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Issue 2 2024

AUDREY TANG

It’s ‘game on’ for Taiwan, where new technologies are being used to collaboratively define the future of AI.
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**Comment**

Andy Haldane

**Escaping a democratic recession**

This century has seen the world tilt away from liberal democracy and towards more authoritarian regimes. Some have called this a ‘democratic recession’. With around half the world’s population going to the polls this year, some fear a further tilt away from democracy. Indeed, could we even find ourselves in democratic depression?

One of the key reasons for failing support for democracies is that, latterly, they have not boosted the living standards of large numbers of people. As global growth has slowed, it has particularly hit the poorest and youngest. The result is rising discontent, especially among the poor and young, at the political system delivering these outcomes.

One of the hallmarks of the RSA is its ability to take a long-term view. When it comes to political systems, that longer-lensed view is decisively more optimistic. We are living in the first century in human history where liberal democracy is the dominant political regime globally. Viewed through the lens of history, we are close to the peak of a global democratic boom, not in recession. We also know, looking at research over many years and many political regimes, that democracy is, on average, good for living standards. Democracies more effectively allocate the scarce resources that make up an economy and support its citizens. The tilt away from democracy is a recipe for slower growth, not faster. A democratic recession makes an economic one more likely.

Another lesson of history is that democracy is malleable. Given the risks facing democracy, this issue of the Journal considers some different flavours. In keeping with our theme of courage, we highlight examples of courageous governance’ from around the world.

Audrey Tang (until recently Taiwan’s first Digital Minister) discusses the innovative ways in which Taiwan is using new technology to upgrade the democratic process. Her article demonstrates that, far from curbing agency and biasing decision-making, technology can improve the accuracy and legitimacy of the democratic process.

Jane Davidson, former Welsh Environment Minister, discusses a different type of democratic upgrade. The Well-being of Future Generations Act in Wales puts the interests of successor generations at the centre of decision-making — a bulwark against short-termism. It also gives environmental health as prominent a role as economic and social health in policy decisions.

The ‘In conversation’ interview with Eoin O’Malley and Vlad Fanaisse’s article on metrics both consider the role of community-level governance. Fanaisse’s work illustrates the added resilience and legitimacy that this can achieve. But O’Malley, who helped initiate the recent citizens’ assemblies in Ireland, offers a cautionary note. While early assemblies were successful in shaping public opinion, more recent versions have not always mirrored society and have been rejected by the public. This is a clearly a pivotal year for democracy globally. Restoring it will require improvements, perhaps fundamental ones. I hope this issue of the Journal inspires Fellows to think, and to act, in ways that support those improvements.

The stakes could scarcely be higher.
he Fellows Artists’ Network (FAN) aims to raise the profile of the arts across society and the need to tap into ideas from fresh sources, encourage new work, increase access to different art forms and promote artistic work and ideas, particularly for under-represented voices in the arts.

‘Made Visible’, an art and writing exhibition in the RSA’s Vaults, was the result of a project by 2makeit, a charity using creativity to support the rehabilitation of offenders, in partnership with FAN and social enterprise Pictora. Since 2021, 2makeit has been part of a project supporting men who have experienced the prison system and who are screened into the Personality Disorder Pathway via the NHS and HM Prison and Probation Service. The provision includes one-to-one professional advice and support, a safe place to meet and complementary music and arts activities by 2makeit to promote wellbeing and build the relationships which can reduce the risk of reoffending. Art from the project led to the exhibition, which brought artists together from any background, including those who suffer from labels that may hold them back (eg ‘homeless’, ‘offender’ or ‘unemployed’), and exhibited work without labels bringing out hidden talent to be… made visible. The exhibition included work by NHS, charity and probation staff, refugees, those experiencing mental health challenges, and those living in hostels and from prisons as far apart as Brixton and Inverness.

Hundreds visited the show, leaving excellent feedback. Most importantly, the exhibition had great impact and meaning for the service users of 2makeit and Pictora who contributed work and had the chance to see the show, one of whom wrote: “Some of the images have stayed with me and I thought about them all evening — in one of them, I could see myself and my own struggles within a drawing and it blew my mind. The building was amazing — with all the masonry, paintings and distinguished visitors… it was so good to feel like everyone was there to appreciate the art, support each other and has made me want to start visiting galleries and feel more like it is ok for someone like me to go! It was one of the best afternoons I have had in a seriously long time!”

Such was the response that more exhibitions are in the pipeline.

Andrew Darke, FRSA is an artist, environmental activist and FAN co-leader.

Philip Emery, FRSA is Director of 2makeit and FAN co-leader.

Mark Power, FRSA is Director of MillsPower Architecture and FAN co-leader.

Above and right two artworks featured in the ‘Made Visible’ exhibition

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Chantal Coady
Chantal Coady is a sustainable cocoa expert and founder of Rococho Chocolates. She has been pivotal in changing the UK chocolate scene, weaning people away from sugary confectionery to single estate dark chocolate. While working with the Grenada Chocolate Company, she was inspired to take a radically different approach, ‘tree to bar’, adding value all the way back to the place where it grows. In 2019, Chantal launched The Chocolate Detective, a business that works with cocoa farmers based in Grenada to highlight sustainable chocolate. Chantal is the first person to be awarded an OBE for ‘services to chocolate making’.

Emma Wilson
Emma Wilson is the Director of Technical, Production and Costume at the UK’s Royal Opera House, having previously served in the same role at the National Theatre’s Wells Theatre, prior to which she toured extensively worldwide. She has a PhD in the field of environmental politics and she is particularly committed to sustainability in theatre production, working on steering advisory bodies in the UK and Europe-wide. Her other interests in theatre include safety in the workplace, opportunities for young people and workplace diversity. She was awarded an MBE for services to the performing arts in the 2024 New Year Honours.

Charles Ekibele
Charles Ekibele is an academic, researcher and writer, currently working on the intersection of climate change and health. He received his PhD in parasitology from the University of Glasgow, focusing on understanding how drugs work against parasites and how parasites become resistant to drugs. As an independent freelance consultant, he has worked with organisations such as the World Health Organization and Wellcome Trust and is a Visiting Fellow at the United Nations University International Institute for Global Health and in children with speech and language differences. Jane is a National Teaching Fellow of UK Advance HE, a trustee of the English-Speaking Union and an advocate of public engagement with research.

Jane Setter
Christoph Nienmann
Christoph Nienmann is an artist, author and animator. His work appears regularly on the covers of The New Yorker, National Geographic and The New York Times Magazine, and has been subject to numerous museum retrospectives. He has drawn live from the Venice Art Biennale and the Olympic Games and has sketched the New York City Marathon — while running it. A member of Alliance Graphique Internationale, in 2010 Christoph was inducted into the Art Directors Club Internationale. His approach is based on decades of detailed experimental work and widespread application in practice (including planting schemes for the Barbican and London Olympic Park) and has been widely applied in the UK and abroad.

Nigel Dunnett
Nigel Dunnett is a Professor of Planting Design, Vegetation Technology and Urban Horticulture at the University of Sheffield and Director of Nigel Dunnett Studio. One of the world’s leading voices on planting design, he is a pioneer of the new ecological approach to planting public spaces. His work revolves around the integration of ecology and horticulture to achieve low-input, high-impact landscapes. His approach is based on decades of detailed experimental work and widespread application in practice (including planting schemes for the Barbican and London Olympic Park) and has been widely applied in the UK and abroad.

Laura François
Laura François is a Canadian impact strategist and Director of Awe Exchange, a non-profit lab building a case for the emotion of awe in systems change work. Previously, she co-founded The Spaceship, supporting social entrepreneurship education, and led nonprofits including Fashion Revolution Malaysia and Singapore, advancing circular production and ethical labour. She now mentors start-ups on impact storytelling at Fashion for Good. Alongside her awe-based impact strategy work, Laura is editing her first book, ReelOfEarth, which explores creativity as a renewable resource for changemakers aiming to reimagine sustainable systems.

