

Transcript of 'The Public and The Private'

Season 2, Episode 25, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow, the podcast from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

Paul: What does the future look like? What did lockdown teach us about the environment? And what does that mean for us in a world that's back to being busy?

Welcome to the Anthropocene.

[Theme music]

Paul: Jan, I want to take a trip back to the Anthropocene.

Jan: Well, I think you're in the Anthropocene to be fair, but.

Paul: Or am I?

Jan: Well, yes, that's a very good question. I, I remember the discussion we had with, uh, Henrik Österblom from, uh, the Anthropocene Laboratory at the Swedish Academy of Sciences not too long ago, and the discussion there deciding whether scientists can even agree if we are in the Anthropocene or not, and what the Anthropocene is if we are in it.

Jan: Indeed. And so natural scientists have a very clear idea, but also organisational and other social scientists have as well.

Paul: Should we...explain what the Anthropocene is because there might be people listening to this who haven't heard our talk about Anthropocene before.

Jan: So, the Anthropocene is a way of thinking about the current point in time as being a really significant and different ecological space than what we've occupied before.

It's where humans become the main driving forces of, of a, of a lot of, um, earth system processes, whether that be climate change, biodiversity loss, material flows, et cetera.

And if we are living in the Anthropocene, then that raises questions about the agency of people individually, but collectively, um, within, uh, countries, but also collectively within corporations.

So it's, it's potentially a game changer in how we think about responsibility for what's happening around us, but who has that responsibility and how is it made?

Paul: There you go. You did a good job considering you weren't expecting to have to define the subject.

Jan: No. Thank you, thank you for that, Paul. We'll find out what our, what our guest made of that.

Paul: And we're also gonna be discussing public and private sector and how they intersect and how that touches upon sustainability as well.

Because we've talked at times about private corporations, we've talked at times about government. It's good to maybe see how everything comes together. Public, private.

Jan: Indeed. But if we're trying to change everything around us, then a partnership between the public and the private sector is gonna be much more productive than these two sectors working in isolation.

Paul: I'm not gonna ask you to define any more things.

Jan: [high pitched with relief] ...thank you...

Paul: ...I'm willing to do so again. [Jan laughs] Yes. Let's bring our guest in, uh, because today we are joined by a man who has a job title that as a child, I'd think, yeah, that sounds like a good job.

It's Dr. Martin Quinn, who is a Reader in the Department of Organisation, Work and Technology. Martin, do you just spend all your day reading?

Martin: Oh, I try. I'd love to. Yeah, yeah.

Paul: I, I, I get the feeling though that the job title isn't as good as childhood me would like to imagine.

Martin: I have to admit the job title is, is quite, I do quite enjoy it.

I think there are some of the old academic job titles that are rather fun, and I quite like the title Reader, and I particularly like the fact that my Department, when you put it down to its acronym, means that I'm a reader in OWT.

[Everyone laughs]

Paul: Which given the Northernness of both of us, as we discussed before we started recording...

Martin: ...yeah...

Paul: it, it's a, it's a word that we use quite a lot. Nowt taken out Jan.

Jan: Aaah, yes... [laughs]

Paul: You almost then tried to do a northern accent, didn't you, but I think you stopped yourself.

Jan: No, I was gonna say 'aye', because, 'cause I spent so long in Scotland, then I thought people would think I was just making it up. So, yeah.

Paul: No, no. We say 'aye'. Aye...

Jan: ...aye...

Paul: ...of course we do...

Jan: Och, aye.

Jan: There you go, we're on the same page.

Paul: We're not here though, to discuss regional dialects...

Jan: ...that's true...

Paul: ...of Scotland, England, and New Zealand. We are here to discuss the areas of public-private sector intersections and the Anthropocene.

Um. Let's start with the first of those, Martin. Can you describe the work that you do focusing on that intersection between the public and private sectors and, you know, particularly in regard to developing the economy.

Martin: Yeah, sure thing. So my work or research has always kind of looked at the points at which the public and private sectors kind of meet. With an eye on how do places, I'm particularly interested in place, how do places come to be? How do they develop? How do they produce a kind of identity, set a sense of place, and how do they grow?

Although that last one has increasingly been a question for me of, is that actually an appropriate way of looking at things? How do they grow?

And the more work I've been doing in the past few years and the, the more opportunities I've had to work with a variety of different people, that question's actually been more about how do places interact both with the people, but also the environment that they're in.

Paul: I thought we were about to get into a discussion about growth and degrowth then, harking back to one of our very first episodes, uh, with Duncan Pollard on such things.

Jan: And also Steve Kempster and Good Dividends as well.

Paul: Yes, yes, that's right. I'd forgotten about Steve. He discussed it very much in that concept of good dividends, didn't he?

