

Professor Liz Bentley & TTU

Nik Gowing

Welcome to talking about, Thinking the Unthinkable. Our latest leadership, conversation, and podcast.

I'm Nik Gowing, Founder and Director of the Thinking the Unthinkable project. These remain deeply unsettling times for a host of ominous reasons. So we want to gauge whether there is progress, especially on the climate emergency, the science is now evermore sinister.

Many scientists now fear, they actually have understated the threat to us all. There's even greater urgency for all of us to cut emissions, and change the way we are used to living and to do it rapidly.

But how to get that message over, how to communicate and convince everyone just how serious the climate predicament is. Well 12 months ago, I was joined by Professor Liz Bentley, Chief Executive of the Royal Meteorological Society, her core mission is to communicate the scale and threat from the climate emergency, and what we must all do to ease it, or else.

But what she faces now is the scary reality that should really concern us all. And that's the focus of this podcast.

So welcome, Liz, back for this update about where you've got to have you made progress. How is messaging and communicating going down? Is there success or frustration?

Prof Liz Bentley

Thanks, Nick. Yeah, and I guess a bit of all of that. So since we've last spoken, the rollneck, society has continued to deliver its climate change communication packages to different communities. And I think what has broadened over the last 12 months are the different groups of people that we've reached out to.

So I think when we last spoke, we were very much actively involved with those in communication roles, those who had large audiences of people that needed to engage around climate change. And that has expanded over the last 12 months. So we now have local councils, community leaders, and interestingly diocese who are also interested in that climate change communication activity. And that I think, is a positive for me.

So one thing that I've noticed not just over the last 12 months, but over the last few years, is that there is a greater need for that communication around climate change. People are interested not just in why our climate is changing, but what they can do to make a difference. And so our shift has been to educate people, but to start to take them on that journey with us that behavioral change journey, so that people have the information but also have the solutions, I guess that will make a significant change. And that's been really important.

So we've done that to a wider audience of people. We've also done that within businesses as well. So taking industry with us some industries that are, you know, real big carbon emission, predators. So you know, things like the cement industry, the steel industry, for example, where we've really tried to focus with them on getting on this journey to net zero. So there has been some headway but you use the word frustration, I think there's definitely frustration from our end, because of the pace of change has been a lot slower than I think any of us would hope.

Nik Gowing

Why do think that is?

Prof Liz Bentley

I think part of the problem is it is a complex problem. But it's probably been maybe overcomplicated.

So when I speak to people, and we talk about net zero, what net zero is and then you break down how you know, you can go on this journey to net zero and you start talking about emissions, direct emissions, indirect emissions, scope, 123 emission, suddenly, it becomes a really complex problem.

When you try and make it as simple as you can for people and just talk about, well, let's focus on direct emissions, what can you as a company, as an individual do to reduce your emissions. And you talk about, you know, a kind of example of scenarios that you can pay for individuals and organisations, and make it as simple as you possibly can, then you get that engagement from people.

But it can be quite a complex subject and the terminology that you use the definitions that are used, almost make it feel like well, it's too big a problem for me to solve. But if you break it down, so one of the things that we do, just let me give you an example.

When we talk to individuals about what they can do, many people think recycling is a really good way of kind of reducing your carbon footprint. Actually, it isn't. So if you think about an average person in the UK or in Western society probably has a carbon footprint each year of about eight and a half tonnes. Recycling probably is naught point naught one tonne of carbon emissions. So it really does. It's very small.

Whereas if you can reduce, change your behavior whether that's transportation so move away from petrol and diesel cars to an electric vehicle that can reduce your carbon footprint by about two and a half tonnes every year, two and a half of that eight and a half tonnes. It's a significant percentage.

And I think what's really important when we talk to people about climate change, it's not all about the examples of the extreme weather events that we're seeing the impact that it's having on people and infrastructure and ecosystems, the conversation quickly leads on to well, what can I do about it? And that's been a really important change, I think over recent years.

Nik Gowing

What about one of the major issues, which is a new view some of it already in this discussion in the first five minutes, jargon, in other words, jargon, all the technology and so on, and also the technical terms like scope two, and scope three, I can imagine a lot of people switch off, when you say, it's got to be simplified.

It's actually a very simple issue, which is our role and our position as humanity on this planet, is now being threatened by our abusive nature, by abuse of biodiversity. And of course, the need to get to net zero. Now, for many people, those three words I've just used, that it doesn't come easy to them, they still don't really grip, the enormity. And you're shaking your head there as well.

Prof Liz Bentley

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, again, you know, once you start to delve under to the complexity of it all, it can be quite scary, and people switch off quite quickly to be able to become overly anxious, you know, it's too difficult to problem solve, or, or there's a sense of apathy, you know, I can't do anything about it.

