

Transcript of 'Power to the People: A Political Perspective on Sustainability'

Season 3, Episode 12, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

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

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

Paul: We're not going back to Malaysia. [mock sad voice] Aw.

But Malaysia is coming to us. Today's episode is all about how politics can impact sustainability, the role of intergovernmental organisations like ASEAN, and how young voices can influence it all.

[Theme music]

Paul: Jan, we're 100.

Jan: Well, I feel a hundred, if that's what you mean. Yes. It's our hundredth episode, which is, you know, really super.

Paul: I don't know if when we started this, we thought we'd get to 100, but that's where we are.

Jan: We are indeed. And it feels like a nice time to celebrate making it that far, but also to ask some big questions, a hundredth anniversary questions.

Paul: Yes. Hundredth anniversary makes it seem like 100 years. [Jan laughs] So I'm gonna cut you off there and say we're not a hundredth anniversary, but 100th episode, definitely.

Jan: Yes. Okay. Fair enough.

Paul: Yeah. Yeah. 100th anniversary. Uh, and that will really, really would be old if we'd reached our one hundredth anniversary. Maybe, you know, if the, this all goes well and new technologies emerged to allow us to transfer our brains into some kind of artificial being, then yes, we'll have a hundredth anniversary...

Jan: ...I don't...

Paul: ...but otherwise I'll just stick with a hundredth episode.

Jan: I don't think you want to spend eternity with me, Paul. That's just a thought.

Paul: No, actually, now you've mentioned it. Yes, let's hope we don't reach our 100th anniversary. Um, yeah, so we've covered so many big topics across the 100th episode.

You know, we've, we've covered topics on this planet. We've covered topics in this country. We've covered topics all around the world, and we've covered topics outer space.

Jan: One of the things we did look at quite a bit is the situation in Malaysia when we had our mini-series, um, from colleagues in Malaysia.

So I think that's, if you like, one of the places where we have looked a bit more in depth, uh, outside of the UK.

Paul: Yeah. So at the start of this year, we had four episodes in Malaysia, both with people at Sunway University and also people outside of Sunway University.

We had such a good time over there as well, learning a lot more about the sustainability attitudes and operations at universities within businesses in Malaysia, the various projects that go on there.

It really was a big part of our year.

Jan: Shall we keep on doing it?

Paul: Well, yes, for our 100th episode, we've brought in a special guest, someone who has come from Malaysia to us. Um, so we've returned the hospitality. We've not quite returned the weather, uh, for him that we enjoyed whilst over there in, uh, KL. But we have returned the hospitality.

And we're gonna welcome Nik Nazmi, who's visiting the UK presently. He stopped by the Pentland Centre, and that's after you met him while we were on hour visit to KL.

Nik's a parliamentarian in Malaysia and he has held a ministerial role in the Department for Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability.

Welcome, Nik.

Nik: Thank you. Thank you very much. And I do enjoy the weather here, actually.

[Jan laughs]

Paul: Yes. It, it is slightly different to, uh, Kuala Lumpur, isn't it...?

Nik: ...definitely...

Paul: ...it's slightly different. Yeah. Yes. No, we, we did have such a wonderful time there though, meeting so many people, and we discussed at the time, while we were out there, there was so much going on about the hosting of ASEAN...

Nik: ...mm-hmm...

Paul: ...uh, for this year, and lots of messaging around sustainability there. And I think it was so obvious to me and Jan that sustainability was a big part of quite a lot of discussions while we were in KL.

Jan: And I, I should also say particularly for our listeners is it's about the power of connection as well.

So I have a very good friend and colleague who I worked with when I was at University of Birmingham, who is also a, a friend and, and colleague of, of Nik's as well.

So, Idlan Zakaria is really the person who put us together. And so it's kind of like, uh, two degrees, with one common friend. You can be in a conversation with somebody who has an enormous array of experience outside my own.

So, uh, particularly if you are, you know, new to the business world or you're still a student studying, um, watch out for your, your school colleagues who are going to be really interesting and be doing really interesting things that you can find out more about that in the future.

Paul: It brings me to wonder if you are the sustainability equivalent of Kevin Bacon.

Jan: Um, I'm really, um, he advertises phones? [laughs]

Paul: Yeah. It's wonderful that one of the most famous actors, uh, from Hollywood in the eighties and nineties has been reduced in your mindset to someone who now is seen on TV advertising phones.

