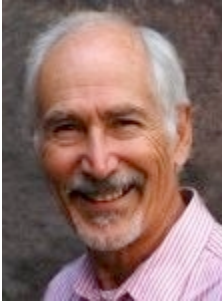


## Spotlight on Bruce Nixon

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In this issue of *Spotlight*, Bruce Nixon talk to editor Sue de Verteuil about linking together corporate social responsibility, climate change and global issues to encourage people to think about them differently.

Bruce is a veteran "change agent". Before going independent, he worked in the Jamaica, North America and UK in retail, food manufacture, mining and chemical engineering, paper, aluminium, and financial services, mainly in HR, Management Development and Internal Consulting. Today he does some consulting and business school "teaching", but focuses more on writing, giving participative talks on global issues and facilitating events for people who want to contribute to bringing about fundamental change in business and society.

Bruce is passionate about sustainability and global justice. His fourth book, [Living System](#) - making sense of sustainability is a result of this. He loves mountains, trees, fragrant shrubs, cultivating flowers, fruit and vegetables, architecture, learning about different cultures and travelling in hot countries, especially Jamaica, where he lived and worked for over 5 years, and Southern Europe. He recently took part in a course in India on Gandhi and Globalisation at Vandana Shiva's International College for Sustainable Living at Navdanya Farm.

He read Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Oxford; is a member of the Association of Sustainability Practitioners, the Sustainable Development Network, Royal Society of Arts Living Systems Group and, until recently, the Council of the Association of Management Education and Development. He is also CFCIPD. He has published some 70 articles and his current books are LIVING SYSTEM - making sense of sustainability, published September 2006, Making a Difference - Strategies and Tools for Transforming your Organisation, 2001, and Global Forces - a Guide for Enlightened Leaders - what Companies and Individuals Can Do, 2000, updated 2003.

**Abstract:** *An interview with Bruce Nixon who cares passionately about our world, its inhabitants and its long-term sustainability. Coming from a business management and management consulting background he speaks the same language as us all and so communicates well. He's optimistic and does see ways forward - we need that. Pessimism means the end of action and progress. Take the small steps and the big steps start to fall into place. Have a change of heart and start to change the world for the better.*

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**Spotlight :** You paint a scary picture. It seems to me the really difficult task is demonstrating to people how all these problems are interlinked. Can you give us a flavour of your thinking?

**Bruce Nixon:** First, I'd like to say, yes, it is a scary picture and we have to take it seriously but we have to get things into perspective. Life is wonderful. It is a beautiful planet and most people have a great deal of joy most of the time. That is easy to forget. Often it is the simplest moments that are the most joyful. Also there is so much positive news. The media tend to focus on the sensational rather than all those positive steps and the small things that make our lives

wonderful. In a recent survey by the BBC, young people made this point. There is a well-known magazine called *Positive News* that corrects the balance. It is full of interesting information about innovations, initiatives and campaigns. It is a delight to read.

Next, may I say something about the scary situation, as I see it. Every day there is more worrying news about climate change. It is now almost universally accepted that climate change is driven by human activity, though solar and cosmic ray activity also play a part. The effects of climate change are potentially devastating. People everywhere will be affected but poor people and poor countries will suffer most.

But sustainability is not just about climate change. It is much more complex than that. We face a growing shortage of resources. If everyone lived as people do in London, we'd need 3 planets - as in New York, five planets! Increasing demand for fossil fuels and water leads to conflict. A sustainable world also includes protecting ecological diversity, Planet Earth and all living things upon it.

It includes global economic and social justice, respect for different peoples and ending violence. There can be no peace or security without justice and respect for difference. In addition, there is the continuing threat of nuclear annihilation, nuclear proliferation, international terrorism, possibly using dirty bombs. Millions of people live with fear and insecurity generated by out of control violence. State violence and bullying are not the answers to these problems. We need a total change of mind set.

Global sourcing for lowest cost is a principal cause of global warming. It is destroying communities and livelihoods, deskilling people; increasing poverty and exporting unfair working conditions. Western culture is bringing unhealthy life styles through over-use of technology. Our lives are out of balance. Treating nature as a resource to be plundered, food as a commodity instead of the source of life and agriculture as an industry is degrading the earth, causing salinisation, water shortage and desertification, polluting water and the air we breathe and corrupting the food we eat. Agribusiness has replaced agriculture. We are losing the arts of making things, growing things, preparing food, sitting round the table and living in communities.