So, so it's trying to make it as relevant and accessible. So, you know, the education work that we do has to connect with the audience that you're speaking to. So you have to understand your audience, their values, their behaviors, their beliefs, in order to have those connections. But it's all about giving solutions as well, I think is really, really important.

So if you just think about emissions, if we all focus on our personal emissions, whether as an individual or as a business, I run a business here, what do I need to stop doing, I need to reduce the amount of energy that I'm using, and I need to stop using fossil fuels, gas, natural gas, so I've got rid of my boiler here at my headquarters, and we're now using renewable energy. And effectively, quite quickly, I have taken my business emissions down to pretty much net zero. And you have to share that with people go okay, you know, that's, that's a challenge for some organisations that are really big and have other emissions that are produced. But for many small organisations, that's a relatively easy task to achieve. Things become quite simple quite quickly. And it's about making those connections, those quick wins those easy wins, and making the message as simple as you possibly can. To help people to come with you. As soon as you put the jargon in. As soon as the problem becomes too complex, people will switch off.

Nik Gowing

Can I put another word to you about whether it's possible to be positive, and see this as a new opportunity, because that's what the theory says. But there are many people who say, actually, this is all scaring me, I can't be bothered with it, I'm gonna live my life.

Where have you positioned yourself in the last few months on this, to make sure that people realize that, whether it be job opportunities, or even their own personal health, these are things which are

really going to affect them in ways which they need to be concerned about? Maybe they don't need to lose sleep over it yet. But they need to be aware of it or do scare people.

Prof Liz Bentley

So a bit of both, I think, you know, we have to be very clear off the facts around climate change. And as you mentioned, in your introduction, you know, we've seen particularly this year, some extreme events that are above and beyond, I think even what climate scientists had expected, just look at the September global temperatures off the scale. You know, gobsmacking, I think was a word used by climate scientists.

It is very concerning, I think, for the community of scientists to see some of the the extreme numbers and events that have happened this year. We have to be honest about that with people. But if you stop there, as I say, people just there's there's either that kind of climate anxiety or an apathy, they fall into one of the two camps. So you have to continue that conversation, not you give them the facts and the information about what's happening. But what can they do about it, they have to be left with some sort of hope. And the word hope, I think is really important here, because I am frustrated, but I'm still hopeful.

You have to have some sort of degree of positivity, I think in how you you know, you can take people on a journey. And I think I mentioned when we last spoke 12 months ago, you know, the Committee on climate change, which looks at the UK Governments and how its meeting its targets around climate change, said a couple of years ago that in order to get to net zero, we have to not just look at technology and policy changes and leadership from governments There will need to be a significant amount of behavioral change, people will need to change their behavior to get to those targets. And so it's about how we take people on that journey.

So policy leadership is important. But we also have to give people a reason as to why they will need to make changes. And they aren't just sacrifices, I think that's the concern people things, you know, the changes are going to be, you know, detrimental to me, the real benefits to people's lives, whether that's financial benefit, you know, health benefits, you know, there are many co benefits from making these changes that, again, we need to educate people about.

Nik Gowing

How much do you think or feel that really, your arm is twisted behind your back metaphorically, simply because governments, and I'm not going to get party political about this, governments are really not being assertive enough to make it clear to the public, this is what you need to do.

And we want you to do, because you have evidence from planetary assemblies, which you've been holding, and also from polling as well, which indicates that the public is going ahead of where governments are.

Prof Liz Bentley

Yeah, individuals, businesses, you know, they're coming to us wanting to know how they can make a difference, what's gonna have the biggest impact to changes in their behavior in their business processes.

It's really important that we can support people with that, obviously, we'd support governments, there's a lot of science evidence that goes into governments. But we know the fossil fuel companies have done a lot of lobbying with governments. And you know, that's, that's not just here in the UK, I'm sure that's happening elsewhere in the world. And that's a real challenge.

So there's this misinformation that comes out the greenwashing that's been coming out, that's been a kind of new battle, I think, in this communication activity for us. So helping people to go on this journey, but to correct factual misconceptions that have been put out, whether that's through governments, whether that's through, you know, the advertising that's done by the fossil fuel companies, in the last 12 months, we've seen a significant change haven't we, you know, the fossil fuel companies have put up their hands and said, yeah, we've known about climate change for decades. You know, they have, they have lied, and they have misled, and they've been honest about that. But they're not taking, you know, they're not being accountable for any of that.

But there has definitely been a recognition from the fossil fuel companies that they've known about this problem for a long time. And they know that.

Nik Gowing

They've had very, very accurate predictions of the way it would go, particularly Exxon Mobil, a remarkable sort of series of exposes there.