Laura François
Melissa Thom
Melissa Thom is a voice actor who founded BRAVA (Bristol Academy of Voice Acting) to provide training for creative professionals wishing to add voice acting to their skillset. BRAVA Business, aimed at improving communication skills in the workplace and beyond, launched in 2024. Melissa hosts BRAVA’s High Notes podcast, featuring conversations on the art and business of voice. She is also a judge for the ARIAS, the UK’s audio and radio awards, and a Women in Games Ambassador. Her voiceover clients have included Rockstar Games (GTAV), Zenimax (Elder Scrolls), Amazon, Google, Facebook, Twitter, Unicef and LI COOL J.

Laura François
Chris Houston
Chris Houston is co-founder and president over the newly established Canadian Peace Museum in Ontario, which will open to the public in 2025. He is currently Principal Consultant for Humanitarian Associates, in which role he advises innovators and funders on scaling up innovations and programming. Chris previously served as head of logistics for the World Health Organization in Yemen and worked with Médecins Sans Frontières and the Red Cross across Asia, Africa and the Middle East. He is also a judge for the ARIAS, the UK’s audio and radio awards, and a Women in Games Ambassador. Her voiceover clients have included Rockstar Games (GTAV), Zenimax (Elder Scrolls), Amazon, Google, Facebook, Twitter, Unicef and LI COOL J.

Laura François
Manideep Yenugula
Manideep Yenugula is the Performance and Monitoring Engineer for The Chickasaw Nation (a federally recognised Native American tribe in the US) in Dallas, Texas. A subject matter expert in performance and monitoring engineering, he excels in leveraging cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, internet of things and deep learning across the IT landscape. He is also a mentor and coach and has authored numerous scientific papers on topics around AI and performance and sustainable cloud computing.
The ‘Taiwan Model’ offers a playbook for using safe, sustainable and citizen-led AI to revitalise societies worldwide.

Words: Audrey Tang
Illustrations: Jude Buffum
local economic and security instability is placing our free and open societies under tremendous pressure. Not since the 1930s, when the Great Depression and civil turmoil dominated a decade of darkness leading up to World War II, have governments faced such uncertainty. Extremism, isolation, polarisation and populism — amplified by social media and the 24/7 news cycle — are reshaping the geopolitical landscape in ways favourable to authoritarian regimes.

With India and the US, the world’s largest democracy and economy, respectively, going to the polls in 2024 — along with nearly 40 other countries such as Taiwan, Indonesia, Mexico and Pakistan — there is not a moment to waste in recognising the misuse of artificial intelligence (AI) in amplifying election-related risks via deepfake videos, echo chambers, micro-targeting and undermining information integrity. Indeed, these tools and tactics are already being used in attempts to sway opinions and create confusion.

What is needed is the collective courage to wrest back control of the narrative by reinvigorating democracy, as well as restoring faith in our democratic institutions and rules-based order. Co-creation is increasingly seen by the public, private and civic sectors as the best means of paving the way for humankind through the 21st century and beyond. The people must be given a fighting chance to understand how AI systems reply to political questions, the role of model developers in shaping replies, whether models are biased and the meaning of outputs. We cannot ignore the fact that lowering the cost of political persuasion threatens to negatively impact the electoral landscape, exacerbating existing divisions and creating different information ecosystems.

**Doubling down on democracy**

I am proud to share that Taiwan was quick out of the ballot box blocks in January this year with smoothly conducted elections — as evidenced by the 22% drop in DDoS incidents compared to 2022. Each distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack was logged, analysed and acted upon.

This approach, complemented by frontline monitoring, proved sufficiently effective, as evidenced by the 22% drop in DDoS incidents compared to 2022.

Anticipatory debunking, or pre-bubbling, was another secret of Taiwan’s success. Cofacts, a crowdsourced platform set up by gov (gov-zero) — a decentralised civic tech community enshrining core values such as cooperation, information transparency and open results — played a central role in ensuring the integrity of online information. Malicious and innocent reports alike were studied and assessed on the basis of accuracy and persuasiveness. With the assistance of community-trained AI systems, the results were quickly released, allowing the people to make informed judgements on the veracity of content.

As a responsible member of the international community, Taiwan leads in sharing its democracy-related experience and know-how. This approach centres on giving back while engaging with like-minded partners. It plays an important part in ensuring that this island of resilience and its 23 million freedom-loving people can contribute meaningfully to tackling issues of global significance.

**Governing AI**

Safe and sustainable development of AI systems is one of the many areas in which Taiwan can help. AI systems are machine-based; for explicit or implicit objectives they infer from the input received how to implement outputs such as content, predicting recommendations or decisions influencing physical and virtual environments. Levels of adaptiveness and autonomy among AI systems vary after deployment.

Global governance of AI systems must be a race to safety, not a race to power. A democratic approach — as opposed to a technocratic one — is the optimal answer for what is an ethical, political and societal conundrum. This encapsulates my personal mantra of ‘deep listening and taking all sides’, recognising that intelligence stems from the mind and spaces between people.

To this end, the moda has advanced Alignment Assemblies with the Collective Intelligence Project (CIP) and world-class partners such as Anthropic, OpenAI, The GovLab and GETTING-Plurality research network. Everyday citizens are invited to co-govern AI in the context of information integrity: protecting users from harm; detecting and labelling AI content; requiring digital signatures for advertisers; making AI systems transparent; implementing oversight of fact-checking; and ongoing monitoring of AI incidents.

The genesis of this deliberation lies in vTaiwan, an online-offline consultation bringing together government agencies and ministries, as well as academics, business leaders, civil society organisations, citizens, experts and lawmakers. Supported by a selection of collaborative open-source engagement tools, the 2014-launched process enables stakeholders to freely and openly exchange opinions on formulating or revising legislation.

**Building consensus**

At the heart of vTaiwan is Polis. This real-time system gathers, analyses, interprets and visually maps in clusters of consensus what large groups of participants think. It is used to address a host of important but generally under-the-radar issues such as copyright, bias and discrimination, due compensation, fair use, public service and broader societal impacts. Its allure lies in a simple yet profound design: people naturally gravitate towards finding common ground, rather than delving into divisive issues.

An innovative aspect of Polis is the absence of a reply button. Participants can propose ideas and comments without going back and forth on trivia, it tends to eliminate the troll factor. This produces a value-added result as the focus is on expressing ideas that will garner support from both sides of a divide. Gaps are naturally narrowed by not wasting time on off-piste statements.

In Taiwan, Alignment Assemblies are already laying the foundations for consensus among the people regarding global governance of AI systems, while addressing common challenges and concerns collectively. Through the 111 SMS number, hundreds of thousands of randomly selected citizens were invited by the moda in March this year to co-create guidelines for Al evaluation in the context of information integrity. (111 was set up by the moda to serve as a trustworthy source of government information, reducing the risk of SMS fraud and further strengthening digital resilience.)

"... intelligence stems from the mind and spaces between people"
Governments should employ inclusion and radical transparency

The topics, pertaining to large platforms and serving as a roadmap for policymakers, are: automatically detecting and labelling posts containing AI-generated content; notifying users exposed to falsehoods post facto and providing them with context; assigning a unique anonymous digital ID to each user to ensure content provenance and accountability; ensuring system transparency; implementing citizen oversight and independent assessment of AI systems; social media harms. Isolation and polarisation are symptoms of the absence of credible neutral institutions in society. The modus operandi is eroding bridges between users and social platforms by encouraging the latter to take greater responsibility for content. If a social platform in Taiwan is used to perpetuate scams, which are flagged and not taken down promptly resulting in financial loss, the parent company is liable for the damages suffered by the users. This re-internalises negative externalities, ensuring the company shares the burden of harms if it does not vet the harms.

The recently established AI Evaluation Center (AIEC) is an additional example of how the modus operandi is supporting global governance of AI systems. As a jumping-off point for comprehensive evaluation of related risks, AIEC combines safety research and development with innovative mechanisms for collective decision-making. Before large-scale damage occurs, steps can be taken to prevent harm and, at the same time, the people understand how to mitigate the risks in advance.