But yeah, there, there's a game called, I think it, it's either five degrees or six Degrees of Kevin Bacon...

Jan: ...oh, right...

Paul: ...where anyone and everyone, it might even be three degrees of Kevin Bacon, anyone and everyone who has ever been in any kind of film can be connected to Kevin Bacon in no more than, than so many steps. So I think you are the sustainability equivalent of Kevin Bacon.

Jan: Well, thank you. I now, thank you. With apologies to Mr. Bacon and his very fine film making career.

Paul: Uh, I daresay you'd be delighted if you had quite as much money as uh, Kevin Bacon and were quite as well recognised globally and had quite as much of a Hollywood career...

Jan: ...yes...

Paul: ...but that aside, you would definitely be Kevin Bacon in, in regards to connections within sustainability.

Jan: Heavens.

Paul: But it is wonderful, that has provided us with the opportunity to welcome you here, Nik, um, to discuss with you lots of important topics around how it works in politics and government when it comes to sustainability.

'Cause we quite often talk about it from the side of academics who sometimes work with government. But, it's good to have someone who's had got that experience from the other side.

Jan: Excellent. So that might be a good time to, to ask you what kind of path did you follow that resulted you, in you being elected to the Malaysian Parliament? And was that always in your heart of hearts something that you wanted to do?

Nik: Yeah, unfortunately I had quite a boring, uh, I mean, you know, I was the geek, the political geek, uh, since I was in school.

And, um, I was involved in Malaysian politics before I arrived in the UK as a, as an undergrad. Um, and the moment I came here, I was in Labour students, I was in, uh, the, you know, the Islamic societies and the NUS.

So yeah, I mean, I, I don't think it was that much of a surprise for me to end up as an, uh, elected, uh, legislator. But, you know, the only thing that was slightly different for me was that, um, you know, I had certain ideas with regards to, um, uh, reform, with regards to multiracial politics that I was not in the mainstream, right?

So I think that was the only thing that made me. People who have said that if he was in the, uh, traditional parties, he would've made it to Parliament. But I've been, I've been very fortunate with the timing that I've been able to be a minister and an MP.

Paul: When you say not in the mainstream, how does that work in Malaysia then? Because here in the UK, say, up until 20 years ago, you would've said two parties and really only two parties, which is Labour and Conservative, there's since been the emergence of the SNP in Scotland...

Nik: ...yep...

Paul: ...there's been the growth of the Liberal Democrats over the past 20 years, from a very minor party into one that has a decent number of seats in Parliament, and then you've got the very well-publicised rise of Reform in the last few years as well.

So how does it work in Malaysia with regards to party politics in the mainstream, and what sits in and out of the mainstream?

Nik: Yeah. Well, our, our system, you know, we took it lock, stock, and barrel pretty much from the UK. Um, it's first past the post, we have a parliament with an upper house, uh, appointed upper house.

But for me, I mean, the equivalent I would say was, uh, when I, you know, I graduated in 2005 from, uh, King's College London. Uh, I went back and I got active in this multiracial reformist party, centre left, I would say.

It was a party that was formed six years before that. We had at that time just one parliamentary seat, which is less than the Green Party now, I guess...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Nik: ...right? But in 2008 we ended up with 30 over parliamentary seats and which we have, we continue to hold on today and we took over a few state governments.

It was an outsider party, but which has I think, um, established itself quite well in Malaysian politics.

Jan: So moving to your ministerial post...

Nik: ...yeah...

Jan: ...what, what does, what does it feel like to be a minister? And, and what kind of change do you see as being possible from that post?

'Cause of course, we think you are the minister, you can do what you like, but of course, no one can do what they like...

Nik: ...yeah...

Jan: ...it's always within a, in a system, in a, in a context.

Nik: Well, yeah. And to put it into perspective, um, you know, and, and you know, again, being the political geek that I was, uh, you know, I watch a lot of Yes, Ministers...

[Jan and Paul laugh]

Nik: ...um, uh, and, and you know, the appointment was pretty much the same, right? So, uh, and I got to know about 30 minutes before the Prime Minister announced the cabinet, and I was in the rank of the party, relatively senior, but not super senior in the party.

