

New Narrative Needed to Tackle Climate Emergency

Guest Speaker **EMILY SHUCKBURGH**

“This is about creating a future that is better for the environment, both climate and nature, better for us in terms of our health and just a more pleasant, more equal, better future.”

Nik Gowing

Welcome to Talking About Thinking the Unthinkable, our latest leadership conversation and podcast. Hello, I'm Nik Gowing, founder and director of the Thinking the Unthinkable project since 2014.

Well, the science about the deepening climate, nature and biodiversity crises is very clear. So is the evidence. But how can the public be reassured that there is a positive way forward which they can engage in effectively and with confidence? Just think of the ambitious new target that the UK announced unexpectedly at the COP29 meeting in Baku. The new aim is to reduce emissions by a massive 81 % by 2035. Yes, reduce by 81%. How on earth can I change my life that dramatically, you and most people will be asking and why can someone tell me?

Well, my guest for this podcast is Emily Shuckburgh. She has a clear answer. It's the word communicate. We must change the narrative, as she puts it. We must frame options in a positive way that encourages, not frightens people.

Well, Emily is a climate scientist, a mathematician, an expert on Antarctica and a science communicator. Crucial for this podcast is that she's director of Cambridge Zero at Cambridge University. The huge project's aim for the past five years has been to try to coordinate all the university's massive, but disparate expertise and science on climate.

Well, welcome, Emily. In these 18 minutes, let's excite people with positives. What do you mean by creating a new narrative?

Emily Shuckburgh

I mean, creating a vision of the future that we all want to be part of and that we can all see our role in. And as you say, I'm from the University of Cambridge and I see every day ideas and innovations that are being created around the university that can be part of that positive vision of the future. And I find that inspiring and I hope that other people would also find it inspiring.

What's wrong with the narrative as it exists at the moment? Let me put it to you. It's very negative because of the awfulness of the science.

Well, is. I'm a climate scientist and I've spent my career studying the changing climate. five years ago, I'd almost got to the end of my ability to cope in some senses with the magnitude of the awfulness of the situation. I particularly studied the polar regions and the changes that have dramatic, potentially catastrophic global impacts that are occurring in the polar regions are, well, in a sense heartbreaking.

But I decided five years ago that in a sense enough was enough. know, we can either take what's happening in the world as a given and give up essentially, or we can say, right, this is the challenge that we've got to respond to as individuals and as a global community. And let's take on that challenge and find a way of creating a positive out of it and create positive solutions. Use our human ingenuity and creativity. To create a better, more sustainable world for ourselves and for future generations. And when you start to reframe it in that context, then all of a sudden you go from a sense of doom and gloom and, you know, hopelessness to a sense that, well, let's do our best to see what we can do to solve this problem.

And, and as I say, I see every day instances where currently, they're at a small scale, but we sort of know how to scale up solutions. We've seen that already in terms of renewable energy technologies that have gone from, you know, tiny scale in terms of wind farms and solar energy to now global impact in terms of a real sense of shifting our global energy systems or the same with electric vehicles and battery technologies.

We've seen those tipping points start to happen in some aspects of our lives. And so now the challenge is how do we find similar ways of creating those tipping points across all aspects of our global economy and global society?

Nik Gowing

Well, here are you and I talking about this. We want to find ways of creating a positive narrative. How do you think that can be done? Things are moving in the right direction, but overall, that isn't the impression that the average person in the public who's not a scientist just gets on with their life and sees the heavy rain and the baking heat. They don't know what to do. How can you change the narrative?

Emily Shuckburgh

Well, first of all, you said that, you you talked about the UK's current new targets for, as you described, a massive reduction in our emissions, but we've already halved our emissions since 1990. and I think most people have barely noticed a change in their lives whilst we've done that.

So, I really do believe that this is possible in terms of a new narrative, a new way of us living our lives as individuals, what can we each individually do? That route to that scale of emissions reductions is

going to come about through two interconnected things. It's going to come about by technology innovation. And we've seen that in some parts.

