



Thinking the Unthinkable | Podcast

20 MINS

Challenging Reluctance and Resistance – Then Winning

Presented & Hosted by
NIK GOWING

Guest Speaker
RICHARD NUGEE



Challenging Reluctance and Resistance – Then Winning

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Therefore, if you approach it by saying we're going to cut your profits, we're going to make it really difficult for your supply chain, we're going to make it impossible. And there's no upside to that apart from some wishy-washy saving the planet type argument, then you're going to lose, and people will pay lip service to it.

So, you've got to work with the grain of the organisation.”

Nik Gowing

Welcome to talking about "Thinking the Unthinkable", our latest leadership conversation and podcast. Hello, I'm Nik Gowing. Hello, Founder and Director of the "Thinking the Unthinkable" project since 2014.

Well, faced with the enormity of the climate emergency and abusive nature, how can leaders at every level in huge organisations change their mindsets and how they think differently at the pace and scale needed? Government departments like, say, ministries of defence are at last confronting that challenge.

My guest is Richard Nugee, a Former Artillery Officer who served in the Iraq and Afghan wars. He then rose to become a three-star general. But he's with us because of his single-handed job to radicalise thinking on the implications of climate change for defence and security in the British M.O.D. (Ministry of Defence).

How did he change his thinking? What lessons can all leaders learn? Well, Richard, welcome. For four years, you ran defence people. That's defence personnel. That gave you huge insights into what talents people have. Then, in a visionary way, in 2020, you created for yourself what became a one-

man command as Non-Executive Director for Climate Change and Sustainability, where you fought off orthodox thinking to eventually make a huge impact.

So, in our 18 minutes, help us all understand: how did you move that mountain of conformity and orthodoxy?

Richard Nugee

So, Nik, it's a great pleasure to be here and a chance to chat. I think the realization very rapidly, and actually reinforced by one or two people I spoke to when suggesting a project of this sort as it became a report and then a design for the Ministry of Defence, was that I was dealing with skeptics—people who believed that it was either-or: you were either green, or you were militarily capable.

And I also met a whole lot of people who said that this wasn't relevant to defence. Defence goes off and does what it needs to do, what its government tells it to do, and it just gets on with it and does it in whatever the circumstances.

So, I looked for a way of showing that this whole subject of climate change, sustainability, global warming, and lack of resources was relevant to defence. In fact, I wrote a six-chapter strategy, and one of the chapters—in fact, for me, the most important chapter—was titled "Why is this relevant to defence."

And by understanding the culture of the department, by understanding the culture of the organisation I was part of, I could actually approach it to, if you like, appeal to those areas of the culture that I knew would have an impact. As you say, having spent four years at the top of defence as the head of people, I actually understood the culture of defence, I think, reasonably well.

And so, I could look to see what would actually make people think differently rather than just doing more of the same. We'd had people shouting at us about climate change and sustainability for quite a long time, and defence had taken no attention to it at all.

And so, what I wanted to do was find a way, and the way that I found was very, very simple. Defence cares, really—and I'm reducing it to a minimum—but cares about two things. It cares about military capability: how good are we on the battlefield? How good are we as a defence force? And so, anything that might challenge that would be a problem, but anything that supported and encouraged that would be sensible and would be conservative.

Nik Gowing

Well, Richard, you described to me how one very senior person said, "We are exempt from climate change." So how did you bend minds?

Richard Nugee

So, by using two things: one was to say that some of the technology that's around at the moment will reduce cost. And that is always—that's the other thing that defence really likes—reducing costs and efficiency.

But the first and most primary thing was to turn around and say, our capability will be diminished if we do nothing. Our whole way of life, of how we operate in defence, will be diminished. Whether it is we will be fighting different people, we will be fighting for different causes, we'll be fighting in different environments and in different circumstances. And we will be unprepared if we do nothing.

That started to resonate when I was able to show that actually climate change is having an effect on the security of the world. It's known now relatively regularly as a threat multiplier. That was a very new idea in 2020 when I started, but now most people accept that climate change exacerbates existing conflicts and existing threats.

And so, saying that...

Nik Gowing

We'll talk about that in a moment about the definition of national security and so on. But let me get this clear. Rather than talking about we need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, it was about reducing costs. In other words, a completely different mindset in order to have the same effect.

Richard Nugee

Yes, I mean, there's a wonderful example of the upfront cost of solar farms, which the army is spreading out across the country so that it can be self-sufficient and resilient in terms of its own electricity. But also, it will save costs in the long run.

And it was the self-sufficiency, resilience, and cost saving that made the difference as far as the finance director of the M.O.D. was concerned. Rather than saying, "We're gonna save tons of greenhouse gases and tons of emissions," that didn't work as an explanation. It only worked when talking in terms of efficiency, resilience, and saving costs.

So, it's understanding what's going to really work with the finance director rather than saying it's all about emissions. The fact that we are also saving a huge amount of emissions by all the solar farms and by different ways of self-sustaining ourselves makes a huge difference to the planet, I would suggest. But it's not the argument, not the narrative, that will win the day with an organisation like the Ministry of Defence.