And you know, I was not in a position to demand, um, the portfolio. So the Prime Minister just called up and said, you know, I want to appoint you as a minister for, at that time it was called Natural Resources, Environment and Climate Change. Right? And it was the merger of two, uh, previous ministries, and it's a huge ministry at that time.

Um, yeah, I just, I could just say thank you. Right? And, and, uh, and I had to do a lot of reading up. Um, and I think, um, you know, I've been in frontline politics since 2008, but, and I've had some pet issues related to the environment, but people would not generally associate me with the environment.

Um, so I had to do a lot of reading up and a lot of learning and, and, um, and all that. And it was, you know, I, I publicly said it was a bit like going back to university again. You know, all this terms from COP, for biodiversity, for climate change and all that.

And my father was a, he was a permanent secretary, so I understood how civil service and, uh, government works. But then I came to appreciate that, you know, the position of the minister, it's about giving that political direction, um, that vision to the civil service.

But it's also about getting the buy-in from my colleagues in cabinet, particularly the Prime Minister. You know, I, I found out that in cabinet I was a bit like that boring student that, you know, who, you know, that, that, uh, I was a bit like a prefect, you know, talking about the environment and climate when you have other ministers talking about jobs and growing the economy and, you know, those sort of things, which seemed more central to how parties win, uh, elections, right?

So I had to be that voice and, and how do I make myself relevant to my colleagues, to understand that it is important for us to make some difficult decisions.

Paul: Have you found that the, your efforts and the efforts of others around you have helped to push the environment, climate change, et cetera, up the agenda in Malaysia?

Did you find that people started to take it more seriously and that you were no longer seen as, as you described, you know, the boring, prefect in the corner who kept, keeps carping on about that one topic?

Nik: Yeah, because I, yeah, I was never that student in, in school, but. Um, yeah, I mean, I would say that because I think, uh, you know, with all due respect, but my, my predecessor probably did not really push a lot about the issue. And, and I think having me there sort of helped, uh, articulate this, uh, the, the issues at hand.

Um, and I think the other approach that I took was to involve the civil society in a lot of deliberations, we had a climate change advisory and consultative committee, which is made up of businesses, civil society, and even youth NGOs.

'Cause I think their voices are often, you know, ignored in the room. People talk about, uh, Greta Thunberg and all that. But in Malaysia we did not have enough of those voices and, and I brought them even to the meetings chat by the Prime Minister on climate change. I was a bit worried about what they would say to the Prime Minister, [Jan laughs] but, uh, I thought that's important to have that voice, right?

Paul: Mm-hmm.

Nik: And I think that helped and, and people appreciate that. But you know, that's my own evaluation, which is not entirely objective.

Paul: So, the name of the department when you started then was Natural Resources, Environment and Climate Change...

Nik: ...yeah...

Paul: ...do you think there was maybe an expectation that you'd focus on maybe the natural resources aspect when you took it on? 'Cause I know that obviously natural resources of Malaysia go together so much.

A lot of the discussions we had when we were over there were about the industries that are based there, the petroleum industry most obviously. Do you think that that was maybe seen as that's where your focus would be?

Nik: Well, yeah, the name is natural resources, but in reality, uh, natural resources, it's about, uh, forests, it's about land...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Nik: ...um, and it's about minerals...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Nik: ...other than petroleum, oil and gas...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Nik: ...right? So that one sits under the Prime Minister.

Right. So, so, um, so rare earth would be under me, uh, and in reality and wildlife as well is considered natural resources. But, in practice, a lot of things with regards to land and forest, it falls under the state.

Um, so, you know, I have that sort of advisory role, but the real powers, um, you know, whether you want to deforest, degazette a forest land, and whatnot, that's all under the state governments...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Nik: ...so, uh, that was a tricky part.

Jan: And I'd like to circle back around to the, the bringing in of the youth voice into the...

Nik: ...sure...

Jan: ...the process, because we have, um, earlier on in this series, uh, listeners will remember we were talking about generational governance...

Nik: ...yeah...

Jan: ...and whether or not there is this generational effect. In that policy environment did you observe generational effects in terms that the younger people were more ambitious or, or more committed, or was it sort of bimodal?

'Cause I sometimes think as people get older they also get more committed to, to the longevity of earth. So what kind of generational effects did you see in your time?

