

Time to take power for the common good

Rosemary Wilkie on a growing movement aiming to change the way we think about our world and our lives

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

To comment on this or other articles in Mensa Magazine write to editor Brian Page at B.Page@btinternet.com or by post at 21 Princess Road, Strensall, York, YO32 5UE

If fresh air could be packaged and sold, there is no doubt someone would own it, and we would pay for every breath we take.

Sometimes current ways of doing things loom so large that we pay them no attention at all. Most of the resources of the planet belong to governments, corporations or individuals. It began with the Agricultural Revolution when we stopped living as hunter-gatherers and settled in one place to grow our food. In the Middle Ages enterprising merchants, bankers and politicians laid claim to 'vacant' land or commonly managed resources, and this came to a head with the Enclosures Acts in the 17th and 18th Centuries. Landowners consolidated small-holdings into their big fenced estates, and labourers had little choice but to seek work in the towns and become workers in the Industrial Revolution.

Numerous liberal thinkers since John Locke – who said that life, liberty and property are inalienable rights – have argued for the validity of property rights and the duty of governments to uphold them. This view, now almost worldwide, has led to the extraction of resources from people unable to defend them and exacerbated the disparity between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'.

The trend is towards ever bigger holdings and control by fewer people. The list is endless: oil tankers waiting at sea until the price goes up, retail parks taking sales from independent high street shops, and the countries nearest the diminishing Arctic now claiming parts of it for themselves.

Few saw the underlying truth about property ownership until Elinor Ostrom, a distinguished professor of political science, was named co-recipient of a Nobel Prize in Economic Science in 2009. She had spent four decades researching – and receiving numerous other awards – on what happens to our freedom and creativity when public and private interests own rights and properties that should belong to all of us in common: land, forests, water, minerals, fuel, living creatures, airwaves, seeds, our stores of culture and knowledge both indigenous and

scientific – resources that are the basic support systems of life, many irreplaceable.

James B Quilligan and others have extended the theory and principles to a global scale. It is now known as Commons. These cutting edge thinkers point to the tragedy of enclosures, the relentless extraction of the finite resources of the planet for profit, and state or corporate ownership of basic resources.

Thirty years ago, the Brandt Commission warned that the failure of governments to co-operate to correct monetary imbalances would produce a series of sovereign debt crises – now a distinct reality.

Many leaders in both public and private sectors now recognise that the unlimited

“Many leaders in both public and private sectors now recognise that the unlimited economic growth model is unsustainable”

'economic growth' model is unsustainable, but instead of envisioning new ways of living in harmony with the environment, governments are trying to patch up the current system.

Public concern about climate change has led to many excellent initiatives, but it is new thinking we need, a new vision of how life can be, and great plans on how to achieve it, undeterred by the likelihood that it will take a very long time.

According to James B Quilligan it could take 200 years. First we have to distinguish a commons sector from the public and private sectors – a tremendous task in itself as the idea has no roots in our personal consciousness and will therefore be resisted.

I believe Commons is an idea whose time has come and that many groups, associations and movements will form to preserve collective

wealth, and that this movement will grow strongly in the coming years.

Among other issues will be how to de-commercialise human life, how to reclaim money – a tool of exchange – from the control of governments and banks, how to return power and accountability to the people and not least, the eternal question of how we can learn to recognise our common humanity and live together on one precious planet.

Archaeology and history demonstrate that once a civilisation exhausts its resources, it dies. In earlier days, communities devised their own rules for the use and maintenance of local resources. Ordinary people, tribal people – commoners – have a deep knowledge of their own area, a valuable asset for the many initiatives for the co-production of shared resources that are appearing world-wide.

However to succeed on a scale sufficient to make a difference in today's world, we need new global legal jurisdiction under which a global commons economy can be created.

Most of us realise that we live in 'interesting times,' and my impression is that the period of unprecedented challenges we are living through now is creating a transformation as great as the agricultural and industrial revolutions.

Human evolution occurs at times of crisis. Shared anxiety, suffering and despair bring us closer together, and today the global response to major catastrophes in countries far away shows that humanity is more closely knit than ever.

Crises also bring a remarkable flowering of creativity. As we develop the ability to handle the greater level of complexity involved, we achieve a higher level of consciousness.

This enables us to see the whole picture, why people think as they do, and what needs to be done by who for whom so that we can all live together harmoniously while preserving global resources for coming generations.

Mensa member Rosemary Wilkie is a writer and a senior practitioner of Spiral Dynamics