Globalisation has not reduced poverty or the gap between rich and poor. It has increased the wealth and power of a small elite and produced a larger affluent but stressed middle class. Nor has it increased wellbeing, partly because of the damaging social consequences and a lack of meaning for many people are not taken into account. GDP is a poor measure of poverty or wealth. Rich countries like UK and US are at the top of many indices of unhappiness.

Here is a definition of sustainability given to me by the Centre for Alternative Technology for my new book:

*"Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' is still good if fairly simplistic. Sustainability must include both social and economic factors as well as the environment, if we are to deal with the causes of the problems. We have chosen the three key areas of climate change, biodiversity and habitat, and social and international equity as our key sustainability challenges. These have been prioritised because they could become irreversible, or out of control."*

Now to try and answer your challenging question. I think we need a holistic view of the situation if we are to succeed in changing it for the better. Westerners divide things into parts, often opposites, rather than seeing the whole. That has been the basis of scientific method and it has led to amazing discoveries. However for the complex problems we face today, I believe we need to see the whole interconnected system and diagnose the underlying issues. We seem to have difficulty seeing the whole system and tend to chop things up into parts - hence the lack of "joined

up" government policy and strategy. Different departments of government pull in different directions. Another feature of Western thought is dualism - so it is either or, and if you are not with us you are against us and adversarial debate, winning the argument instead of discovering the truth - instead of *let us see every point of view and find truth in the complexity of many different viewpoints* . We need to give up dualism.

Another feature of Western thought is rationalism. Today we need to engage heart and spirit as well as head if we are to find our way through the situation we face.

If we are always going to approach global issues from our heads, without heart and spirit, if we always approach these issues from the starting point of our individual and national interests, rather than the interests of all human beings and all living things, we will face a continuing horrifying doomsday scenario.

Satish Kumar has written beautiful books and articles about all this and of course so did Gandhi. When I look at the situation described above, I see that it is all interconnected. I do not think we are going to transform the situation by problem solving. **We need to address the underlying system** at the root of the crisis - otherwise it will re-appear in new forms despite everything we do.

We have to see that we are part of a **living system**, an intricate, interacting relationship between the planet and all living things upon it. Living systems hit back hard if not respected. That is what is happening on the planet. Climate change and the situation in Iraq are two warnings, if only political leaders would see it!

It is difficult to identify clearly the underlying, fundamental issues. However I think they are a lack of respect for nature of which we are a part, for life in all its forms including human diversity and failure to see that wealth and power do not bring happiness. This is at the root of the crisis.

We live in a society based on greed, domination and violence in various forms - violence towards nature, towards animals, towards each other - in thought, word and deed. Exploitation of others and of nature are forms of violence.

We need a change in mind set and a change of heart.

*"Problems cannot be solved at the same level of consciousness that created them."* Albert Einstein.

**The root of this crisis is an unsustainable economic system.** Another way of putting it is to say that at the root of this crisis is an unsustainable economic system based on consumerism. We are caught up in it. Maybe we are "conned" by mono-thinking about globalisation and the assumed need for continuous economic growth. It is creating a mono-culture across the world. Vandana Shiva makes all this brilliantly clear in her writings. Political leaders accept it uncritically and are afraid of the consequences of pursuing a different path for fear of alienating big corporations and losing out in the race for investment, economic growth and jobs. Hence there is really no democratic choice for electorates. One party offers much the same as another.

The system is driven by the corporate world - imperialism in a new form supported by foreign policies accompanied by militarism to which there is growing opposition. Un-sustainability is driven by consumerism; large corporations; global institutions and governments too much influenced by big business; media dominated by big business; a military economy; over use of "science" and uncritical belief in global sourcing and globalisation as the way to eliminate poverty and GDP as the measure of progress.