Nik: Yeah, I mean, we had hardcore civil society activists who have been probably, you know, they were there present at the, at Rio in 1992...

Jan: ...ah yeah...

Nik: ...right? And they've been to every COP, right?

And, and so you have that, that perspective. And they are really, they really believe and they fight for their cause. But you have these young articulate kids, uh, who were, I mean, they are as young as, we had, uh, our youngest speaker at COP in Dubai was a 12-year-old boy...

Jan: ...yeah...

Nik: ...from Malaysia, right? Uh, I mean, you know, obviously, I mean there's that, uh, you know, they, they are, some of them are very young, very new into this stuff, but they have that, not just earnestness, but that passion.

And I think, you know, that sense of, don't leave us the youth with, uh, you know, a, a broken planet, you know, that, that sense of, of urgency.

And I felt that, you know, it's again, when I involved the civil society, I even involved the corporates, I involved the youth. I don't have to agree with everyone, right. But I think it's important that we understand that perspective and try to get ownership.

Paul: Did the young people change your mind on anything?

Nik: Yeah. Well, I think the young people pushed me to be more imaginative. And I guess in a way it helps me to convince my colleagues again at, at cabinet, um, because a lot of things are interrelated and not entirely my power. And then, uh, you know, the energy, water, flood mitigation, which was under my department in my first year.

When the ministry was split and renamed, um, then those things fell under a different minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, so I had to get them on board. And I think, well, I, I know this sounds, uh, very, uh, you know, it shouldn't be like that, but in reality was that I could tell my colleagues that the young people care about this and it will matter in elections...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Nik: ...and it was on, we've only had, um, 18 year olds being able to vote since 2022, in Malaysian elections, right?

So I'm telling my colleagues that if, I mean, that's sometimes the easiest way, uh, to tell, [Paul laughs] to talk to politicians, unfortunately. Uh, but I told them that, you know, if we ignore these issues, then um, you know, we will get punished. Um, so we have to be able to champion, um, these issues as well.

And, and there was, and the other part, to be fair to my colleagues, is they realised that the floods have gotten worse and worse. They've seen the impact and, and they see that, you know, it, you can't solve the floods without dealing with climate change.

Um, so, so that also helps me, helped me in my case.

Jan: And in that, you're sort of straying into the question that I wanted to ask as well. So what, what kind of issues were really relevant for Malaysia, um, in a, in a policy context? And you've, you've highlighted floods, but some of those things are also relevant on an international basis as well.

So what kind of things were really exercising you?

Nik: Well, I think on an international scale, um, the other part was, uh, on waste, right? Because, um, Malaysia, unfortunately, we take in a lot of plastic, as well as electronic waste, from the world.

Um, plastic, it's partially legal. I mean, there are legal waste that with permits coming into the country. Um, but electronic waste is totally, uh, supposed to be illegal. Um, but it still comes in, particularly after China, um, basically closed down their borders to waste in 2018.

So a lot of those ships predominantly, um, a lot were from the US and Japan. Um, and I think the EU has taken action as well where they are not going to send, uh, plastic waste to non, uh, OECD countries anymore.

Um, but so that was a major problem, because I think for Malaysia, we are already a high middle income country. Within the next three, four years, we are supposed to be able to become a high income country and for us to be processing waste, I mean, this is not an industry we want to be in, right?

I mean, we, we, we can go on another debate about data centres and all that, but at least you know, that's a high end, uh, sector as opposed to, uh, processing plastics and, um, electronic waste.

Paul: We had a mini-series right at the very start of this year on something that we do here at Lancaster called The Plastic Packaging in People's Lives Project, and there is an offshoot of that actually, which is going in Malaysia with Sunway University...

Nik: ...yeah...

Paul: ...looking at those exact issues that you talk about. And it's fascinating because I know that looks at the fact that we here in Britain might not think our plastic waste affects people elsewhere...

Nik: ...yeah...

Paul: ...but it's ending up in countries like yours, in Malaysia, which is just showing how it is a global issue. And obviously sustainability itself is a global issue, and climate change is a global issue.

But you don't always think that the small things like packets of crisps or plastic packaging off your cereal, things like that are affecting people around the world. But they are.

Nik: Yes, they are. And, and I think, uh, and I mean part of it is also our problem where we do not recycle enough in Malaysia. We are a major plastic manufacturer. So as people demand for more and more recycled content in plastic products, and our manufacturers cannot get enough from Malaysia, so then they have to reach out overseas.