Alignment Assemblies can also be employed in adjudicating AI risks and harms. One of the most topological is the persuasive power of large language models (LLMs). Studies show that LLMs with access to personal information are far more effective in changing participant opinions than humans are. This opens the door to advancing false or misleading narratives online, particularly via micro-targeting. The legitimate course of action in this case is to recognise the perils of persuasiveness by assessing acceptability and risk tolerance.

Once an area of general risk is prioritised, and alignment processes take place in Taipeh and Tainan cities, then it is critical to understand a proportionate response based on these results. One option is to create a standing panel, starting with domain experts in relevant areas. The legitimacy of this course of action is to recognise the perils of persuasiveness by assessing acceptability and risk tolerance.

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Almost a decade on from its passage, the Well-being of Future Generations Act is a testament to the power of courage in good governance

Words: Jane Davidson   Illustrations: Calum Heath

“Do unto future generations what you would have had past generations do unto you”

John Rawls
We’ve spent most of our working life trying to understand why organisations, including governments, take bad decisions. By ‘bad’ I mean contrary to the factual evidence. We are seeing record ice reduction in the Arctic and Antarctic, record temperatures, record rainfall, record floods and droughts. In response, you would expect public bodies to be calculating risks, making plans to keep communities safe, prioritising spending to mitigate, and adapt to, the current and future situation. Most importantly, you would expect governments to be doing ‘whatever it takes’—a well-used political trope—to look after their populations.

But, in fact, the silence on the actions needed is deafening. Somehow, the actions needed are too brave, and the protagonists too fearful. Perhaps we need to change the culture of ‘how’ we take our decisions? After all, good processes are integral to good outcomes. The challenge lies in reframing our mindset and governance models to enable bold, evidence-based actions. It shouldn’t be considered courageous to promote the idea of a liveable world for current and future generations, but it is. It is a retool: a big step change away from how decisions are usually taken. In our, current paradigm, we didn’t take decisions commensurate with the evidence, how can we factor in the seat of emotions’, and ‘spirit, temperamen, state or frame of mind’), the new type of courage we need now is cultivated in the new governance model; of government decision-making to protect future generations, exploring how and why this groundbreaking legislation was forged in Wales.

Charting a bolder path
And what is courage? From the French coeur, meaning heart (‘as turning down a new motorway in favour of valuing nature or making significant changes to policy and decision-making can help foster trust where culture wars and short-term decision-making have hitherto prevailed), we can see that courage is about making decisions that are ‘good’ for the environment and all generations. It shouldn’t be considered courageous to promote the idea of a liveable world for current and future generations.

“We need now is courage to commit our stakeholders and partners...”

Leading the way
Wales has become an unlikely world leader in this space. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 is the first and still perhaps the only legislation in the world that provides a legal basis to deliver on the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Based on the Brundtland definition of sustainable development, ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising on the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’, the Act aims to protect the rights of future generations alongside current generations in everything the Welsh government and its public services deliver.

The Act is structured as a governance framework. On the face of the Act are seven clear goals—the ‘what’ organisations are required to achieve—but also five ways of working: the ‘how’ Welsh public services are required to deliver. Unusually, the Act includes the Welsh government itself: all are required to think long term, to act preventatively, to collaborate with others, to integrate their outcomes and, very importantly, to involve those about whom decisions are being made. Significantly, the Welsh government does not mark its own homework: there is an independent Future Generations’ Commissioner and the Welsh Auditor General to apply external pressure, as ultimately can the courts.

What difference has the Act made?
In simple terms, it is a value system that enables decision makers to be more confident about the actions they propose. Individual actions, such as turning down a new motorway in favour of valuing nature or making significant changes to policy and decision-making can help foster trust where culture wars and short-term decision-making have hitherto prevailed, and those who are acting in accordance with the science and support them on their journey—when some governments are becoming increasingly draconian about anyone who challenges their actions? How can we turn this moment into a movement for change?

So, when I talk about courageous governance, I’m not talking about the old, rigid governance systems that measure without values, without heart. I’m talking about new governance models that can help us to live up to our responsibilities, with head, heart and, urgently. New flexible systems, with processes designed to enable innovative solutions. We should make space for solutions to emerge and the models must be inclusive, able to listen to what’s emerging from different places at different levels. My fundamental argument is that ‘good’ governance can yet save us all. And I use the word ‘good’ deliberately. Some will see it as a unique, unfamiliar evolutionary path that has been in thrall to a bureaucratic mechanism that takes time and effort but delivers no benefit. We are in new territory now. The Earth has revolted, and each storm, fire, drought and flood that overwhelms and claims the lives of people somewhere on this single precious globe of ours is part of a bigger picture. The challenges ahead are huge, complex and systemic, but we hold the solutions in our hands if we are brave enough, courageous enough, to execute them. In the interests of current and future generations, we cannot fail.

The RSA has a proud history of being at the forefront of significant social impact for 270 years, with its unique global network of changemakers who work collectively to enable people, places and the planet to flourish. Its most recent Design for Life programme explicitly recognises the importance of the natural world for all our futures. I believe this is now and, the RSA is the global organisation best placed, to collaborate widely with others to set up a Courageous Governance Commission to help, inform and support governments and organisations to foster a liveable planet for another 270 years.

With thanks to Anna Nicholl, Maria O’Connor, Simon Milton and Andrew Corbett-Holan, and to all those who responded to my LinkedIn challenge with their thoughts.

Jane Davidson is a former Welsh Minister for Environment, Sustainability and Housing. She is also an author and environmental activist and previously chaired the RSA in Wales.


It shouldn’t be considered courageous to promote the idea of a liveable world for current and future generations”

Recommended reading
Jane Davidson’s Alfuregen: Lessons From A Small Country tells the story of how Wales has managed to put sustainable practices at the heart of government decision-making to protect future generations, exploring how and why this groundbreaking legislation was forged in Wales.
BOOKS
What RSA Fellows and staff are reading

Wandering Stars
Anna Markland
Reviewed by Heather MacRae

Tommy Orange's second novel effortlessly traces a family's path from the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864 to post-Covid Oakland, California. A cast of unique characters, each with a distinct voice, explores what identity, authenticity and legacy mean when your culture is actively being erased. These individual narratives are also often intertwined with stories of addiction, and exploration of the escape and control it promises.

To help us make sense of this alienation and longing for connection, the reader gets to 'listen in' on deeply personal conversations — from a mother sharing a moment of hope with her unborn child, to an adoptive father trying to bond over a DNA test, to the internal monologue of Richard Pratt, trying to bond over a DNA test, to the observer, ever-present. How well do we really know each other? Reading this book is a mind-expanding experience. It begins — as all good stories do — at the beginning, with how the moon came to be. From there, we embark on an epic journey of knowledge, stopping at the momentous milestones of our shared history; the evolution of life from the sea, the creation and control of time, the advent of civilisation, the mathematics of the stars and the day the moon first pulled a human to its surface.

Boyle takes us through cosmic and earthly history, from the dramatic and violent origin story of Earth and our world's missions and the pieces of moon we brought back, all the way recounting the unique, intimate and consequential relationship between our planet and its silvery satellite. This book is a captivating read. Expertly weaving learnings from astronomy, archaeology, classical and contemporary history, evolutionary biology, psychology and more (and introducing us to a colourful cast of characters along the way), it informs, but also inspires. For all the wisdom she imparts, Boyle preserves the sense of mystery and mysticism that our ancestors must have felt when they looked up at our ethereal companion.

This book explores the English literature texts that children and young people are taught across the country — their meanings, underlying messages and the discussions they elicit in the classroom. It is beautifully written and has a unique format, as each chapter is structured as an English literature lesson, with the teacher's notes included.