Nik Gowing

So, how do you make the skeptics or the naysayers actually sit up and listen, give you time rather than avoiding you in the corridor?

Richard Nugee

So, I use my own example. In Iraq, we were in 50 to 55 degrees of heat. We weren't terribly well prepared for that sort of heat. I had one of my soldiers drink 16 liters of water in one day and still go down with heat exposure. These are almost impossible environments to fight in, and yet you get on and fight in this, and you lose people through heat.

What I was able to do was turn around and say that was a one-off in Iraq; it just so happened that we had this 50 to 55 degrees. But what I was able to prove with science is that those sorts of temperatures will be relatively frequent in our training areas in Cyprus, for example, in 10 to 15 years' time.

So, it may not be immediate, but if you think that we're going to be training in Cyprus in the summer in 10 to 15 years' time and not lose a huge number of people through heat exposure and heat exhaustion, then you've got another thing coming.

So, I tried to make it directly relevant to what we do. And what we do is we fight, but we also train. If we can't train because it's too hot, and we have various temperature thresholds which we don't train above—we'll fight above it if we have to, but we don't train above because we don't want to damage our people during training.

So, trying to get to the real detail of how it will affect us on a day-to-day basis in the future and, therefore, take note, pay attention, and work out what you're going to do to try and reduce our incidence of heat exposure and heat exhaustion by understanding what we need to do to our equipment, understanding what we need to do to our clothes, etc, etc.

That's how it suddenly became, "There's something in this. And now let's look at slightly wider aspects of it."

Nik Gowing

Richard, you're no longer serving; you're technically retired. This means you can speak very openly, but you're working across government and many other organisations. What have you learned that can make leaders think differently within the existing grain and culture of the organisation, which may still be very conservative?

Richard Nugee

So, I think this is—I mean, I often say, work with the grain, don't try. And this is where I think so many people have failed, if I might, and I'm going to be really blunt. I think a lot of people who have been brought up in the sustainability world, rather than brought up in the business world, don't understand the very, very simple premise of somebody who is operating a business is there for a purpose. And that purpose, frankly, is to do the best they can and make money.

And therefore, if you approach it by saying, "We're going to cut your profits, we're going to make it really difficult for your supply chain, we're going to make it impossible." And there's no upside to

that, apart from some wishy-washy saving the planet-type argument, then you're going to lose, and people will pay lip service to it.

So, you've got to work with the grain of the organisation. And I worked with the grain of the M.O.D., talking about how we can be better, how we can be more effective, how we can save money, which means that we can purchase more equipment. It's that idea of working with the grain but finding solutions, either technological solutions or people solutions or some other mechanism, that actually means that you pay attention to this issue called climate change and sustainability, rather than saying actually it's going to do us harm.

And there are lots of other examples that, you know, for example, if you want to drive a tank, drive a warship, or fly a fighter plane, there's only one place you can do that, and that's the Ministry of Defence. And in each person's country, that's fine. But that's about the tip of the spear; it's only about 30% of the people in defence. So, 70% are doing jobs that you could do outside defence. You can be an engineer outside defence or in defence; you can be a lawyer outside defence or in defence, etc, etc.

And what we were finding is that the further you get away from that tip of the spear, the person actually driving the tank, the more likely it is that those individuals who are looking to join will say, "So, how are you doing in terms of sustainability? Are you interested in it?" And if the answer's no, "I'm not interested," the younger generation more and more are turning around and saying, "Well, we don't want to join you. We're not interested in what you're doing because you don't care about the planet."

And therefore, while that's not the case for people who want to drive a tank, it's definitely the case for people who have alternative ways of doing what they want to do, whether it's, say, whether it's a lawyer or something like that.

Nik Gowing

Now, Richard, you've been praised for bringing the implications of climate change and sustainability right to the heart of defence and national security. So let's, as I mentioned earlier, and you mentioned as well, talk about how national security is now defined.

It's not just about the threat of attack from terrorists or missiles; there's something much bigger at play. Can you just summarise how we now need to think about national security in this new era of a climate emergency?

Richard Nugee

So, I think national security is much wider, as you say, in corporate cybersecurity, for example. I think we need to understand what is national security in my book. And it's not a definition you'll find in Wikipedia or anything like that. But in my book, that national security is allowing us, if you have national security, you are able to live the way that you wish to live as a country.

And the country makes choices. Those choices are different per country, but you have a chance to say what you how you want to live in your country. Climate change is affecting that. It's affecting our personal security, it's affecting our health. As a country, it's affecting our food security, our ability to pay a reasonable amount for food, as opposed to paying extortionate amounts for food, and more importantly, to be able to have the food that we wish.

I remember very clearly, gosh, it's now 15 or 16 months ago, when we ran out of tomatoes in the supermarkets. And the reason for that was that Spain, where we get almost all our tomatoes from— or did, until we diversified—chose not to sell us tomatoes. Now, that's not because they couldn't sell us tomatoes, but they chose to sell to a market closer to them because they had so few tomatoes to sell that they sold to the markets close to them rather than selling to us.