Jan: So we should tuck that into the, to our sort of intellectual head space as, as we, as we go forward with this one. So you talked about public and private meeting in places.

So let's sort of unpeel that a little bit. So what characterises the public and the private sectors, and where do they meet, and why are people interested in those distinctions?

Martin: I mean, to some degree they're blurred, the boundaries between the two are, are, are blurry. However, I think they have different remits and different purposes to a degree within, within an economy or within a place.

You could take a very basic definition of the, of the private, the private sector, which is simply that it's there to make money. And that it makes money by extracting value from resource, whether that's humans or whether that's natural resources, or whether it's manufacturing something and selling it, whether it's offering a, a service, whatever that may be. But ultimately, the purpose is to turn that into a profit-making enterprise.

The public sector has a much broader remit, um, has a, a remit of ensuring that services run, um, that there is infrastructure in place that I think in our version of economies here in the, in the West, in the UK, is that then those private sector organisations can operate, can operate as freely as possible and, and make that profit.

Now there's interplay between the two. There's been increasing blurring as a set of the boundaries between the two, where some tasks that the public sector would previously have done are now done by the private sector. However, if you take a longer view of that, those were tasks that were originally done by the private sector, that then became public sector tasks, that have then moved back into this kind of middle ground of some elements of them being done by the, by the private sector, some by the public.

That can be things like energy, that can be things like transport, health, education, any aspect of life really.

Paul: It's a big political issue, obviously, as well as an environmental issue, when it comes to public and private.

You've got certain wings of certain parties want to privatise everything. Certain wings of certain parties want to bring everything back into public ownership.

It's a discussion that you see going on all the time across loads of geographies, including here in the UK when it comes to, say, trains or the National Health Service. You see it in America when it comes to whether they want to decentralise government.

They're the two examples that I can think of off the top of my head. 'cause they're the ones that are most in our media, but you, you see it a lot, don't you, about how they work individually as private and public, but also how they might work together?

Martin: Yeah, indeed. And, and, and I guess, you know, part of that, kind of the, the, some of the political debate that you just, you referred to, sometimes seen as what's called hollowing out of the state. So taking some of the functions of the state and handing them to the private sector.

Now there are different ways of looking at that. There's some really interesting work coming out of, um, UCL in London. Uh, Mariana Mazzucato's work on innovation, and public innovation and entrepreneurship. And some of the arguments there are actually, what's happened is we've taken the potentially profit-making part of the public and handed it back to the private, so it's a way of handing public money to the private sector.

That's obviously a very particular take on that. Uh, but you can see transport for that. So the public sector retains the responsibility for the track, whereas

the private sector run the trains on that where you can sell tickets and you can make, make your money.

So there's, that's, that's one of the ways I think that that's playing out.

Jan: And in this context, we often hear, hear the phrase 'public value'. And so that must have a particular meaning, um, within, within this debate. So could you say something about that?

Martin: Yeah. So public value is, it's, uh, I think it's a really interesting concept and a really interesting idea, but it's, it is by its very nature, quite a messy one.

So we, we, we think about, well, how do we produce value for the public as at a very basic level. Well, one way of doing that is to ensure that, uh, there are plenty of jobs because then people can earn money and buy their houses and, and pay for sustenance and also consumer goods. That's one way of producing public value and public good.

And in that, we can see how the private sector has a very large role to play. Because bringing in a large private sector operator potentially produces a lot of employment in an area. There's also then a broader notion of, well, okay, how do we make sure that that value is spread as widely as possible?

And I guess that's where the public then comes back into that discussion. And I think in terms of some of that interplay between public and private, that, that's been mentioned. You know what I, what I think, some of the questions I'm interested in in terms of governance of this, is what is the role of the public sector in helping the private sector to thrive and flourish? But also what are the responsibilities of the private sector in making sure that the public sector has the wherewithal to do that?

And that's not just about finance, that's also about expertise, and it's about support. Because a lot of the time lending credibility to a major project really helps the public sector to see something through. And I think you can think about something like HS2, which perhaps never really gained traction.

Whereas something like the Eden Project in Morecambe, which has a lot of business support, that then allows the public sector to talk about it more broadly, 'cause they can say, we've got the private sector on board, we've got our local businesses on board, and I think we see that really good examples of that in lots of different places.

So, other research I've done, I've, I've seen examples of that as well.

Paul: Call me a cynic, and I know I've been accused of that many times on this particular, uh, podcast, but when it comes to private sector involvement, truly it's, they don't care what happens with the public sector, they just want to make money.

So therefore, the public value of it is irrelevant to them, as long as they roll in lots of dosh for their company.

