we will be gone, the planet will still be here.

So we have to make this thing about protecting our children and their children's future as part of our narratives. Because in all cultures, irrespective of race, religion, creed, color, you will find that...everybody views their children's futures as quite important.

The last thing why we are failing is the universe is constantly telling us that we're in trouble. The 1997 financial crisis, the 2008-2009 global financial crisis and COVID. And when we are in the midst of those crisis, our political leaders do actually summon up the courage to be bold, you know, like...

During the 1997 financial crisis, they talked about the world needs a new international financial architecture. During 2008, 2009, there was a G20 in London where commitment was made to stop fossil fuel subsidies. And during COVID, our leaders were saying, we need to build back better.

What we find is that once they get out of the crisis, it's all about system recovery, system protection, and system maintenance. But these events have taught us that what we need is system innovation, system redesign, and system transformation. And I'll end with that by saying that the climate crisis is not an environmental crisis. It's a result of a economic system that's not working for the majority, a food system, energy system, a transport system and so on. And we will be deluding ourselves if we

think that we're going to address the crisis by engaging in incremental tinkering or baby steps in the right direction when we've dragged our food for so long.

### **Nik Gowing**

Now, Kumi, one of the phrases I've seen and I've heard you mentioned many times, powerful interests have abused our planet. We, people and the public, are inconvenient collateral damage. What do you mean by that?

### **Kumi Naidoo**

So as we are seeing now in the world that, you in many places where we thought we had democracy like the United States, in fact, largely what we've had is liberal oligarchy, which is the domination of the societies by the very wealthy. And right now under President Trump, it's become very, very clear to see, right?

The thing is that the people that are facing the first and most brutal impacts of climate change that like in Africa, for example, are the ones who don't even have a fridge, a microwave, a car, and so on. They are contributing virtually nothing to the crisis. But they are the ones that are paying the price right now. And the appeal we make to the most wealthiest of people who control policy making in far too many governments around the world is to simply say,

Your children and our children are both at risk here. And you have to moderate your thirst for levels of profit that don't take into account the fact that we need to change our economic system, our energy system, and so on. The good news is one of the biggest drivers of climate is our energy choices.

And on this we are seeing that solar and wind is drastically coming down and is now, you know, the economics is what's going to drive renewable energy forward, but it needs to go in a much faster rate than it's going at the moment.

### **Nik Gowing**

How do those like you counter what you call the forces of denial, the significant powers out there who are determined to discredit the science and pour vast amounts of money and resource into making sure that the science is set aside and that the status quo is maintained?

### **Kumi Naidoo**

So first we have to recognize that we are experiencing a desperate communications deficit in the way we approach our work. And the communications deficit, plays itself up in two ways. One, the objective challenge of who controls the communications tools today.

So if you're looking at social media and its rise, and you're talking about Elon Musk and...Mark Zuckerberg and a handful of people who sadly have aligned themselves to Trump and climate denialism to varying degrees. But even if we look at mainstream media or legacy media as they call it now in the United States, it is heavily stacked against any ideas that push back on the broken status quo.

in which we live. So objectively speaking, you know, let's say that we're starting in a very difficult situation because the means to communicate the crisis and how close to the climate cliff we're getting is stacked against us. But having said that, assuming for a minute we had a more equitable communications environment where alternative ideas, visionary ideas and all will get equal or

### **Nik Gowing**

Do you think that's possible? Do you think that can be created?

### **Kumi Naidoo**

In the current moment, if we look at how the media environment is, it would be very challenging to change. But I would say, Nik, if we don't do it, we don't defend democracy and democracy is going to die. So it's critical for democracy that we have a diverse.

And I don't want a media environment where it's only things that I agree with. I want a media environment where the things that people who are pushing for very different visions for the future gets a fair say, as well as others. But I would be lying if I said to you that it's going to be a walk in the park. But just for a second, let's assume that we had a much more equitable environment. Now, in this equitable environment, we would mess it up.