But can I just come back to that point about what evidence you've got now, Liz, about the way the public is feeling about it, both wanting quicker action, and also saying it's not needed, but also the issue of, you've got planetary assemblies, you're bringing people together, you're gathering people, probably the convinced, how much is that acting as an accelerator and a multiplier for what you're trying to do?

Prof Liz Bentley

Yeah, and the key thing, and I mentioned this a minute ago, is the conversation has changed. So there are still people out there who don't believe in climate change, or don't believe it's caused by, you know, our human behavior.

But the conversation has changed with a significant percentage of people and organisations about understanding that our client, they can see a climate change, and it's playing out in front of us on a daily basis. They want to know what they can do about it. And so our kind of communication package, and the work that we do, has shifted somewhat from having to have that discussion around climate change to what what can people do? What has the biggest impact? How can we help people on this

journey? How can we bring communities together, because as an individual, we all have a role to play, but actually, there's strength in unity.

And so doing things at community level at local level within organisations, you then start to grow that momentum. And then you get these wider organisations like race to net zero that bring multiple international communities together to work together and share in best practice. And these are all positive things. It's been slow. And I've mentioned the word frustration earlier in the interview, I am frustrated with the pace of change, and, you know, it feels sometimes like, you know, the our foot is coming off the pedal, when really we should be pushing much harder on that accelerator to move much faster. And that can be frustrating.

But as I said, you know, it is about taking people on this journey with us. If we just put enforcement in place, if we, you know, look to government to put policies in place that the public don't agree with, then, you know, clearly there's going to be a battle on our hands. We've seen that being played out with you know, some of the, in the UK in particular some of the local policies that have been put in to improve you know, emission zones in cities, for example. You know, that it has to be and as you say, we have done citizen assemblies to bring the population together. We're to talk about, you know, the targets to get to net zero, what the public, what the people on the ground want to see change happening that would help them to get to that you have to take people on this journey with you. That's really important.

Nik Gowing

If you're frustrated, and there's this tension, many politicians I've spoken to mostly privately, but some publicly have said, politicians have got to understand they've got to make political sacrifices now, not worry about being elected or reelected, but actually just get done, what is needed?

How much do you feel it needs that kind of dramatic, positive statement from those in positions of power responsibility, like in politics, like in the corporate sector, as well, in other words, no longer hiding their position under a bushel? getting on with it? And being proud of it as well? How much would that help you?

Prof Liz Bentley

Well, significantly, I mean, you know, we need some bold Climate Leaders. Absolutely. Whether that's in politics, or whether that's in business, or, you know, communities and individuals, we need in leaders to show the way to guide the way and to lead by example. So not just words, but actions that need to be taken. So that that's clearly going to be fundamental in all of this.

I think one of the key things for me, though, is that climate change has to be removed, in a sense from politics. So you know, these have to be done across multi party decisions. So that when we get a change of government, these long term policies can still be driven forward. And we're not kind of shifting and changing depending on whether you've got, you know, one, one right wing or left wing kind of government in place. And that's really important, I think, is, you know, climate change is not just

something that that is impactful over, you know, one party kind of period, it is multi decadal. And so we have to look at the bigger picture.

The problem is it is tied, it is fundamentally tied to politics. And as I mentioned earlier, you've also then got this kind of interweaving kind of relationship that politicians and governments have with the fossil fuel companies that that make it, you know, it just slows the whole process. I've been involved with IPCC negotiations and the COP negotiations for a number of years. And again, it's just, it's quite interesting. But it's very frustrating to see how things just get slowed down because of, you know, views of, you know, if you look at cops, for example, you know, you have about 200 countries involved in those negotiations. And yet, it's a handful of them that are slowing the negotiations down.

Nik Gowing

Alright, well, we're getting back into jargon. We've got a minute left. Give me Give me your take. Imagine that there's a chief executive chairman of a board board members watching this, what would convince them that you've got a minute to say it? What would convince them do you think, to move off the off the fence off their concerns into saying, this is something I want to be committed to, I want my company to be committed to I want my political party to be committed to because this is actually something which is going to put it bluntly, save human life on the planet?

Prof Liz Bentley

Yeah. And again, it's that engagement, you've got to be having that conversation all the time, not just with kind of work colleagues, it's conversations you have with family and friends, it's engagement with people.

So again, very quickly, we have multiple examples where people have no idea where to go. And that's really because they have not they haven't got the knowledge, they haven't got the information in front of them about what they can do. So that starts with education and those conversations, it's all about engagement.

Nik Gowing

Thank you so much for joining us, Chief Executive of the Royal Meteorological Society, Liz Bentley. The transcript is posted in parallel on our website. Do please join us when we next have a conversation about Thinking the Unthinkable because there are many unthinkables around at the moment, as you all know, for me that going until the next time, keep thinking unthinkables more than ever, it's both possible.

And my goodness, it's necessary. Bye bye.