And I've already mentioned renewable energy and battery technologies, for example, but there are many other examples of innovations which are currently sitting in universities and need to be taken out into the real world. I'll give you just one example of low carbon or zero carbon cement, which is a critical material for buildings.

There are other ways that we need to embrace that are not so much about technologies, but how we conduct our lives or our businesses. So in the agricultural sector, there are all sorts of changes that we can make to the way in which we manage our land that have benefits for climate and nature, but also still preserve that rural economy and our ways of life.

In terms of our individual behaviors, I went to my workplace canteen yesterday and there's been a major change over the last year in terms of the food offerings that they provide and the catering manager, wonderful, wonderful person called Ivan had a real philosophy that if he wanted to improve the sustainability of the food offerings, the thing that had to come first was good, tasty food and that people would change their behaviors and their choices if fundamentally it was tasty.

And that's what he's done. And you go into the canteen now and the food offerings that are vegan and vegetarian plant-based foods are so delicious that honestly everybody chooses those by default.

So there are things that we can do that are, this isn't about, you know, hair shirts and living in caves. This is about creating a future that is better for the environment, both climate and nature, better for us in terms of our health and just a more pleasant, more equal better future, and it's in our hands to create that future. And that is where it starts to become exciting, I think, because we can shape.

Nik Gowing

Let me press you on communication. I have actually in front of me a book which you published two years ago called Climate Change, but it's written with then Prince Charles, now King Charles. And I'm putting it up there because it's what we call in the UK, a Ladybird book. It's only 42 pages. It's very simple and he's got plenty of cartoons and so on. What I'm getting over here is how can you communicate this? How can you communicate this in a different way, which groups people, whether they're young kids or aging people who are just struggling day to day with putting food on the table, et cetera, et cetera. How can you get into their minds as well?

Emily Shuckburgh

Well, you know what, one thing that I, if you say that I, I often say that we need to create a new narrative and we need to create a positive vision of the future. The other thing that I am absolutely convinced of is that those visions of the future and the solutions need to be developed with local communities and local people, because each of those solutions are going to be different according to the context in which people are living.

And so as you say, people who are struggling to put food on the table, we need to be working with them to find solutions to living more sustainably that work for them in their context. And I gave an example a minute ago of the farming community. And one thing that we are doing in Cambridge is we're working closely with the farming community in the UK in three particular landscapes to help work with them to deliver and identify solutions that can work to how they can manage their land in different ways for their benefit of climate and nature, but whilst preserving their life.

Nik Gowing

But what you're talking about is changing perceptions. And I was very struck by a quote on your website from one of your colleagues, Nina Seeger, who says, quote, Unfortunately, there's still a persistent perception that sustainable investment means sacrificing profitability.

But that's not the case. People assume that if a job is going to become green, somehow it ain't going to exist much longer and they're going to be out of work. There's this perception problem. That's why for you as a communicator, I come back to how do you create a narrative for people who are fearful that actually the future is positive?

Emily Shuckburgh

Yeah, it is a perception problem, but there's also a coordination problem. And that comes down to communication again, because an individual can't solve the global climate problem on their own. A single business or an investor can't solve the global climate challenge on their own.

What's required is a set of actors coming together. So you mentioned right at the start, UK national policy setting the agenda, setting in part the narrative at a national governmental level. That then needs to be supported by market shaping policies to help support businesses who want to do the right thing. But if they do the right thing just on their own, it's very difficult for them to be successful and very difficult for them to fight against the vested interests of the incumbent businesses.

So there needs to be that support and a policy environment. And the same for individuals. One individual making the choice to do something more sustainable in their lifestyles is not going to make the difference. But if we create a much more coherent narrative that supports new green jobs and the skills training that's associated with that, that supports the infrastructure to enable people to live their lives more sustainably.

So it's not that the narrative is not just about convincing individuals to do things differently. The narrative is about creating an entire coherent ecosystem that supports that positive change.

Nik Gowing

I know, because we've spoken many times before, that you talk to business leaders, you talk to leaders, political leaders, you talk to a lot of people. Are they surprised by this when you tell them actually there are many positives because there does seem to be a culture of doomism, of being gloomy as opposed to seeing the bright side?