So I think that that's why we are trying to say, let's try to recycle our own first. And, you know, so it is an ongoing process, um, and, and yeah, plastics is a, is a whole conversation. And, and that was tough. Um, I think, I mean honestly, plastics, which I unfortunately did not succeed was, Malaysia took a very, uh, passive stand on the Global Plastics Treaty, and partly because, um, you know, we, we, I mean, when I speak to my civil servants and all that, they always perceive industry as only oil and gas and plastics.

I kept telling them that the food manufacturers, the retail, you know, those who make cosmetics and what, they are also industry, and they are a bit more pragmatic because they just want a clear policy that they know how to design the products. They're quite agnostic, whether it's plastic or paper, uh, you know, so we were trying to engage, but unfortunately that did not happen, and I think so far we've taken, um, slightly a position that is more closer to the plastic industry, and oil and gas industry, um, on plastics, rather than on sustainability.

Paul: How do you find attitudes across the Southeast Asian region, then? I mentioned that as ASEAN has been in Malaysia this year, with that message all around, uh, sustainability issues.

Do you feel that Malaysia has similar attitudes to the countries around you in general, or are there different aspects coming in from these different countries?

Nik: Mmm, well, yeah, I mean, yeah, I know talking about the EU in, in, in UK is not [laughs] the greatest thing.

But, um, no, I think whatever it is, um, you know, ASEAN in certain ways, we want, we want to be the EU of Southeast Asia.

Paul: Mm-hmm.

Nik: But in reality, you know, we do not have a parliament. You know, it is not, uh, uh, we are not, uh, unified. We do not have the same institutions that the EU has.

And, you have absolute monarchies. You have, um, you know, countries that are still communist, nominally communist, and you have liberal democracies of various extents in this region, right? So it's very diverse.

So I would say that, um, that has been the challenge because again, you know, I think one of the things that the EU in my, in my view, has succeeded, is giving that one strong voice for Europe.

And we should use as ASEAN as that equivalent in Southeast Asia, because Malaysia alone, Indonesia, yeah, they're 250 million, they're huge. They're G20. But Malaysia, we are a country of 35 million, right.

So, but unfortunately we have not been able to do it properly. We are trying to work with some like-minded countries in the region. But there's a lot of, so for example, Indonesia, they see themselves as quite a big country on their own, why do the need...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Nik: ...to go through ASEAN?

Uh, Singapore, they're very smart. They, they, you know, they're very developed, but they work with the small island states. Uh, so I mean, while you can still work in various groups, but it undermines that coherent, um, ASEAN voice.

Paul: That brings us very nicely actually, talking about ASEAN and the EU, to things such as the United Nations...

Nik: ...yeah...

Paul: ...now you've spoke at Conference of Parties, the COP meetings that you've already mentioned, the first one in Rio back in 1992. You've spoken at the United Nations.

So what do you see as the function of these meetings when it comes to issues around the environment, climate, sustainability?

Nik: Yeah, it's easy to get lost, uh, and find, you know, what's the whole purpose of it.

Uh, but you know, you do realise that at the end of the day, we need to do things together. And I think one of the things, which is we know is under challenge today, is the fact that the world, you know, out of the nightmare of

the Second World War, the world realised that we need to find certain, uh, we, we need to have these institutions and to find common solutions to problems that are global in nature.

So, I mean, it's not an easy process as you know, and you, you have to buy a whole new dictionary just to understand the language...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Nik: ...um, and, and at the same time, I need to communicate to my, you know, going back to my voters who are ultimately my clients...

Paul: ...it sounds just like communicating with academics, having to learn a whole new language...

[Nik laughs]

Jan: [joking] ...steady on, steady on, and I'm not having you two gang up on me.

[Everyone laughs]

Nik: So, so I think that was the, the, the challenge. But I, I do find that it was useful. Um, but you know, we are, we are in, uh, a challenging time.

Um, I mean, I, I appreciate the leadership of, um, for example, the UN Secretary General, um, on the climate crisis. Um, but when you have countries, uh, and, and you know, I was in Dubai, Malaysia shared this, our pavilion was part of the same building as China.