Because we want to talk about scientific facts and all of those things, and instead of connecting with jobs and futures and children and things that... So we have two challenges. We have to push for making the media environment in different countries and globally to be much more fair for a wide variety of ideas to get a fair hearing.

But we also have to start communicating in a way that we are not talking to just policy makers. And that is why even when our governments do positive things to move the climate agenda forward, they got resistance from ordinary people because they have not done the communications to get people on board. And that I think we ignore at our peril.

### **Nik Gowing**

Do you have a big idea on this, about how to create this engagement with the public, a public which is deeply concerned now, whether wherever they are in the developed world or the underdeveloped world, about what is happening in so many ways. I don't have to have to list them here, but how people can be mobilized and be told, because you say pessimism is a luxury we cannot afford. This is now a terrifying moment to use your words.

### **Kumi Naidoo**

So the big idea that we have been working on is looking at history and what history teaches us. For every struggle that we have fought successfully, whether it was slavery, whether it was colonialism, whether it was a woman's right to vote, if you go and look at those struggles, the power of arts and culture was central in moving those strategies forward.

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The way I put it is, harnessing the full power of arts and culture alone will not deliver our salvation from the climate crisis and the intersecting crisis. However, failing to harness the power of arts and culture almost guarantees that we will fail. Let me give you a quick example, Nik, to make this point clear. When our Secretary General of Amnesty International, an artist who might be familiar with you from Iceland called Olafur Eliasson, was done some major...

installations at COPS and so on and he's a really powerful communicator on the climate calls me and says, Ken, I really need you to come to Reykjavik and I need you to encourage Mary Robinson to come and join us. So I say, oh, what's happening in Olafur? He says, we're having a funeral. I say, I'm so sorry who passed away. And he said, a glacier. And on an early Saturday morning,

Mary Robinson, myself and the Prime Minister of Iceland spoke to about several hundred people. We climbed up this dead iceberg. There was a plaque there that said at this moment of history, we know what needs to be done. If you're reading this now, let's hope we did it.

And that evening when I'm at Olafur's Place, he says, let's just go and check how much of coverage we got, you know, in the media. And I'm not saying this just to be modest, but it had much more impact compared to 90 % of the actions that happened under my leadership at Greenpeace. So when I reflected on that together with all of you, you said, you know why? Because you didn't talk about 1.5 degrees and 350 parts per million. You all talked about loss. And everybody understands loss, whether they lost a lover somewhere along the line or whether they lost a friend, family or colleague through death. People have a sense of loss.

And so, what we focused on, we lost this very precious thing that is not coming back. And so the media coverage, can even go now, I invite your viewers and listeners, just say, funeral for an iceberg. And it touched people in a very different way.

And so that is why this is one of the emerging movements of our time to say we need the worlds of arts and culture to be centrally involved in the climate movement to help us to communicate more effectively. Let me just end by saying why is it that we need, in addition to helping us communicate the current moment?

Nik, throughout history, it is artists and cultural creatives that helped us imagine societies yet to be born, right? The role of imagination, because what is lacking most right now is we cannot imagine sufficiently how to get out of the mess that we're in and to create the future that we want. So for all of those reasons, I would say harnessing the full power of arts and culture, creating multiple opportunities for cultural creatives to be, and by the way, cultural creatives are not waiting for boring people like me from the mainstream sort of activist movement to come and ask them to get involved.

They are getting involved based on their own understanding, right? And we need to nurture that, enable that, make that, you know, flourish. So, for example, I'm just about to accept an invitation to go and do the keynote address to the gaming industry, right? Having a meeting in Nairobi, a global

meeting, because more than 1.5 billion people are spending more than 20 hours, you know, a week on gaming. That's part of the new culture we live in.

So, does it make sense for us to engage with that industry and say, hey, you guys just make games about shooting people and crashing cars. Can you make also games about building a forest, organizing a community, doing civil society, solar mini grid and so on. So that's the big idea about the communications thing.

### **Nik Gowing**

I've heard you say several times that we need a united planetary response and movement, mass collaboration, mass mobilization. We've got a couple of minutes left. Are you making progress on that to mobilize vast numbers of people to come together?