Martin: Well, as I say, I mean ultimately if you take the very base level, um, kind of definition of what is private, absolutely, you know, the private sector's job is to make money. Obviously, it's made to make profit. It's to make sure that they can, they can turn whatever their ideas are, whatever their resources are into profit.

However, I think, and I think we're probably gonna come onto different definitions of the public value, and how we might define public value differently. It is in the interest of the private sector to have a strong economy.

It's not really in the interest of a private organisation to simply go it alone. Um, you know, some private organisations are obviously huge and, and effectively as big as a state, but even then they have to interplay with others. They have to have a regulatory framework, which allows them to operate. They have to have access to skilled labour. They have to have access to skilled labour that can easily access the jobs that they're offering.

Now, in order for, you know, an organisation can't do that on its own, a private organisation cannot do that on its own. So they actually do need the public sector in that way. They need the public sector to be providing healthy, educated workforce who can easily access and get to the site where that work is being done.

So they do need it. I mean, and all of those things then enhance the profit line. So yeah, you can take a, a view of, well, all we're interested in is making profit. Okay, that's fine. But in order to make that profit and to maximise that profit, you need these tasks doing, and there's a cost to that. But the benefit of that cost outweighs not working with the public sector at all, I, I would argue.

Paul: So you don't see us being in the kind of cyberpunk, dystopian future whereby corporations are just running the whole world and running all the governments and everything.

Martin: But even if corporations did that, they would still have to think about that infrastructure and those services. So yeah, there's still gonna be a cost to that.

So if they were running it themselves entirely, there may be little bits and bobs that they took outta that. But ultimately, they need res, the resources they need aren't simply about the natural resources. It's all about the human resource as well.

Jan: What I liked about how you described that is that that comes together in a place, and I know in your work you also use a fantastic phrase of 'anchor institution'. And, um, it might be a new phrase to, to some of our listeners.

So I'd like you to run us through what is an anchor institution, um, in the first instance, and then we'll ask you some more questions about these things once you get going.

Martin: So the, the idea of an anchor institution is, is generally a large institution or organisation. I'm gonna keep using those words interchangeably, I suspect. That, that anchors a place that acts as a kind of a, a source the, the rest of the economy can kind of spark off and bounce off and grow off.

Now they can take different forms. They can be a big, um, private sector organisation. Now, in the past, in the UK we would be thinking about manufacturing probably there, we would be thinking about, say steel in South Yorkshire, the mining industry, you know, big manufacturing.

For a town like Morecambe, or some of the coastal towns, you'd be thinking about tourism as an anchor institution. You might think about the shipping industry as well.

But what they do is they provide a massive employment. They provide a reason for the town being there in the first place, in some instances. Without clay would Stoke on Trent be there, for example? No offence to Stoke on Trent meant by that, but, but you know, it's, it's the, the cities and towns tend to have sprung up initially around a resource, and that resource then turned itself into an industry, or was turned into an industry. It's giving it perhaps too much agency to say it turned itself.

And it's around those industries, and then. But if you think about, so let's take the coal mine, in the village that I grew up in, that acts as an an anchor for the whole town of Golborne where I, where I grew up. Now, the colliery in

Golborne would've employed 800 to a thousand people, but the other businesses that spring up around that to service that, that one large employer include, the supply chain for food.

It includes the clothing, it includes everything around it, but also off that you get things like the community centres. You get a reason for going to school because you need the job. So the schools spring up around, you get all the services that then service the population.

We can look at Lancaster as an example as well. The initial anchor institution would've been the castle, and everything kind of grows around the castle. You then move, say from the castle to the port. And the port then being the reason that the town grows. Now not everything in Lancaster is to do with the port, but people need to eat, people need housing. People need, again, employment, education, health.

Now, you might view a public sector organisation as an anchor, so the University might now be seen as an anchor. Perhaps controversially for some, for some people in the town to see this, this University as an anchor, but I think it does act as that when you look at the amount of employment it brings, but also then the spend in the town of the student body.

Um, and again, to go to Morecambe and to Eden, if Eden comes in, Eden could potentially be the anchor that everything else then, then kind of sparks off.

Paul: I think certainly the first time I heard the term anchor institution was in relation to us as a university, and you hear it mentioned within these walls. I think because it's very much a term that you wouldn't necessarily hear the general public use that much, but even though the concept stands, but you do hear it a lot within the walls of the University, people seeing us as an anchor institution and not just the benefits of that come with that, but the responsibility for us as an anchor institution of how we act, the impact that we have on the area.

So there's much more to being an anchor institution than just being there and having other stuff spin off you. It's how you behave and what goes on.

Martin: Absolutely. Yeah, and I think that's, that's a really important point actually, the kind of responsibilities that come with being that anchor institution.