So you could see at that time, 2028, sorry, uh, COP28 in 2023, uh, John Kerry going up the corridors, because once the US and China agrees, then a lot of things get done.

But that was then, right? And things are different now. And, and I think that has been the, the challenge. Um, and at the same time, unfortunately, you know, when, when you see inaction from the big powers like the US, um, you see developing countries also making it as an excuse not to do anything, right? Just blame.

I mean, I totally agree that, you know, the impacts of, uh, colonialism on the environment and, you know, you shouldn't judge the Malaysian petrol industry the same way you judge the industry in the develop world and all that.

And I totally agree, but at the same time, we need to be more, we need to realise that the problem is here. And we need to do things without just pushing it, um, on others, uh, you know, blaming it on, on others.

But when the world's, well, the biggest polluter in the world does not take responsibility, then it's bit difficult to get things done, right? And, and also, I mean, I think China, at least in terms of sustainability, I think they, they've advanced a lot and they've shown that a lot of good things that can be done, but now there's no competition, right?

I mean, they do not, in the past, they had to show that they're better than the US but now if there's no push for that, it's, you know, then, then I, I'm afraid about the world, uh, progressing from that.

Paul: How does it make you feel when you hear the President of the United States, speaking at the UN General Assembly and saying things like he did recently, such as climate change being the biggest hoax the world has ever known, et cetera?

As someone who is, I would guess on about as, not quite as far, but I guess a long way away from him on the political spectrum as you can get, that must be so frustrating.

Nik: It is, it is. Because, um, it gives legitimacy to things which were seen in the past as you know, uh, in the margins or out of the mainstream. But, uh, fortunately, I mean, we do not see much of that in Malaysia yet in terms of, I don't think anyone denies per se, uh, you know, major politicians, uh, deny climate change.

But it does, it's, you know, that you don't have that sense of that feet on the brake. Uh, you know, and, and that, in the past when you had, um, the US you had the EU and you had China all pushing on this, it sort of created that momentum.

Um, so, and we know, I mean, corporates for example, a lot of them pay lip service to all these things. Um, but you know, and, and while we can all be cynical about that, but when they do not even have to pay lip service, then it's worse for the world.

Jan: You are in a different position.

Nik: Yeah.

Jan: So, we have quite an international listenership on, on this podcast...

Nik: ...yeah...

Jan: ...so I, and rather than focus on uninspiring leaders [everyone laughs] might, might ask you...

Paul: ...he inspires people, just in not the ways [everyone laughs] I would like, certainly...

Jan: [laughs] ...exactly, yes. Yeah, definitions are hard to come by here.

Uh, given this, you know, your chance to interact with, with, you know, people in similar roles to yourself, but also within the UN system, who have you have encountered that you really think, ah, there's a really inspiring leader who has...

Nik: ...yeah...

Jan: ...really has the ability to articulate about this issue and bring people alongside?

Nik: Well, one, I mean, before we go to that, I mean, you know, one thing we can learn from Trump, I think, is storytelling. And I think that's where a lot of progressives, a lot of leaders in the climate world, for example, are not able to do so. And if you're stuck in the language of COP, uh, you know, in that abstract language and all that, which is useful for negotiations, but it's not useful for going back to your electorate, right? So, so I think that's where Trump has succeeded in telling that story.

Um, one of the persons have had the privilege of learning a lot from, um, is actually, um, the Environment Minister for Brazil, Marina Da Silva, who has served in that portfolio before, during Lula's earlier administration. She's a, I think she was a rubber tapper, only learned to read in, at about 18 or 19 years old. Her husband was killed by the timber gangsters involved with the timber industry.

Uh, I mean, she doesn't speak English and I don't speak Portuguese, but, um, I engage a lot with her teams and, and her story. And I think, um, and, and she actually resigned at one point from the cabinet, unhappy at climate policies of Lula, in the past. And she stood against Lula on a different party platform for president. And, she lost, but Lula still appointed her as Environment Minister.

And I think, uh, you know, Malaysia shares a lot of similarities with Brazil being a developing country. Um, and, uh, you know, I, I admire them for, uh, you know, trying to do, uh, fighting for climate justice.

You know, I have people like, uh, Jacinda Ardern from New Zealand, the Prime Minister. I've had the privilege of meeting her once. Um, but I just like, and again, I think, again, I can't speak, I assume that my Brazilian former counterpart can tell the story well, 'cause of how successful she is, but certainly like Ardern and all that. And these are the things that we need, the people that we need.