### **Kumi Naidoo**

Yes, what's amazing is that the fossil fuel treaty idea, which draws on the nuclear nonproliferation treaty and the landmine treaty, now has 20 countries that have publicly endorsed and a further 20 plus or minus who are in the conversation right now. And in April, at the end of the month, in Colombia will be the first international Conference for a Just Transition on a Phase Out of Fossil Fuels, hosted by the Colombian, Dutch, and Pacific Island governments. We hope to have close to 100 governments participate, and we hope that this will be the beginning of countries coming together to say, we need a treaty where we can bind ourselves, not leave it for voluntary implementation as the COP for the UNFCCC, the UN body that caught...

### **Nik Gowing**

And Kumi, let me just press you because you've talked about hope. We need hope, not naive hope, but courageous, disciplined and determined hope. Is the mountain moving on this or not?

### **Kumi Naidoo**

Yes, I am seeing, like say, if you take the United States, everybody says, oh, things are so bad in the United States, was what Trump has done. But if you look deeper, you've got a growing number of states. For example, three states have in the legislatures have passed resolutions, Hawaii, Maine, and California, to endorse the treaty and to push for the treaty. We've got multiple cities that are joining more than 200, the mayor of London.

Sadiq Khan is a global champion for us to get cities mobilized. We've got more than 4,000 civil society organizations that are gravitating. What this moment needed was an intervention that went to the root cause of the problem, which is fossil fuels. And right now we are seeing the momentum. However, is the scale of mobilization anything close to what we need? Absolutely not. But is it building in the way that we want? It is, but it needs to accelerate much more than it is happening at the moment.

And I would remind people of Desmond Tutu's quote, know, Desmond Tutu used to say, I am a prisoner of hope, right? And what I would say is that at this moment of history, it is true, pessimism is a luxury we simply cannot afford. And we have to acknowledge that the pessimism that justifiably

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emerges from our analysis, our lived experience and our observations can, must and should be responded to by the optimism of our thought, our creativity, our action, our courage and our sense of humanity. And what I want to say optimistically, getting to the root cause of the problem fossil fuels is finally on the table. It's being discussed.

We all need to push our leaders to move faster to phase out. We now need to communicate in a way that invites a much larger number of people into the movement by harnessing the power of arts and culture and communicating in more accessible ways.

And thankfully, because of the courage of young people across the world, I think adult leaders, some of whom have got a bit stale in the way they see the current moment, I am seeing energies that give me hope that we are on a point of tipping the balance. And ironically, some of the blockage by President Trump might actually contribute to people both within the United States and outside really pushing for much more bolder climate action as we move forward.

### **Nik Gowing**

So in 10 seconds there really is a new appetite for activism which as you say you've never seen in history.

### **Kumi Naidoo**

Absolutely. The moment we are in is not where any one of us thought. When you and I met for the first time, if I told you, you know, in 2026, this is where we're going to be, you would have laughed at me, right? So, but on the other hand, so that's the downside. On the positive side, I don't remember, Nik, any moment in more than almost five years of activism that the appetite for big structural and systemic change is as high, as it is at this moment.

And I believe that the appetite for big change, which is what the moment calls for, is higher than it's ever been. And I think that that gives me hope that we are finally going to get to the point where we start addressing root causes rather than just treating the symptoms of climate change.

### **Nik Gowing**

Well, thanks, Kumi. I look forward to getting an update from you in a few months to see how fast this really can move. You can reference every detail that Kumi has given us. That's because a transcript of the podcast is posted in parallel on our website, along with contact details for us and for Kumi, of course. Do please share your experiences. Join us when we next have a conversation about Thinking the Unthinkable. Subscribe to our YouTube channel where you'll find all our podcasts very much in the same vein of frankness.

So from me, Nik Gowing, until the next time, keep thinking unthinkables. More than ever, it's both possible and necessary, from Kumi and from me. Bye bye.

### **Kumi Naidoo**

Thank you.