Now we've sometimes seen examples of regional developments and place development where towns and governance structures have decided what we need to do is attract an anchor tenant.

Um, so in Birmingham for the Bullring, it was John Lewis. Um, in other places you've seen them try and attract, so Nottingham brought in Capital One for example. To try and say, look, we've got this big organisation, so the rest of you want to be here as well. What that then relies on is that organisation staying around, but also then actually taking a lead in the governance of that place.

And you've seen it in some places where it's worked. So again, you think about the coal mines, they didn't just extract coal. They also put in place community centres and helped to build the schools. I mean, that's perhaps going back to Victorian values of places like Saltaire and Ellesmere Port and Port Sunlight.

But I think that's also true in more modern times of, so John Lewis going into places like Birmingham, but also into, into Leicester as an example, and then working with the local FE colleges to put on courses that allow people who were coming out the dying textiles industry to then gain retail qualifications to go and work in that. So they take that kind of lead role within their economy and within their governance structure.

To go back to one of the points you made, that then allows them to maximise their profit. Because they're, they're working with the local structure to, to make sure that it's supplying them the labour they need.

Obviously there are different requirements, I guess, from anchor institutions that come from the public sector, but yeah, the University has a, has a massive role to play and, and not just in Lancaster, but in any town, in terms of its position in the, in the economy and in the ecosystem of that economy, and how it then works with the businesses.

So any, any small business in, in a town or a city with a university should be able to go and work with that university, should be able to go and say, look, we've got this particular problem. It might be graduates that they need. It might actually be the, the research that's being done, you know, how can we spark off that research?

Paul: I could see this in my hometown as well, spread across 150, 200 years. So Barrow in Furness wasn't really much of an anything until iron. On the back of

iron came steel, on the back of steel came shipbuilding. When the ship building came, they started to build a place called Vickerstown on Walney Island.

Anyone who's a fan of Thomas the Tank Engine may know the island of Sodor and Vicarstown, spelled as in a vicar in a church, that's named after Vickerstown, spelled as in the old shipbuilding company, Vickers, on Walney Island. And Walney Island is essentially Sodor.

So I grew up on Sodor, Jan. That's, uh, an interesting fact for you.

But going, going beyond that, so you have the, the, the yard building that there was schools built, there were hospitals built. Then coming to the present day, the University of Cumbria is now building an engineering campus that is gonna be tied in with the shipyard because they need the engineering graduates and the engineering expertise, apprenticeships and everything.

So yeah, you can see there how as an anchor institution, iron, steel, ship building has been in place for almost 200 years in the town, and the town just would not be there in anywhere near its current form. It'd still be a lot of little farms patched about an old ruin of an abbey if it wasn't for that industry being there.

Martin: Absolutely, and, and if you think about that, it's then incumbent on those anchor institutions of steel and shipbuilding to ensure that the people who are taking those jobs have houses.

The, their families have something to do. Uh, they can access food. So it's important to build the infrastructure, to bring the shops in.

Otherwise, yeah, they'd wanna build a ship there, but they wouldn't be able to do it.

Paul: And this is a concept as well that I first came across, and it just reminded me when you said about John Lewis, in geography lessons, uh, senior school, and we didn't talk about anchor institutions, but you talked about essentially a 'magnet store'.

So if you had a, a big shop like Marks and Spencer's, Debenhams, you talked about John Lewis, in a town centre, then other businesses want to be in that town centre. And that's an example from a retail perspective of that one institution there, but this is a whole bigger thing for a wider community.

Martin: Oh, absolutely, yeah. And I mean, another term for it will be flagship. Um, you know, and, and it attracts, you know, it people, it makes it a place that other businesses want to move to. You know, you think about the number of startup and tech companies around Oxford and Cambridge and the Oxford-Cambridge arc. That's because of those two huge anchor institutions in the universities that have been there for that long.

And it's that, well, if I need access to skills, if I need access to knowledge, the latest innovations, this is where I need to be as a tech company. Um, and I, you know, to go back to where I used to live in Leicester, that's exactly the same thing there.

You know, the, we, the Council worked with the University and worked with some of the key businesses in the town to set up what was known as the Creative Business Depot.

That creates a whole culture of startups, and now people are moving outta London to work in that area because it's the place to go if you want to make that business work.

Jan: So this is where we're gonna have to limber up and, and I'm going to be judged as to whether or not I knew what the Anthropocene was. [laughs]

Paul: Just, just, you know, your physical gesture there says that you're actually gonna be doing some limbo dancing...

Jan: ...no, limber...[inaudible]...just get ready.

So, so all of that is a huge area of, uh, discussion. You know, depth of expertise, huge amount of sophistication in the area.