I am very impressed by the relevance of Gandhi's thinking to our situation today. He called his mission *Sarvodaya*, "the welfare of all." The fundamental basis of his thinking is non-violence, or love, truth, respect for all beings and service. Lack of truth and denial seem to pervade the worlds of politics and big business. Many of us are tired of it. It has led to disasters like the Iraq war and a great deal of the harm that is being done by big business. Big business seems to have lost its way, its sense of purpose. Instead of being there to serve society and meet human needs, it is too much about money and power.

Have I succeeded in answering your very interesting question? I am not sure.

I only asked for a flavour of your thinking and I certainly think you did that. Your book is dealing with some of the biggest problems the world is facing at the moment and I don't suppose any one book or mindset is going to answer all the questions.

This year is the 200th anniversary of the ending of the slave trade in the UK and 200 years ago that must surely have been one of the most evil and iniquitous trades ever. Wilberforce and others like him changed people's views forever on that subject - a transformation in thinking.

**Spotlight:** How can we change the ways we help poor and developing countries that will produce real and sustainable improvement in their lives?

**Bruce Nixon:** It is interesting that you refer to the two hundredth anniversary of the ending of the slave trade. Anti-Slavery International estimate there are 27 million slaves today and 127 million children in harmful labour.

The first thing I would say is we need to change the trade rules imposed by the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary Fund. We have tried to force developing countries to open up their markets whilst protecting ours and dumping our subsidised products on their markets, thus destroying local food producers. We have obliged them to privatise services like water and open them up to Western companies. We have made this a condition of aid. We have also created a huge debt burden, as is well known. Often interest alone - not debt repayment is a large percentage of national income. The idea of developing countries working their way out of poverty through growing crops for export is controversial. This has often been at the expense of local food production. Development by Western corporations has often damaged the local economy by taking too much precious water away from local agriculture, especially in countries that are very short of water. Producing roses or French beans for our supermarkets can have very damaging consequences for local people feeding themselves or growing for local consumers. Another ridiculous example is producing expensive bottled water and beverages in poor countries, instead of helping provide a good supply of free clean water.

This is another example of why we need to see the whole complex picture, be well informed and make decisions from awareness. We have to be inquiring and listen to people who understand the situation, rather than think we know the answers.

Another aspect is an arrogant attitude on our part and the fact that we continue to exploit. We need to have a humble attitude of partnership, supporting people in developing countries in finding their own solutions. This means respecting their knowledge of their situation often based on generations of working with the land and the climate, not imposing our solutions or technology.

**Spotlight:** Aren't we all just too selfish to accept that sacrifice is necessary? Look at the US's track record. Wouldn't it be true to say that they have yet to legislate or agree any path of action which impacts negatively on their own use and share of the world's resources? If we can't budge the big boys what do we do?

**Bruce Nixon:** There are several questions there!

Firstly, are we just too selfish? Charles Handy spoke of "a proper selfishness". To my mind that is to see that it is actually in our selfish interests to change. We are going to harm ourselves enormously if we don't. Exploiting others harms us spiritually and internally - ultimately materially. Victims almost always hit back. Most of all we may completely destroy ourselves, or vast numbers of us, and what about our children and their children? It is in our interest to change and it might actually lead to a better, more meaningful way of life! We have to make the motivation for change positive - not changing just because we are terrified!

We may have selfish genes but we also have the capacity to be aware. And awareness is everything - or almost everything. Out of awareness we can act wisely.

Yes, I also think legislation is necessary to discourage or prevent the unsustainable, encourage the sustainable and create a level playing field for companies.

Secondly, it is not just the big boys and governments who are slow. We all are! Me included. Governments and big corporations are notoriously slow, partly because of vested interests, the process of denial, being right, political preoccupation with retaining power and simply inertia. Change often starts with more agile small companies, innovators, local communities, just ordinary people making choices and life style decisions and putting pressure on government and big organisations. There is a tremendous amount of change going on in USA. George Bush lags far behind many citizens, cities and states.

Who changes the world? We all do!

Gandhi, an expert agent of change, said: "Be the change!" That is a tremendously powerful idea. He also argued that we have to take responsibility and change within! I know that applies to me. It is no good waiting for the big boys. That is dependency. We have to get on with it ourselves.

**Spotlight:** If you were the CEO of an SME what areas of the business would be most affected by your thinking? Where can we start?