I especially appreciated Snow's poignant commentary on the prevalence and persistence of poverty as the cause of much inequality in Britain. From the book's preface, which references recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation data on destitution, to his accounts of the lives lost in the Grenfell Tower fire, Snow both intellectuallyises and humanises what we are facing today.

For anyone wanting a realistic account of how we might sit with our own intergenerational history, this book is a compelling read for anyone with an interest in modern day politics, how the media operates and the big issues we are facing in the UK today. Snow eloquently describes his passion for supporting people who are often overlooked in society, particularly in education, employment and the media. It's wonderful that Snow, with his own acknowledged privileges in life, is writing reflectively about his own experiences. It's a book that will impact children's education, from a familiar face, this is an

The State of Us
John Snow
Reviewed by Mike Findlay-Agnew

Anyone watching Channel 4 News between the late 1980s and 2021 will be familiar with its former news presenter, Jon Snow, and his vast array of colourful ties.

His extensive career more than qualifies him to comment on the 'state of us' — and his book is a compelling read for anyone with an interest in modern day politics, how the media operates and the big issues we are facing in the UK today. Snow eloquently describes his passion for supporting people who are often overlooked in society, particularly in education, employment and the media. It's wonderful that Snow, with his own acknowledged privileges in life, is writing reflectively about his own experiences. It's a book that will impact children's education, from a familiar face, this is an

Our Moon
Jolyon Miles-Wilson
Reviewed by Victoria Kinkaid

This book takes you on a journey of how the anti-raster movement is growing and galvanising support worldwide, targeting not only gender rights but reproductive rights and equality for women.

Butler explores the anti-raster views of some of the most powerful organisations in the world to draw our attention to how sex and gender is becoming more politicised and reinforced.

I found this book very accessible and therefore quite a tough read. I think the language and concepts are quite complex, making it less accessible to the average reader.

Overall, however, it is a fascinating book and really made me think critically about how the word ‘gender’ has been harnessed by anti-raster institutions who seek to restrict the freedoms of multiple groups, including women. It also highlights the importance of feminists not being divided by their views on gender, and instead forming a strong coalition against the degradation of gender rights.

The book is a critical plea and call for an abomination against sustainability, pulsing, neon-drenched magnet of the activists he profiles. It is a book that will make an informed counter argument. My determination to read it. My determination to read

Our Moon
Rebecca Boyle
Reviewed by Jolyon Miles-Wilson

This book explores the English literature texts that children and young people are taught across the country — their meanings, underlying messages and the discussions they elicit in the classroom. It is beautifully written and has a unique format, as each chapter is structured as an English literature lesson, with the teacher's notes included.

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The State of Us has a good combination of facts, humour, self-deprecation and optimism. For anyone wanting a realistic account of the big issues of today from a familiar face, this is an excellent and accessible read.

Reviewed by Mike Findlay-Agnew

Reviewed by Nia D Thomas

Nia D Thomas is a doctor of self-aware leadership and director of a children's charity.

Reviewed by Anna Markland

Reviewed by Victoria Kinkaid

Victoria Kinkaid is a military doctor and a co-founder of The FMU Education Project.

Reviewed by Heather MacRae

Heather MacRae is Chief Executive of the Ideas Foundation.

Reviewed by Carol Atherton

Carol Atherton is co-founder of The FGM Education Project.

Reviewed by Jolyon Miles-Wilson

Jolyon Miles-Wilson is Senior Quantitative Researcher at the RSA.

Reviewed by Nia D Thomas

Nia D Thomas is a doctor of self-aware leadership and director of a children's charity.

More from Victoria Kinkaid

More from Heather MacRae

More from Carol Atherton

More from Jolyon Miles-Wilson

More from Nia D Thomas

More from Anna Markland

More from Heather MacRae

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More from Nia D Thomas
“We might... design a process that would allow citizens to disagree with each other without necessarily hating each other”

Over a decade on from their genesis, one of the architects of Ireland’s original citizens’ assemblies speaks with Andy Haldane about lessons learnt

Andy Haldane: We hear a lot now about democracy being under threat. Words like ‘democratic recession’, a re-tilting of the political playing field towards more populist or authoritarian regimes. What’s your sense of that? How fragile are our democracies?

Eoin O’Malley: We can see in countries in the European Union — Hungary, for instance — that there is retrenchment from ordinary, working democracy. We can also see in opinion polling that younger generations are less attached to democracy. Millennials and Gen Zs declare that their attachment to democracy is not as strong, not as intrinsic, possibly because they don’t believe that it’s delivering for them in the way that it delivered for our generations. When I grew up, I perceived democracy as rock solid and something not up for grabs, not even open

Photos: Kevin Lake
“When I grew up, I perceived democracy as something rock solid and not up for grabs, not even open to debate”

Haldane: How would ‘representative democracy’ differ from ‘deliberative democracy’?

O’Malley: Representative democracy is essentially us as citizens sending people to parliament to govern on our behalf. In a general sense, all democracy should be deliberative. We’d like to think that, in the House of Commons or the Cabinet Office, they are deliberating, thinking rationally, coming up with reasons for the decision.

When we talk about deliberative democracy, a lot of the time we’re thinking about ‘mini-publics’, where we take a random sample of people and ask them to think about a subject in an intense way. This gives us a sense of how ordinary people would think about an issue if they were exposed to different arguments, and if they were forced to deliberate, to talk with others who don’t hold the same views as them.

Haldane: Presumably, having a forum where different perspectives can be debated, deliberated, maybe consensus sought, would be particularly useful for issues where there are otherwise deep divisions or disagreements about what the right course might be.

O’Malley: Yes. It’s probably not an ideal method of making decisions for technical things, whereas if you have moral issues, where no one is right or wrong, we simply have different value judgements, a deliberative forum will be useful to air different perspectives. Hopefully then you can, if not achieve a consensus, at least achieve some sort of compromise or position where more people are happier than not.

Another way of thinking about it might be in terms of ‘losers’ consent’: that the people who lose the battle on that issue at least feel that they have been listened to, they consent to having lost and won’t bring it up again and again. The idea of losers’ consent is important in any form of democracy, that you have a group who maybe don’t win the majority, they don’t form a majority, but at least their position is respected and reflected in some ways in the outcome that’s been decided.

O’Malley: It was in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, which affected Ireland more deeply than most other places. The political system had taken a bit of a battering. People started to think, how do these people who we’ve trusted for generations get it so badly wrong? We were going to have a situation where there was a potential for, not quite an uprising, but for a government having to introduce, say, tax increases or new charges, and there could have been civic upheaval in some way.

We were thinking, how do we prevent that from happening? What are the policies that will be acceptable to the people, what are the ones that won’t be acceptable, and how would we find out about this beyond just doing an opinion poll? A colleague had worked on introducing a new electoral system in Canada and they had used this idea of a citizens’ assembly. We got funding from a philanthropist, and tried out the “We the Citizens” experiment, where we brought together about 100 people randomly for a weekend to think about difficult decisions where there are difficult trade-offs... should we introduce a property tax or not, or should we introduce water charges or not?

We got a sense that this was a worthwhile experience because you had ordinary citizens thinking about the trade-offs that were involved. It probably would make it easier for politicians to make those decisions knowing that, after a debate, ordinary people think this is acceptable. Or that, even after a debate, there is still no way they would want something like water charges, for instance.

Haldane: Not long after that, in 2015 and 2018, you convinced the government to embark on citizens’ assemblies on some big and contentious issues in Ireland around same-sex marriage and abortion. How did you get from your initial weekend away to these national issues being debated, first by citizens and then by referendum?

O’Malley: We got lucky to some extent, in that we had done this in 2010 and there was an election in 2011 where there was a new coalition government between a centre right Fine Gael and a centre left Labour Party, who both needed some way out of problems that they had in forming their coalition agreement. The Labour Party insisted on wanting to have something on same-sex marriage; Fine Gael was more conservative and didn’t want to do anything on that.