Then you take that area and twin it with the Anthropocene. I mean, I know you're heroic [laughs] so, so how do, how have you developed those ideas within the context of the Anthropocene?

And perhaps we ought to start off with you marking my homework and whether or not I knew what the Anthropocene was, on the spot as well.

Martin: Yeah, you did very well I think.

Jan: Oh, thank you. Thank you.

Martin: Uh...

Paul: ...damn it!

Martin: [laughs] No, I mean, this is where, uh, um, my homework might be marked as well. [Jan laughs]

Uh, I, I mean, I, I think, I mean, for me, I was working on the issues that we've been talking about already, and then I, I was in a fortunate position that, um, the departments I was in at the time had a number of fascinating people who were trying to apply all these ideas and concepts across different, um, challenges.

Uh, and you know, one of them was how do you spark innovation in the economy? One was, uh, how do we deal with the graduate brain-drain from most cities in the UK?

And then another one was around, well, we have this environmental crisis on our doorstep. The university I was at previously, we were lucky enough to have, uh, in the geology department some of the leading figures on, uh, the science behind the concept and the, the idea of the Anthropocene.

So, um, in terms of defining the Anthropocene, uh, I would always, in anything I do defer to, to my, my friends and colleagues from geology. Uh, but I, I mean, I guess my, my understanding basically is the, the Anthropocene is, is the point at which change in the ecosystem and the earth system, as you said earlier, uh, is demonstrably influenced by human activity for the first time.

So it's humans that are changing the climate, it's humans that are changing the ecosystem. While that's been going on for a, a period of time, a hundred, 150 years, depending on your point of view. That's accelerated since, since the early 1950s. Um, with the amount of activity and, and the sheer number of humans that are now on the planet.

And to then apply that to some of the, some of the kind of concepts and ideas I worked with previously, say, cities and places. You think about a city and you think about a place, and as I, as I think I said earlier, cities and places tended to spring up around an area that was livable. Where there was a natural resource, whether that was a river, whether that was arable land or something like minerals in the ground.

As soon as we get a, a collection of humans, we, we tend to then start to overuse our resources, and then we have to bring food in. But we've hit a point with the scale and size of cities that that's then having a hugely detrimental effect on, on the local environment.

Now at that point, that becomes a challenge for governance, and for the economy of those cities and places, because if it's suddenly costing much more to extract your minerals or to, to bring your labour in, if it's not a pleasant place to live and people are moving out, then you are faced with a challenge to go back to the profitability argument.

You are faced with that challenge, so it becomes a live challenge for everyone. Um, and I, I think that's, that's one of the reasons I got kind of interested in it and involved in the, in the group that I did at the time, which was, um, great fun to be involved in those discussions, by the way.

And yeah, so it kind of sparked from there.

Jan: And that sort of thinking about the liveability then comes back to that conversation we just had about, you know, public value, public and private sector working together in place.

But I'm just gonna do a wee aside here if, if I may. Um, so, it's, it's, I mean, some of the geologists you're working with are the core people in the stratigraphy community who got to name and to interrogate and to understand the Anthropocene.

What's been your experience of working with, you know, natural scientists, um, of, of this kind of calibre, but also natural scientists that are so embedded in the geology, whereas you're got coming from a completely different discipline.

Martin: Yeah, um, it's been fascinating. It's been, it's been a wonderful opportunity. Um, Mark and Jan, who are the, the two main guys that we work with from, from geology, um, they've been brilliant to work with.

Um, it's been, I think, a really good collaboration because what we've, what we basically had was a group of people who were working in a management school. Who were from a range of different disciplines within that, and social science disciplines, who were interested in the applicability of what we were doing beyond merely a business.

So we were already looking at, at, you know, what happens outside of this? How does this impact on society? And then we'd started looking at the environment and looking at the climate crisis.

And as it happened at the same university, we had these people in the geology department who were working on the very idea of the Anthropocene, the very

concept of when it started, uh, when it should be classified as, as having started.

Um, and they were looking, uh, at questions of, well, okay, we know the science, but how do we then get it into the public debate, into the public discourse? How do we make it an issue for organisations?

And you have that, I think, issue that, you know, universities do an awful lot of amazing, detailed work in different disciplines, but often we're working in silos. But it can't be that management schools and business schools simply create a group of students who understand, or graduates rather, who understand consumption and production, and who understand how the economy works, but don't understand how that relates to the environment.

Equally, you can't really just simply produce a group of science graduates who understand in enormous depth and detail the damage that's been done to the earth system, but don't know how to deal with organisations or manage that knowledge.

Why has it not been done before? Perhaps should be the question, rather than how's it working? It's, it's great, you know, the...one of the joys of the job that I think we do is we, we work with people with inquisitive minds and providing we can kind of step aside from the politics of higher education, um, I think there are enormous opportunities there.