Nik Gowing

What is this saying though? What is this, therefore, saying about a society's resilience and the assumptions of stability, which we all have? There are warnings now that the stability we take for granted is no longer guaranteed in any way, shape, or form for some of the reasons you've already mentioned.

Richard Nugee

Well, look at the Prime Minister's speech. Just recently, he said to the effect that we're entering five years of very difficult times, where the world is a much more dangerous place. And that is not just a more dangerous place because of the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. But it's a more dangerous place because we are losing control over things that we take for granted.

And whether that is how much water is coming from the heavens, how much food we have, whether we can control the pathogens that are coming out of some of the areas as a result of climate change and the warming of particular parts of the world where actually, they've never been warmed before. It's said that the permafrost have a number of pathogens in them that we've never experienced as humans before, because it was frozen before humans really started operating.

And so what we're beginning to see is that our security to be able to lead the life that we wish to lead is being threatened by a number of issues, all of which work with each other, all of which work with the traditional security threats that the country has seen over a long time. But they work together to exacerbate some of those threats. So it becomes a more difficult place to live.

And that could be seen as a very negative story because what we're doing is we're losing our resilience. But I would say that actually, it's a bit of a wake-up call, yes. But there are real opportunities to try and build our resilience, build our understanding of what's likely to happen. And then we can start to look for opportunities of how to solve some of those problems, or at least mitigate some of those problems.

And I'm not just talking about mitigation in the emissions world; I'm talking about mitigations in terms of health, mitigations in terms of insurance. Our insurance premiums are going up; everybody's seen that. Well, part of that is that insurance companies are having to pay huge amounts more for the damage done by floods, by wildfires, etc. Across the world, not just in the UK, the UK is an example. But actually, I think the figures were four and a half billion spent last year against an average of one and a half billion spent in previous years by insurance companies in Europe, combating or, if you like, compensating for the effects of climate change.

Nik Gowing

Richard do you...

Richard Nugee

This is going to grow. And it makes it means that we need to understand this and do something about it.

Nik Gowing

Richard, we've got a couple of minutes left. But do you think the political class—I'm not being political about this—but do you think the politicians who have to get reelected and so on, do you think the leaders really understand the scale of the threat and the enormity of what's happening, and the speed at which it's happening, and the way in which it could and is already destabilizing the society we take for granted?

Richard Nugee

So, I think this is really, really difficult. Because actually, the reality is that this is problem compounded on problem compounded a problem and compounded on problem. Do they understand the totality of this? Even if they did, I think it would overwhelm.

So I think the chances are that there is not a really deep understanding. But even if there was it would probably overwhelm and you'd go, what on earth do I do about it, we need to, departments of government work in their silos. That's the way government works. There's very little cross departmental thinking on this, although there is some, I think that that trying to get the message across, but it's always a matter of priorities, it's always a matter of the urgent over the important, and climate change.

And sustainability fits into the important category. And of course, the next crisis always fits into the urgent category. So even if they really did understand that they will be pulled, politicians are always pulled by doing something now to alleviate the situation. Now, rather than dealing with the problem in five to 10 years time, it takes real strategic thinking by politicians to be able to think beyond the next five to 10 years and say what is going to happen and do something about it. And I think that some of what this country is trying to do and trying to get to net zero, for example, that was such a bold move. It's something that if they stick to will actually be genuinely strategic, and they will genuinely try to solve some of the issues.

Nik Gowing

Finally, Richard, literally in 30 seconds if you can, because we're almost out of time: What about the message you've got for leaders who are skeptical, still, who are kind of naysayers, who aren't there yet, who are sitting on the edge? What are they got to do to change?

Richard Nugee

So I think there's a very, very simple answer: look for opportunity. Because we're trying to combat climate change, and are trying to become more sustainable, huge amounts of innovation are beginning to happen around the world in order to do so. And that presents enormous opportunity, whatever your field.

And I think that there is great opportunity to take some of these new technologies, new ideas, and try and do things more efficiently and more effectively. And that's in everybody's interest. If you can save money, be more efficient, be more effective, then do so. And it doesn't matter whether the end result is, "Oh, by the way, you're saving the planet as well," because that's not the motivation; the motivation is to do your business better.

And the new technologies that are coming on, the opportunities that are there, are really manifest. And it's worth looking for them so that you can actually develop and become a better organisation, whatever that organisation is.

Nik Gowing

Richard Nugee, thank you so much for joining us. You can reference every detail that Richard has given us. A transcript of the podcast is posted in parallel on our website along with contact details for us and for Richard.

Do please join us when we next have a conversation about thinking the unthinkable from me, Nik Gowing. Until the next time, keep thinking unthinkables. More than ever, it's possible but also necessary, as we've just heard from Richard. Thank you very much, Richard. Bye bye.

Richard Nugee

Thanks Nik.