We arrived with a present, which they thought was an immediate way out of their
problem — they could just send it to a citizens’ assembly. There was a constitutional convention set up that considered about five or six different issues. Same-sex marriage was one of them. It was a fairly contentious issue, but not deeply, deeply contentious at the time. But you had different groups coming in, and there was this sense that in policymaking you get to hear people’s lived experiences and [those] came to the forefront. You also had the different groups speaking to each other... they were forced to address each other. You got to tease out the potential difficulties that came to the fore. Politicians then were able to back and say, “Okay, these are the issues that people have, these are the ones that aren’t really issues, and these are things that we probably should just leave alone, and these are the ones we can fire ahead on.”

Haldane: That then paved the way for a referendum on the topic?

O’Malley: Yes, it paved the way for the referendum on same-sex marriage, which then was passed very easily, even though in Ireland we still have that image of ourselves as a conservative Catholic country. That probably had been broken already, but there were still concerns among the political classes that the Church could suddenly rise up and make this difficult. It probably did help the political classes to see that we have nothing to fear from a referendum on this issue. And it was even more important in the abortion debate.

There was a deep division within our society about abortion, so much so that, for about 30 years, politicians had steered clear of the topic completely. The courts ended up having to do a lot of the policymaking with difficult cases and there was not a huge appetite among any group to deal with this issue. The idea of a citizens’ assembly was irresistible because it allowed politicians to stand back.

They set up a citizens’ assembly on abortion and it met over the course of almost a year. It heard from lots of different people and ended up recommending a much more liberal regime than would have been expected. The Oireachtas, the Irish Parliament, repeated that exercise; they invited more or less the same people in front of a parliamentary committee and discussed it. And what you saw was that a lot of very conservative citizens had changed their minds as a result of the citizens’ assembly.

It was then put to the people in a referendum. There were still a lot of people with strong opinions about it and there was a sense that the citizens’ [assembly] gave it that legitimacy. It probably helped it to some extent in passing the referendum, but the most important thing that it did was that it steered politicians. They felt able to talk about the topic and were able to anticipate what people’s objections would be.

“"If you are going to do a citizens’ assembly, you need to have hard questions”

Haldane: So, two referendums on contentious issues went the way of the citizens’ assemblies. But more recent experience has produced a very different outcome. [Two referendums on proposals to modernise wording in the Irish constitution — on the family and the equality citizens’ assembly, however, didn’t get equality citizens’ assembly, however, didn’t get equality citizens’ assembly, however, didn’t get equality citizens’ assembly, however, didn’t get.

O’Malley: Even though we can argue that they worked pretty well in demonstrating the debates about same-sex marriage and abortion, one of the things we did find out in We the Citizens was that processes are easy to manipulate. The same thing happened in the more recent citizens’ assembly on gender equality.

People, when they hear experts, tend to agree with them — so if they don’t hear strongly opposing views, they will just go with whatever the experts say. One of the things we need to do with a citizens’ assembly is have a specific question, a difficult question and one where people’s values might differ somewhat.

Gender equality was neither specific nor difficult. We had in the Irish constitution an old-fashioned clause which said mothers in the home provide great service to the state and to the family, and so their position should be supported by the state. A lot of people, not unexpectedly, found that that would allow citizens and wanted to have it removed. The gender equality citizens’ assembly, however, didn’t get into the arguments for and against. You could, for instance, make reasonable arguments that marriage as an institution supports children and is something that the state should support. But none of those views were heard because the experts were all of one opinion.

Equally, we could see the same on the issue of childcare. You could reasonably argue that children benefit from having one parent staying at home. There are arguments for and against whether we’d be better off with families that had one parent working and one parent staying at home rather than two parents working. That issue wasn’t addressed.

The outcome of this citizens’ assembly was a wish list of nice things that we could have and the government should fund. Citizens’ assemblies should ask participants to confront difficult questions, questions that policymakers have to confront where you have real trade-offs. None of those trade-offs were asked of the citizens in this. They produced 80 or 90 recommendations, which all required more money. Everybody was in favour of them. So, if you are going to do a citizens’ assembly, you need to have hard questions.

Haldane: What would your advice be to the Irish government today about whether to keep on going with citizens’ assemblies?

O’Malley: In the Irish government the enthusiasm to keep them has been more mainly because of the experience in the most recent referendums on marriage and the family. There is a sense that citizens’ assemblies aren’t quite the panaceas that everybody said they were. I think the opposition to the Irish government would be, if you’re going to do it, make sure it’s specific, that there are difficult choices, and that you’re hearing both sides of the argument. There probably aren’t that many issues that are going to work for that. There are problems when it becomes almost as if [the citizens’ assemblies] are legitimate in and of themselves.

Haldane: We started off talking about the fragility of our democracies. One of the values of the RSA is optimism about the future, so how do we act with confidence and optimism to strengthen our democracies to avoid those fragilities?

O’Malley: If we think about what some of the challenges are, a lot of them come from online misinformation and disinformation. We might use a deliberative process in a way that could enable people instead of creating echo chambers, of course, where we can see that digital democracy enables us to scale up to allow lots of people to have a voice.

We should be able to think about how we can go from 100 people in the room, how we could scale it up digitally to allow 100,000 people or 1 million people to talk to each other in some way that enables them to see the other side’s perspective and the perspective of the politician making difficult choices.

Eoin O’Malley is an Associate Professor in politics at the School of Law and Government at Dublin City University and a regular contributor for The Irish Independent.

Andy Haldane is Chief Executive Officer of the RSA.

Kevin Lake is a UK-based photographer who specialises in portraiture, street photography and documentary-style portraiture.

Recommended reading

“Something I enjoyed recently is Under the Influence: Putting Peer Pressure to Work by economist Robert Frank. He teases out the implications of the insight that people are heavily influenced by what other people do, thinking about how we can create benign social environments that foster pro-social behaviour.” Eoin O’Malley
We now also understand that, not infrequently described as a polycrisis. A new approach to metrics is bridging the gap between scientific measurement and human experience, strengthening civic participation, and laying out a path to thrive through adversity.

Words: Vlad Afanasiev
Illustrations: Graham Samuels

Measure of success

A new approach to metrics is bridging the gap between scientific measurement and human experience, strengthening civic participation, and laying out a path to thrive through adversity.

We now also understand that, not infrequently described as a polycrisis. We believe this transition is impossible without creating governance innovations that position citizens as the main agents of change. Last year, we launched an initiative called the Cornerstone Indicators, which aims to reinvigorate the role of metrics and indicators to become tools for radical civic empowerment by allowing citizens to decide on what impact in the community they want to see and measure.

Now being developed across multiple locations, the Cornerstone framework was initially prototyped in Sweden in collaboration with citizens of Västerslätt and Sandvikskompaniet, a platform for social innovations operated by the local university and municipality. The nine-month design process started with a statistical analysis that combined best international practices of wellbeing frameworks, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Canadian Index of Wellbeing and New Zealand’s Living Standards Framework. It was then followed by online surveys on local social media groups and the city council’s website asking participants to rank multiple factors themselves. Taken together, statistical and subjective inputs helped us to identify the universal dimensions that are most relevant to communities by Västerslätt, then group them into different thematic clusters, such as physical safety or trust and security.

At the core of the Cornerstone process were several participatory workshops where, over a one-month period, citizens formulated and explored different scenarios of how their district might look in 2035. Using visualisations and storytelling, the group was presented with multiple potential ecological and political scenarios. Participants were asked how they would feel and act under different conditions, defining how their collective future might unfold in the limitations and potentials of each case. Finally, all views were combined and synthesized into specific communities of place, but this is also where the most effective response could and should happen.

Community resilience, as part of the broader social capital, is increasingly being recognised as a positive force in the face of these threats. From digital support networks distributing media during the Covid-19 pandemic in Taiwan or neighbour case groups grappling with hurricanes in Australia or Pakistan, to wide-scale civic resistance against Russian aggression in Ukraine, these inspiring examples show that, when things go sideways, decentralised decision-making and self-organisation can be significantly more effective than systems of top-down governance.