So it, it's been brilliant to work with 'em. Now, obviously, they have the work that they do that goes into the natural science journals and is based on, on, you know, the very hard scientific data. And then they come along and they work with us with our more philosophical ethnographical bents. And they find that fascinating and interesting and different, and we find the way they approach data fascinating and different and, but it's been brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.

Jan: That's good. And that has been my experience as well...

Martin: ...yeah...

Jan: ...and your really superb curious natural scientists are a joy to work with.

Martin: Yeah.

Paul: And how is this then, how has your work around the Anthropocene shaped how you think about public value?

Martin: Well, I think what it's done is it, it sparked a conversation about actually what is public value.

There are kind of two core questions within the public value, uh, debate. One is, who is it valuable to do things for? So, who are the public?

And the second one is, what is it then valuable to do for that public. And I think for us, we started playing around with that first one. Who is it valuable to do things for? Who is the public?

Now, if you think about the public in terms of the general population as one aspect of that, and institutions and organisations. So, universities, religious groups, um, towns, organisation, businesses, private organisations, then we can see that there are certain things in the economy that are valuable to do for that group. That don't harm the people in that group. There's a question of who and what gets left out.

So it's valuable if we have that, that definition to produce the conditions, which allow a mine to open and to extract coal because it's creating employment. That's valuable for the public.

What we started to do is to push that question of who should be considered in terms of who is it valuable to do things for. And I think what our thinking then started to do was say, well, if in the Anthropocene, if we just carry on with that narrow definition of who it is valuable to do things for, we don't change anything.

Because actually extracting the maximum amount of resource for the maximum amount of profit is absolutely the right thing to do if we take that narrow definition of who it is valuable to do things for.

If we broaden that out to the town itself, the earth system, the ecosystem, to plant life, to animals. At that point you're, you're asking different questions then in terms of what is it valuable to do, because pure extraction of, of materials and natural resources is actually no longer valuable. When taken from the point of view of a new constituent within that public, if that makes sense.

Paul: It sounds to me a bit similar to the, um, conversation we had with Camilo on, uh, when we talked about environmental law and giving a voice to the planet.

So that, something that doesn't have the ability to vocalise what it wants like we do as people still is represented, 'cause like you say, you're not, you need to consider the effects on the town, on the, the surrounding area.

You need to consider the effects on the whole planet, and therefore this concept of public value needs not just to like consider the public as people, but to consider everything around them and to make sure that that has a say in what happens then.

Martin: Yeah, absolutely. And, and I mean, even within that, you know, we have to acknowledge that in what we've tried to do in terms of expanding that question of who, and giving voice to the environment, and, and to the ecosystem and the earth system, that's still a very human-centric view, and point of view.

You know, it is our interpretation of what the planet might like. Now, sometimes you'll hear people argue, what we're trying to do is save the planet. We're not, are we? What we're actually trying to do is make sure it's still habitable for us. We're trying to save ourselves, really. It's still a very human-centric lens on this.

But yeah, we, we thought, and what we've argued in in our work has been that if you consider the impact on the environment as part of that question of value, that actually you come up with some different answers when it comes to how do you produce value. Because you have to make sure that in producing value, you're not damaging one of your constituent parts of your public.

Jan: So I think in some ways the, the questions of who, what, and how are really important, but also not fully realised 'cause we are in the midst of environmental, um, breakdown and, and, uh, and the Anthropocene, a crisis of all sorts.

So I wonder if you've got an example from your work, and here I'm thinking about the work that you did, thinking about what life looked like during lockdown, that might be able to provide us with a sketch of the who, what, and how and what, what that different world might look like.

'Cause we are trying to imagine something that we are not currently seeing.

Martin: Yeah. And it, I mean, and I think it is a, it's, it's a challenge and it's a challenge that's been thrown at us whenever we've presented the work, of

course, is actually, this is all lovely and it's a very nice idea, but practically, how do we do this?

Because people need jobs. People need, uh, cash in their pocket to be able to live their lives. Um, so we can't just stop, we can't just turn everything off.

But, actually one of the things that we, we then started to think about, I mean, it was sparked by experiences of, of the lockdown. The lockdown actually offered us, I think some pretty stark lessons.

You know, within a matter of weeks of the lockdown starting the skies were clear. In some of the work we, we've been doing, we, we looked at the, the city of Venice. And one of our papers, we start with a walk in Venice and it's during lockdown. And I say we, we didn't all walk in Venice 'cause there was only one, one of the team, the lead author, uh, was actually in, in Venice at that point, and she lived there, so.