**Bruce Nixon:** I think the attitude I would need as CEO is: "See the opportunities in the big issues." Another principle is: "Be the change!" Also, good housekeeping means: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Repair.

The first thing I would do is "put our own house in order":

1. Develop a plan to reduce carbon emissions and waste.
2. Scrutinise and review all our activities and suppliers in terms of sustainability and ethics.

Often this results in saving money.

Secondly conduct a strategic review. The organisations that are most likely to thrive are those that see and seize the opportunities presented by the big issues. This is happening all the time and it looks to me as if the really innovative and enlightened ones are mainly SMEs.

Here is a process I have used with many leadership teams that provides a potential agenda:

- **The Global Picture** - Taking the widest possible view, what are the most important global issues? The major threats to the environment, to humanity, to society, to the world

economy, to our business and our families? What is already affecting us? Most important, what are the key trends and potential opportunities?

- **Rigorous Review of Current State** - What is our contribution: economic, environmental and social - how well are we responding? Our positive impact on society? In what ways are we doing harm? What are we doing that is unsustainable? Outside the company, inside and to ourselves? How are we wasting money and losing out? What are the key issues and opportunities for us?
- **Purpose and Values** - What are my personal values and purpose? What gives me meaning and fulfilment? Where do I stand? What am I prepared to challenge?
- **My Vision of a Sustainable Future** - Starting from the most desirable, most probable scenario. World; my business; myself; those I love. Include my vision for the culture - the kind of workplace I want my business to be for everyone - employees, customers, suppliers and the community.
- **Strategic Initiatives** to increase our positive impact on society and minimise harm: What are the key issues to tackle - the key opportunities to focus on? What are the key strategic actions that would make the biggest difference? How can I involve my team in co-creating change? What is my unique leadership role.
- **Influencing Strategy** - What are the risks I am prepared to take? The business case? Who do I need to influence? Network and support I need?
- **Key Issues:** Obstacles I need to work on: out there in my group above all, in me! As *within so without*. Do I have the hope and courage that it takes? What is my passion and energy telling me? How do I need to develop myself as leader and entrepreneur? What personal issues do I need to tackle?
- **Action and Support** - Plan implementation and support. What technical and other support do I need to take the bold, yet prudent steps to create a sustainable business and make the contribution I want to make to a sustainable and fairer world?

**Spotlight:** How can we change minds and make a difference?

**Bruce Nixon:** "The right way to do things is not to persuade people you're right but to challenge them to think it through for themselves"

### **Naom Chomsky**

I am not sure it is quite as simple as that. I think it is partly a matter of enabling people by asking them questions such as those in the process above. But I also think it is a question of presenting information, helping to increase awareness. Many good people are not aware of many shocking facts, which governments and large corporations would prefer us not to know. We need to seek it out and be rigorously skeptical and questioning. That is why I wrote my new book. It presents a lot of information, some of it quite shocking.

I believe that with information comes greater awareness and that may lead to a change of consciousness. That is the key learning process and the key way in which transformation occurs.

However it is not just information we need. We need a change of heart.

That requires us to witness what it is like for other human beings, listen to them and talk and hear them with feeling. Once again, we need to engage heart, spirit as well as head. Too often we are cut off from our feelings, numbed because we are afraid of how we might feel if we allowed ourselves to feel. I think we see that so much in politics and public life - leaders who are out of touch with their humanity and are making tremendously important decisions disconnected from their heart and spirit. We all have flaws in our make up but the fact is that many leaders have severely flawed personalities and the consequences are magnified when they are in positions of great trust and power. That is why we need institutions that thoroughly scrutinize their proposals

and prevent them taking decisions that do not reflect the interests and wishes of the majority of people.

Changing an unsustainable system may seem a daunting task. We created it and we can change it. When human beings see that things are not working they change things. We are tremendously creative and adaptable, like the rest of nature. That is how we have survived throughout our long history.

Finally, we need the courage to challenge, to speak up and oppose what we think is wrong and propose an alternative we believe may work better.

"Whatever you do may seem insignificant, but it is most important that you do it."

**Mahatma Gandhi**

For more details about Bruce and his writings see [www.bruce-nixon.com](http://www.bruce-nixon.com)