Unfortunately, our dominant theories of governance are unable to recognise the value of thriving communities capable of action, collective remembering and agile planning. They often fail to distribute power adequately. This allows us to understand the embeddedness and complexity of the issues before us.

Our international and homeless architecture requires new forms and procedures of democratic self-governance.

The Cornerstone Indicators Work at Dark Matter Labs, an organisation that is developing options for the fundamental transition of our economies in the face of the planetary emergency. We believe this transition is impossible without creating governance innovations that position citizens as the main agents of change.

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What type of neighborhood would you like to live in? Does it have a playground? Library? A bar full of things? Artist Graham Samuels has constructed the components for you to choose from to build your ideal community. (Break and grab a friend!) To cut out the illustrations along the dotted line and assemble as you see fit.

We want to see your creations, so make sure to tag us for a chance to be featured on social media pages! 

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It is time to get creative! What components are most important to create a healthy community where everyone has a chance to thrive?

“Quality of life and societal health should be the starting points from which we operate; this is often forgotten in a system that primarily optimises itself for financial profit and growth.”

Considered for the design of the first set of indicators, of which five were chosen and have now been adopted by the city. In contrast to existing impact measures, such as the Cornerstone Indicators combine and score across 17 different aspects of wellbeing to create a single intuitive indicator that is easily relatable and has a visual representation that allows it to be understood immediately. For example, one of the selected metrics, “the number of households that enjoy owning a car,” implies a set of factors such as climate awareness, air quality, the state of public transportation, trust and safety of the community, while also conveying a change in attitude and mindset regarding personal mobility.

They are not substitutes for global measures, or intended to be used as hard evidence but, rather, they are interfaces and balance points between scientific measurements and our human lived experience. They exist to help us think, listen, reflect and learn.

Beyond wellbeing
Quality of life and societal health should be the starting points from which we operate; this is often forgotten in a system that primarily optimises itself for financial profit and growth. Yet, in the age of policy, wellbeing can no longer be our only aspiration, but must be considered in the context of systems and sustained risk. In order to thrive and grow through adversity, our theory of democratic governance should include what we think of at Dark Matter Labs as ‘critical capabilities’ of our society. From collective intelligence to civic agency, these are interfaces and balance points as hard evidence but, rather, they are not substitutes for global measures, or intended to be used as hard evidence but, rather, they are interfaces and balance points between scientific measurements and our human lived experience.

The main role of the Cornerstone Indicators project is to help communities replicate plans to publish more case studies and design-making capacity to act for the future on a scale where it is efficient to do so. The complexity of the polycrisis landscape cannot be effectively managed via a centralised, top-down approach. Our governance architecture should resemble the interactions of natural systems, operating through networks and facilitating agency and power closer to the reality on the ground. Only by doing so can we achieve systemic agility and speed required by the high volatility and uncertainty of the future.

The Cornerstone Indicators provide one example of how our governance frameworks, such as democracies, could be redesigned to facilitate the mentioned capabilities of society. If we find more ways to build distributed, agile and resilient governance frameworks, such as climate change and pandemics and geopolitical rivalries, becoming more than the sum of their parts and creating the societal context for the necessary transition to happen. The challenges we face are systemic and systemic; our governance frameworks need to become systemic.

The original idea for the Cornerstone Indicators concept was developed in collaboration with Katherine Toksvig, Emily Harris, Graham Samuels and Vlad Afanasiev were the core team behind the Framework and Swedish pilot project.

Pedro Delgado is a designer and consultant. Katherine Toksvig is an illustrator and animator. Graham Samuels is an illustrator and animator. Vlad Afanasiev is a strategic designer and researcher based in Berlin. Emily Harris is a strategic designer and researcher. Katherine Toksvig is a designer and consultant. Katherine Toksvig is a designer and consultant.
aria Georgina Grey (1816–1906) was an educationalist, writer and pivotal figure in the fight for women’s rights in 19th-century England.

Alongside her sister, Emily Shirreff, Grey created the National Union for Improving the Education of Women of All Classes, a pressure group dedicated to advocating for women’s educational rights. In her 1871 address to what was then known as the Society of Arts, Grey laid out the Union’s primary aims:

1. The equal right of women to the education recognised as the best for human beings.
2. The equal right of women to a share in the existing educational endowments of the country, and to be considered, no less than boys, in the creation of any new endowments.
3. The registration of teachers, with such other measures as may raise teaching to a profession as honourable and honoured for women as for men.

Central to Grey’s aims was the idea that men and women should be awarded the same opportunities — though this was often misunderstood by her opposition, who confused equal opportunity with unfair advantage. But Grey was not asking for special exceptions to be made, and her objective for women to be given the same advantages as men was a goal with which many members of the Society agreed.

Grey’s involvement with the Society was instrumental in the Union’s early success and sustained influence. It provided her with her first audience, supporters for her ideas, a committee (comprised largely of its own members) and a platform, the Journal of the Society of Arts, for disseminating news about her meetings and initiatives. By the 1880s, the Union served as a focal point for various organisations interested in women’s education. As these organisations deepened their collaboration, the Union became superfluous, ultimately leading to its dissolution. But its legacy lived on through initiatives such as the Girls’ Public Day School Company, which established 38 day schools for girls. Today, it is known as the Girls’ Day School Trust, and continues to provide quality education to girls across England and Wales. Grey also helped found a teacher training college in 1878, later renamed The Maria Grey Training College for Women.

Whether they know it or not, women across the UK owe much to Maria Grey.

“A school of one’s own”

“Grey’s involvement with the Society was instrumental in the Union’s early success and sustained influence”

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A rainy Saturday in March saw RSA House packed to the rafters as more than 200 Fellows met for the third annual Fellows Festival to discuss the theme of courage in the year of our 270th anniversary.

This festival was the biggest yet, with the London event following a series of global meetings and regional gatherings across the UK (see page 49). Fellows heard from high-profile speakers, took part in workshops and enjoyed live music and dance.

Each speaker offered examples of courageous acts that could make the world a better place. There were many standout moments, but it will be hard to forget Kwame Kwei-Armah’s passionate speech calling on the government to have the courage to invest sustainably in the arts.

Having just announced his resignation as Artistic Director of the Young Vic, Kwei-Armah said he could no longer be “complicit in undermining” the culture sector. The current funding situation had created an “atmosphere of fear”, and he urged the public to put pressure on politicians to come up with a “Big Idea” to fund the arts sustainably.

Post-Covid courage
Arts funding was also examined at a session involving Lucy Keel, founder and Director of Tonic, Kate Varah, Executive Director of the National Theatre, and Amanda Parker, an arts and cultural sector consultant.

“Post-Covid courage and the need for pragmatism as the sector inevitably shrinks. “What’s essential is ensuring that, in that shrinkage, we don’t lose diversity. That we don’t become a homogenous blob,” Parker told Fellows.

In the session on community, Tim Smit, Co-founder of the Eden Project, discussed leadership in the UK. He highlighted the “lack of courage in middle-aged men” and the poor quality of politicians across the parties, while Emily Bolton, founder of Our Future, described the work her organisation is undertaking with the local community to help Grimsby’s green transition.

Culture wars also surfaced in the session on courage and climate involving environmental psychologist Lorraine Whitmarsh and wildlife writer Kabir Kaul. According to Whitmarsh and wildlife biologist Lorraine Whitmarsh, culture wars are happening. “If we can highlight those positive stories, hopefully that will empower people. Yes, we’ve got a long way to go, but there are very good things that are still happening.”

Culture wars
In the courage and empire session, author and journalist Sathnam Sanghera was asked about the abuse he received following the publication of his books Empiriland and Empireworld. He pointed out that interpretations of the past were constantly changing as evidence emerged, but that many historians were regularly threatened through ‘culture wars’ often taking place on social media.