The, the images we got from Venice at that time were of a city of beauty. A city where you could hear wildlife, where the canal was blue. Can you imagine such a thing, if you've been to Venice, the canals were blue, they weren't smelly, they weren't full of rubbish. You could actually see the buildings because the city wasn't simply full of tourists. Um, the issues of Venice sinking, you know, that started to, to correct itself.

Now, of course, it's all gone back, but what, what you see in that area is that all of a sudden, hang on a minute, if there's a way of limiting this, if there's a way of thinking differently about how we move people around, about our activity, about the amount of activity we do, look how quickly the environment reacts and responds to a lack of pollution.

We finished the paper with an apocalyptic walk, which is, nothing changes and actually things get worse and Venice has exploded. Um, 'cause we like to be creative. Um...

Paul: ...I was really worried he was gonna go back to Stoke on Trent there, because he was a bit offensive towards Stoke on Trent before, was Martin. And I thought...

Jan: ...well, he actually wasn't, but I think you're being mischievous.

And that, that kind of makes me think about the Ministry for the Future, which is a, you know, quite a, a well-known book, which I, I had a go at reading, but I

found I couldn't get past chapter two on, on the trauma scale. But I should maybe go back and have a think about it.

Where, if you, like, they were motivating that thinking about, um, articulating, you know, what the world could look like, what a place could look like.

And I suppose given we're all connected to places and, and settled into places, actually that's a really powerful way to articulate what a, what a better and a worse future might look like.

Martin: Oh, indeed. And I, and I think, you know, we probably all experienced elements of that during lockdown ourselves, didn't we? In terms of what happened around us.

I, I believe, to go back to Morecambe, uh, the promenade at Morecambe was one of the busiest places in the UK during lockdown, 'cause we actually took advantage of nature. We actually went and, and walked...

Jan: ...yeah...

Martin: ...we slowed down and we walked, and maybe slowing down the thing to do. You see a place and you see...experience a place, whether that's a city or whether it's the countryside, completely differently when you walk it.

You suddenly actually appreciate what's going on at street level, at street level. And maybe one of the lessons is more walking. [laughs]

Jan: Yes. [laughs]

Martin: It's better for your health. It's better for the environment.

Jan: And I, I was locked down in, in, uh, in Birmingham just up by the university.

Owls. There were tons and tons of owls that I don't think any of us knew were living there, but when it was quiet, you could hear them...

Martin: ...yeah...

Jan: ...which was quite amazing.

Martin: Yeah, absolutely.

Paul: So just to wrap it up then, Martin, what are you taking from all your work that's so inspirational to you that's providing you with hope for the future?

Martin: Hope, uh...

Paul: ...I, I was worried then that he, he'd mislaid that concept of hope.

Jan: [laughs] I know it's in there...

Paul: ...please tell us, Martin, I'm sure a good concept of hope is in there somewhere.

Martin: I mean, actually that is [clears throat] a concept that some of my colleagues are playing around with. Marta Gasparin is the lead author on that paper is actually playing around with the idea of consolation rather than hope, uh, in the Anthropocene. And I think that's, uh, that's summat to perhaps keep an eye on.

I think hope is that we've seen how quickly we can actually make an impact. And I think hope is that an anchor institution like Eden might offer a different way of developing a place.

So, you know, for Morecambe as a town, which has seen a, a series of, of declines in the past 20, 30, maybe even 40 years. A project like Eden might well offer hope, because it's an environmentally focused project that should produce public value in terms, as how we might want, have understood public value in terms of, of employment.

In terms of developing the education system in the town, um, attracting people to the town, but attracting people to the town in an environmentally sustainable way, and to actually come and learn about the environment and to interact with their environment.

So maybe there's some hope there, that we might think about how an anchor institution should have as one of its focuses its interaction with the environment and lead on that.

And maybe Lancaster University with its energy, uh, development, um, maybe that's another example of a, of an anchor institution taking a lead. So maybe there's some hope there as well.

Um, and the more that those kind of things happen, perhaps the more that then cascades down through the rest of the, rest of the economy and the rest of society.

Paul: There is hope. It's not all gone, Jan. It's not all gone. [laughs]

Martin, thank you very much for this conversation, it's been great.

Martin: Thank you for having me.

[Theme music]

Jan: Well, do you feel consoled Paul? [laughs] Because hopeful's not really your thing, but consolation, that was, yeah, that's, I don't know, but I feel unavoidably sad just now.

Paul: I like to believe in hope as a concept though, and that pretty much left the room halfway through that conversation. It's that hope no longer exists, except consolation that you're not dead, essentially was the, the message there. So, yeah, yeah.

Jan: Well, I suppose, and, and there is a light-hearted edge to this, this podcast, but this is one of the topics which actually is pretty dark and serious really.