Is this a mindset problem? What are you dealing with here? How do you change those perceptions with a new narrative?

Emily Shuckburgh

Well, think one thing that I, when I try and, know, and I do passionately believe that there is a positive narrative here, but when I do so, I sometimes get pushback and I sometimes get people saying, isn't this just wishful thinking?

And I think that therefore having really credible examples, there are living examples where positive change has been already enacted to give people a sense that this isn't a hopeless cause. And those positive changes can be at a global level, at a national level, or really down in terms of local communities. I think that is really important to give a sense that this isn't just wishful thinking.

There are real opportunities here. And in some senses, I get frustrated when I see, as I describe, innovations that are sitting in the university context. We've got people in our chemistry department here who are developing effectively artificial leaves to create new sustainable fuels. It's a wonderful concept. still on the lab benches at the moment, but with the right support and an investment that could scale up and be transformational.

So I get frustrated sometimes that I see the new ideas here, the elements, leaves of the positive vision of the future. And what needs to happen is they need to come together and be supported so that they go from being leaves to into our trees and then forests of the future.

Nik Gowing

We're talking here about the information space. And there are many who are the skeptics, fossil fuel lobby, et cetera, et cetera. and certainly in America who are very cunning, very canny, putting a lot of money into debunking much of what you're saying. How do you counter that with a new narrative? Does it require money? Does it require commitment? Does it require government? What does it require?

Emily Shuckburgh

Well, as you say, there are undoubtedly vested interests from the incumbents of an old narrative. And if a new narrative is to have hope of getting, you know, cut through, in the midst of those vested interests of the incumbent, then support is required because it is simply not going to be the case that a little minnow of a good guy of a narrative is going to be able to come up against the sharks of those vested interests unless there is the right support to enable that to happen. And that support is partly, it is of course partly about ensuring that there is the right funding, financial funding, of both the narrative itself and the ideas and innovations that sit behind the narrative.

But I come back to the fact that there is about a broader systems change. so things like the policy environment are really important as well to ensure that there's a fair playing field to enable those new ideas to break through.

Nik Gowing

Emily literally we've got a couple of minutes left. Let me encourage you to come up with the big idea where people are watching maybe a bit skeptically saying what the hell can I do? How can I benefit from this? How can I push this forward? How can I see positives here? What's the overarching message that you've got for them, the skeptics who want to be persuaded?

Emily Shuckburgh

I don't know. Listen, everyone, don't have a single answer for you, Nik. If I did, I would have been able to change the world already. I think that for everyone, it is slightly different. And I see that when I speak to people. So there some people I speak to who say, you know, why don't you tell the truth? Why don't you tell the truth on the scale of the challenge?

And well, I've tried to in terms of the scale of the challenge and I've spoken about the changes that are happening in the polar regions and that is deeply concerning. For some people, if I describe the scale of the challenge and the potential of really catastrophic changes occurring in the climate system if we don't address our global emissions very rapidly, then other people worry that that's scaremongering and that that's a turn off. there's somehow in the mixed all of that.

Different people with different values and different ways of seeing the world require a different way of thinking about it. And I think that that diversity is fine. But what we ultimately need is the world to come together in a common cause, in a common future, with a common vision of what a desirable future is. And I would argue that...

Everyone can agree that a desirable future is one where we are living healthily, where we are helping to support a healthy planet, which is the planet that fundamentally sustains us. And that means a healthy environment and healthy nature.

And if we can create something that has those elements together, then we have a positive vision of the future that can be a vision that sustains us, our children and our grandchildren.

Nik Gowing

Well, Emily, thanks so much. Emily Shuckburgh, thank you. You can reference every detail that Emily has given me because a transcript of the podcast is posted in parallel on our website, along with contact details for Emily at Cambridge Zero.

Do please join us when we next have a conversation about thinking the unthinkable. From me and Nik Gowing until the next time, keep thinking unthinkables, keep positive as well. More than ever.

It's both possible and necessary. Bye bye.