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Provocative, empowering and unapologetically feminist — Ghada Amer’s body of work defies conventions and challenges perspectives

Words: Nadia Khomami
The awakening

Even more enraged at the time, says Amer, was that “everybody thought it was okay. Afterwards, I went to the library and asked them to give me a book about women painters, and the librarian said, ‘there’s nothing like this.’” It was then that Amer had something of an epiphany. Though she was already in her third year of art school, she says she had never before considered that she and her classmates were being “brainwashed”.

“I thought, if men invented painting, I’m not going to turn into ‘a strength’.

The revolution

Over the course of a career spanning more than four decades, Amer has created paintings, drawings, sculptures and installations that reflect her identity as a woman, and the subversion of moralistic attitudes towards women’s bodies and sexuality. As with her embroidery paintings, she often chooses media or techniques that are traditionally considered to be feminine in both nature and practice — aspects she wanted to turn into “a strength”.

At first, she chose in her embroidery works to depict “bored women” performing daily chores or quotidian activities, but she soon came to see this as submission, “I needed another image that would totally contradict the embroidery, I decided it was a good idea to be posing in porn magazines.”

The decision paid off. Today Amer is best known for her embroidered images of women in autoerotic poses that have been traced from pornographic magazines, often layered with acrylic or gel. They depict naked women in ecstasy or with other women. Her aim, she says, was to radically reimagine pornography as something depicting female desires and fantasies; she wanted to invent an aesthetic in which men are the bearers of the erotic gaze and women merely its object.

This perspective is evident in works ranging from Couleurs Noires (2000) and The Woman Who Failed to be Shahrazad (2008) to Les Grandes Nympheas (2012), which features the image of intertwined females repeatedly across a 275×366 cm canvas (the title is an homage to Claude Monet’s Water Lilies).

“I was very oppressed sexually, as a Middle Eastern woman,” Amer says, but “these images made me like sexuality and my body, to make peace with it. For me, there’s no difference between eroticism and pornography. ‘Pornographic’ is a moral adjective on eroticism. If someone doesn’t like it, it’s ‘porn’.”

The future

It’s a future Amer is increasingly concerned about. She believes people in the West have become complacent about hard-earned rights and freedoms. “And the women do not fight
“Capitalism has attained a huge level of injustice. People are suffering... and the first ones who will suffer are women”

hard enough,” she says. Amer cites the rise of the ‘trad wife’ [short for ‘traditional wife’, a trend popularised on TikTok whereby young women forego work outside the home for performing domestic duties for partners], saying “This is not a very good sign. I feel that the balance is shifting.”

What’s the reason for this? “I think capitalism has attained a huge level of injustice. These ‘trad wives’ are sick of working for nothing and sacrificing the family. People are suffering. Look at how much people have to work to make ends meet. Maybe it’s better not to work and to just cook, I don’t know. But for sure, it’s economic injustice that is causing this. And the first ones who will suffer are women.”

With potential for major upheaval around the world this year as major elections take place in at least 64 countries, including the US and UK, Amer cites freedom of speech as one of the rights “taking a big hit”. “We’re witnessing it with college campuses in the US. You can’t revolt against injustice or against the killing of civilians, it’s crazy. Ceasefire means peace and love.”

I wonder if any of it is inspiring her newest art? Amer says she’s currently working on a piece that incorporates the famous Desmond Tutu quote, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.” But in general, Amer points out, her best art doesn’t emerge “in the middle” of conflict, but after a period of consideration: “I like to speak about it later”, she says with a smile.
Power shifts

For one Fellow, a federal future is the path to a truly United Kingdom

Words: David Kauders, FRSA

There’s a prevailing sense that, in modern Britain, nothing works as it should.

Many individual policy failures have brought about near-Victorian conditions. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s 2023 annual ‘Destitution in the UK’ report reads like a Dickensian novel: rising child poverty; deteriorating healthcare; insanitary housing. Recent news articles even report people using pliers to extract their own teeth because of the lack of reasonable access to NHS dental care.

It’s not surprising, then, that the public have low levels of confidence in parliament. A study by the Policy Institute at King’s College London found that confidence has halved since 1990. Meanwhile, a YouGov survey examining the entire political system reported that 90% of UK citizens believe it needs reform.

In their book, When Nothing Works, academics Luca Calafati and colleagues describe three pillars of society: essential services and social infrastructure.

All three have been wrecked by deliberate policy choices, they argue, warning that UK policies are stuck in a quagmire, with too much regulatory weight given to market-oriented economists. Indeed, the share of national output going to employment fell by nearly 40% between 1976 and 2019, contributing to Britain’s poverty.

Power failure

The Westminster model of absolute power has failed. Moreover, it has contributed to British economic and social decline. This became clear when the emotions and misrepresentations of the Brexit campaign collided with the principle that sovereignty is the Crown in parliament.

Centralised power simply cannot adequately respond to the complexity of the 21st century and exponential rates of change affecting all levels of society.

How, then, can the UK build a more effective, participatory democracy and improve its political governance?

Federal government

The cultures of the four nations (Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England) are different, so the UK is long overdue adopting a federal structure, which would enable decisions to be taken at the most appropriate level. Without this, there is the very real possibility that the UK will eventually break up. Switching to a federal structure would be a bold move, but one which works well elsewhere. However, such sweeping reform needs a written constitution regulating political governance.

Citizens need the right to put policies onto a democratic agenda. Young people need more say in determining their futures. And we need a democratic process of consent to legislation, instead of meaningless royal assent.

Voice of the people

The discussion starts now. What should a modern constitutional settlement look like? Labour created the Brown Commission, led by former prime minister Gordon Brown, to examine public dissatisfaction with politics. It called for more public involvement but offered an inadequate solution: electing a powerless upper house.

My concept is an elected People’s Council that would replace both the House of Lords and the Privy Council. This would be completely separate from five unicameral legislatures, one federal and four national.

Dispersed power would replace central power, with sovereignty being the people of each of the four nations. The People’s Council would provide a channel for all citizens to be heard and for strong checks to replace those that are so weak and ineffective today.

The federal legislature and People’s Council will need to escape the bias towards English issues caused by England representing 84% of the total population. One simple solution would be to apportion numbers of members using a segment of the Fibonacci series. As an illustration, a representative federal assembly might consist of eight Northern Irish members, 13 Welsh, 21 Scottish, and 34 English — 76 members in total.

Necessary questions

There are valid concerns about whether the present chaos is capable of resolution by any government, and we need to ask ourselves: What is the point of adversarial politics when many neighbouring countries outperform Britain by consensus? Should we wait five more years while a (possible) Labour government struggles with the havoc they have inherited without the truly creative thinking and democratic consent required for tackling the deep changes that are needed? I don’t think so.

Escaping the dead end that Britain has reached requires constructive public participation. Academics have examined policy alternatives using deliberative citizens’ assemblies. Academia and think tanks should recognise that our present political governance needs major redesign, and citizens’ assemblies could debate these questions — now. Only the people can provide answers. Tinkering with details to improve the present system is worthy, but unlikely to bring the country to a prosperous, cohesive future. Only a federal nation can truly unite the United Kingdom.

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David Kauders, FRSA is an investment manager and author of books about economics, finance and the United Kingdom. His most recent book is Reinventing Democracy: Improving British Political Governance.

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Circle celebrates one year of uniting Fellows globally

On 15 April 2024, Circle, the RSA’s innovative global online platform, celebrated its first anniversary, with more than 4,000 Fellows having joined the community from around the world. Circle has revolutionised the way Fellows chat, connect and collaborate, and has enabled decentralised interaction across borders.

The platform has been pivotal in fostering meaningful interactions among Fellows and helping RSA networks to reach their potential. Philip Ward, Sustainability Network Lead, underscored Circle’s value: “Enabling Fellows to communicate and collaborate was crucial for the Sustainability Network. Circle is providing that for Fellows to communicate and collaborate, and has enabled decentralised interaction across borders.