Paul: Hey, it didn't necessarily start off that way. We were talking about public and private and we were talking about the differences between them. What the idea of public value.

You know, my cynicism obviously came out with the regards to the private sector and whether they'd do anything if there wasn't money in it for them. But, yeah, then we went to the Anthropocene, and suddenly a big cloud came over the room and everything was darkness and death was all around us, and yeah.

Jan: However, there were some bright sparks. I promise you there's some bright sparks here, if we, we think about them.

I think, um, bright, well, two that really, you know, sparkled for me. The first one is a sense of agency that we might have of members of Lancaster University. That as an anchor institution that we, we, with the right leadership and you know, the, you know, so many a good following wind, all sorts of things could come together, and for the institution itself to actually create public value, to nurture public value, and to be part of this conversation between who, what and how.

Paul: Yeah. I think the idea of responsible anchor institutions, those that aren't just there, but recognise the role that they have because they are there and the responsibilities they have to...

Jan: ...mm-hmm...

Paul: ...the communities and the world all around them is a particularly key element that needs to be considered. There will be some anchor institutions that don't have that same positivity and attitude that are just there.

Um, Martin gave the example of you could just mine coal because it's good for the people who work there, and you could carry on doing that until the coal ran out. Just because it's good for giving people employment and a job, but that concept now just doesn't hold water because there's far bigger considerations to be made.

Jan: And in some ways, and I know the, you know, we shouldn't hark back to prior ages being, you know, straightforwardly good, but some of the, some of the Victorian sensibilities and some of the sensibilities around New Lanark, um, around Port Sunlight, some of the Cadbury, the Bournville estate at, um, in Birmingham.

Some of these ideas were actually about a, a larger sense of, of being an anchor institution and public value that comes from it. So we maybe squeezed it out in the meantime, but maybe these circumstances in the Anthropocene bring that those elements back into the conversation.

Paul: Because we were talking about the Anthropocene and you talked about harking back to previous ages, I thought you were gonna go back to something like the Jurassic period or the Triassic period. [Jan laughs]

Uh, and sort of say, I wonder what the dinosaurs of those time thought about it. I'm sure not everything was rosy for them. I know if you were being eaten by a carnivore, then I'm sure it wasn't.

But yeah, I know exactly what you are saying that, yeah, harking back to old times isn't always brilliant. You can look for anything with rose-tinted spectacles, but there are ideas there and you see concepts there that on how they works and how they developed and see positivity in that.

Jan: And the second bright spark then, which almost takes some of those ideas and to a more current time, is that linked to Eden. And um, listeners who, who have listened to a few of our podcasts would've heard Eden come up quite often.

We've had the Morecambe Bay curriculum folk on to talk about that work. And, and Eden Morecambe Bay is, uh, you know, it's, it's been, it's been consented. Um, a lot of funding's been assembled around it, and there's a

general expectation that it will come through and be part of the, the broader place landscape here, but there's a lot of hopes for that institution as well.

And, and the desire for that to, you know, not be a game changer on its own, but with these other partners to actually create something quite special.

Paul: Yeah, a lot of weight gets put on it. If it was to fail, then everyone would go, oh God, we were putting all our hopes on that almost. There's a whole lot of weight around it and stuff.

I want to go back to something though Jan, you made a very good joke during the episode and I don't think you even realised you'd made it.

Jan: [laughs] Probably not.

Paul: We, we were talking about the value of multidisciplinary, about working with colleagues across different areas, and how Martin works with different people in different areas and with the geologists.

And that's such a great concept and the fact that you can bounce off each other and learn, just as you have with the SeaBOS project, and with the various biologists, marine biologists, and other people who you work with on that.

And you called geologists, core people [Jan laughs] and I, I just immediately thought, well done Jan. That, that's great.

I don't think that's what you meant to say or meant the joke of it, but, well done.

Jan: Thank you, thank you. Yes, that was, that was uh, unintentional but really quite sweet. I agree.

Paul: Yes. So next time, I'm afraid we don't have any geologists for you.

Jan: Oh, well. Who've we got?

Paul: Never mind, eh.

Jan: I'm sure we've got someone equally as good.

Paul: Well, we're going to be going to India, and we're gonna be talking to Biraj Patnaik, who is the Executive Director of the National Foundation for India, an organisation that works a lot to end food inequality in the country,

Jan: And I think there's a really nice link across to the Ministry for the Future, which is a book that we'll put on as a, as a resource on the bottom of, of, um,

this podcast, is that part of that is, is sat in India and a future India that looks really scary.

Paul: Let's hope that the India that Biraj envisages isn't quite so scary.

Jan: I, I think that will be the case. I look forward to it.

[Theme music]

Paul: Indeed. Until then, thank you very much for listening. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]