Our online community has enabled young Fellows to connect directly, and we have gathered more than 300 contributions from the Fellowship for the Day One initiative. Micro-communities align with the RSA’s Design for Life mission and unite Fellows across diverse locations, interests and identities. Notably, the Responsible Artificial Intelligence Network was the first to emerge from Circle discussions, rapidly growing to include more than 400 Fellows.

The platform has been pivotal in fostering meaningful interactions among Fellows and helping RSA networks to reach their potential. Philip Ward, Sustainability Network Lead, underscored Circle’s value: “Enabling Fellows to communicate and collaborate was crucial for the Sustainability Network. Circle is providing that for us, and we are beginning to see its potential. It is replacing our reliance on ‘broadcasts’ from the centre via newsletters with an interactive web, allowing Fellows to seek out and converse more broadly.”

For those Fellows eager to connect locally, Circle offers designated area spaces, enabling direct engagement with area managers and other local Fellows. This feature promotes a closer Fellowship community at the local level.

Creating a safe and supportive environment

We uphold our commitment to responsible community management, and monitor and support the Circle community to ensure everyone feels respected and that Circle is a safe space for open collaboration. We do so by combining automated flagging with community-led reporting, followed by staff reviews of flagged content.

The creation of community guidelines was a collaborative effort with the Fellowship, and has been refined based on feedback. Since launch, we have updated the guidelines to include guidance on coverage of party political campaigning in anticipation of this year’s general election, and enhanced our moderation of profanities.

In its first year, over 99% of posts on Circle remained unmoderated. Those that are moderated typically involve posts with an aggressive tone or attempts to promote commercial interests. Now in its second year, Circle continues to evolve, shaped by the active participation and feedback of the Fellowship, and we will continue to embody that spirit of open collaboration and community-building globally.

If you still need to activate your Circle account, please do so through My RSA account, please do so through My RSA and get involved in our flourishing online community. We look forward to your contributions.

Line Kristensen is Director of Fellowship at the RSA.
Connecting with the Fellowship

A regular request from Fellows is for more opportunities to meet the RSA senior leadership team. In response, RSA Connect was established to enable members of the executive team to travel beyond London and meet with Fellows to find out about the work they do, hear feedback first-hand and strengthen connections.

So far, the executive team has visited 15 locations — from Truro to Dundee — with a meeting in Cardiff scheduled to take place as the Journal goes to press. RSA directors and CEO Andy Haldane have met with Fellows, providing updates on our Design for Life mission and interventions beyond London and meeting with Fellows members of the executive team to travel with the Fellowship.

The desire for connections, meeting other Fellows and focusing on bringing people together based on place, themes and identity.

An appreciation of the need for a focus of the work outside of London.

A desire for more youth activity, with Fellows keen to hear about the youth mentoring pilot, the success of the Youth Fellowship and the Youth Advisory group.

Much of the feedback received links to work in motion from the Fellowship team, including:

■ The desire for connections, meeting other Fellows and focusing on bringing people together based on place, themes and identity.
■ An appreciation of the need for a focus of the work outside of London.
■ A desire for more youth activity, with Fellows keen to hear about the youth mentoring pilot, the success of the Youth Fellowship and the Youth Advisory group.
■ RSA Connect will continue in the autumn, visiting more locations every month.

IN THE REGIONS

Courage takes centre stage at Fellows Festival events

This year’s Fellows Festival was more ambitious than ever before — with UK gatherings taking place in Cardiff, Southampton, Newcastle and Birmingham, as well as the London event (see pages 36–37), and online sessions for those in Italy, Oceania and the US.

Seeds of change in Cardiff

Fellows who met in Cardiff celebrated the ‘seeds of change’ for a regenerative future. Hosted by Fellowship councillors Anna Nicholl and Damian Joseph Bridge, the meeting took place at sbarc/spark, Cardiff University’s ‘home of innovation’.

Conversations opened and closed with an icebreaker led by ‘manwhisperer’ Kenny Mammarella D’Cruz, who encouraged participants to share their thoughts on the theme of courage. Attendees also reflected on a piece of art presented by Zandrea Stewart and listened to a reading by opera singer Jeremy Huw Williams.

According to Lee Sharma, CEO of innovation platform SimplyGo, “The few hours at the RSA Fellows Festival were just amazing. It was an incredibly diverse group, but all connected by the theme of ‘change’ and doing things differently.”

Creative courage in Newcastle

Newcastle’s Fellows Festival was held at the Northern Stage venue, with a line-up of speakers all talking authoritatively on the theme of courage.

Jonathan Sapsed, Professor of Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Newcastle University Business School, discussed the Northern Creative Corridor and the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, while Tris Brown, FRSA, Founder and Director of the Northern Rose Consultancy, spoke on courage in decision-making in local and regional government.

Full steam ahead in Birmingham

The Central Fellows Festival was a collaborative effort between Fellows, local organisations and Birmingham City University (BCU), hosted in BCU’s STEAMhouse centre.

Speakers included Anna Bright, Chief Executive of Sustainability West Midlands, Alex Nicholson-Evans, Director of Living for the Weekend, and Nicola Fleet-Milne, CEO of FleetMilne.

Participants enjoyed the wide range of speakers, and the opportunity to network with Fellows from across the region and meet representatives from local organisations that share similar values — feedback that could equally be applied to any of the regional Fellows Festival events.

YOUTH SUPPORT

Young Fellows to benefit from ‘substantial’ bequest

Derek Winterbottom, a Fellow since 1976, has indicated that he will leave a substantial bequest to the RSA and, from this year, will grant a sum of money annually to defray the subscription costs of young people who wish to become Fellows.

Derek is the author of more than 30 books in the fields of history, biography and education, and was a teacher for many years. He is the heir of his late parents who owned well-known hotels in Lancashire and North Wales. The bequest will be used to further educational and professional opportunities among young people.

He told the Journal that the decision to make the commitments came about because he had “spent most of his life learning in schools, teaching in schools, writing about schools and being a school governor”.

According to Line Kristensen, RSA Director of Fellowship: “We are delighted and honoured that Derek has chosen to leave a bequest to the RSA. Donations and bequests from Fellows make a vital contribution to our charitable work and this better enables us to support the next generation of Fellows.”
y activism was born out of the global rise in ethno-nationalist rhetoric and violence in the wake of 9/11. A deep love for my community, a working-class and immigrant-heavy neighbourhood in Detroit’s suburbs, shaped both my identity and an inherent solidarity with and desire for justice. But there was hate there, too, and I still cross certain streets to avoid the places where I was assaulted or called slurs. It was a turbulent time to grow up brown in America. I didn’t know anything about human rights back then. All I knew was that I loved my friends, and I wanted change. So, I became an activist.

In the wake of the 2016 US presidential election, my community faced another spike in hate. By then, I had the tools to fight back — whether by organising hundreds to rally against Executive Order 13769 (which suspended the admission of refugees from several predominantly Muslim countries) or campaigning for my university to cease sharing student information with ICE, the agency that enforces US immigration. We found solidarity and fought back together against a tide of beliefs we knew we could not stand for. From bureaucratic red tape to indifference and inertia to outright opposition to change, we now faced the same systemic harm but whispered instead of shouted.

To build a better world, we must commit to dismantling barriers to progress internally as much as externally. The more I find myself in powerful rooms, whether government offices or UN headquarters, the more I look around and wonder: who is missing from this table? What perspectives are we not hearing? What keeps them from the table and how do we change that?

When our activism isn’t just for show, when the voices of those most directly impacted by injustice are centred, heard and valued, only then can we channel the power of resistance into meaningful change.

One young activist’s growing understanding of the shifting landscapes of opposition and power

Words:
Vibha Venkatesha

Vibha Venkatesha is an advocate, researcher and writer based on Ohlone land now known as Oakland, California. She founded the Amnesty International USA National Youth Collective, helped develop the Amnesty Global Youth Power Action Network and led the drafting committee for The Hague Youth Declaration of Human Rights.
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AUDREY TANG

It’s ‘game on’ for Taiwan, where new technologies are being used to collaboratively define the future of AI.