And finally, um, I think, and one of the, you know, when I wrote my book on my, on the environment, the inspiration was, uh, after reading, uh, Sadiq Khan's 'Breathe'. Uh, I've never had the privilege of meeting him per se, but I feel that, I know he has a tough time of, now, pushing things through. But I do admire, uh, how he was able to weave something as, you know, the story of a kid dying from air pollution, to inform of what he was doing in London and that storytelling ability was, was very inspiring.

Paul: You may not have met him, but he certainly seemed to like your book. [Nik laughs] Judging by the fact his name is quoted on the front of it, um, advocating for the book.

I want to move away from politics and move towards business and the businesses you may have come across in your work in ministry and in politics. And have you come across businesses who can be a force for good, who can help when it comes to sustainability? And what kind of examples have you seen of them doing that?

Nik: Uh, I do, and, and I, you know, I've seen one, you know, one of the, in the West, uh, companies that tend to have the worst names in, in the environment, uh, Malaysian companies are the, uh, palm oil companies.

Um, and I, I do not dispute that there has, there have been problems, um, with regards to deforestation and all that. Uh, but I do think, uh, I mean, you know, that other than the site that, uh, palm oil in itself is something that is probably one of the most efficient vegetable oils that you can get, it's one.

But two as a result of all these pressures, um, I see a lot of this, at least the listed ones, they're doing a lot of things. They're reaching, they're changing their practices, and they're also trying to tell their story.

Um, and I, you know, yeah, again, you'll see some that are more of a greenwashing stuff and, and some are more genuine. But I do see a lot of good, um, practices that are starting now.

You know, that there, uh, there's a plantation that's starting, uh, that, that have succeeded with a wildlife corridor. Um, you know, um, for the elephants in Borneo. We, we've seen, um, um, what they call that, uh, another company that's investing a lot in tiger conservation. Um, and also the Indigenous Tribes that live near them, uh, as well as, um, you know, um, in their property projects, um, to actually, um, incorporate a lot more, um, of, uh, sustainable and green practices, you know, linking it with, um, forests and whatnot.

Uh, and that becomes a selling point now, right? Um, so, so I think, um, you know, because the, the, at the end of the day, you know, when we like to, you know, we like to tell individuals, uh, use less plastic, uh, travel less, so on and so forth. It's all and great. It's all well and great.

But, at the end of the day, if the governments and the corporates do not take action, you do not see that big systemic changes. And I think what is, what is, has been inspiring is that some of these changes at the corporate level, it has led to some big impacts.

Jan: So starting to draw our conversation to a close and reflecting on what individuals can do and what has to change in the system, what advices would you give our listeners about how they can make a substantive difference in the world?

Nik: Well, I think the most important thing, and you know, you, we were talking about people who deny the signs of climate change and you know, there are people like that and I think, um, you know, there's a long way to, to convert them to, to the cause.

But we forget that among those who accept the signs, the rest of the world, and I believe that's the vast majority in the world. Um, there's also a lot of people who feel that there's no more hope and, you know, it's too late to do something about it, right?

And, and, and you know, we are all, again, going back to the idea that how much can we really change as individuals? But I think that's where we need to win them over. 'Cause these are people who already believe in the science. It's just about telling them that, um, you know, we should, I believe that there's

still a chance for us to limit the damage, um, and also to adapt better to climate change and all that. Um, and to actually do something.

Obviously we do not know how things will end up, but I think just that, uh, you know, rather than being passive, that sense of, uh, being victims, uh, by actually taking ownership and doing something, I think that is more positive.

So I think that that is something, uh, and you can, if you read about stories and, and you know, the way the media needs to sell themselves today, they have to tell all this. The headlines need to be, you know, the worst possible, um, headlines to scare people, and all that.

But you try to find stories of, you know, there are a lot of successful rewilding, successful efforts to adapt to climate change, um, you know. And all those stories, I think are the ones that we should be sharing so that people, uh, are more hopeful and believe that they can do something, uh, impactful for, to save the planet.

Paul: Do you think that people can influence politicians if they speak with a loud enough voice to get them to act more on sustainability issues?

Nik: Definitely. Right? So I think, you know, why do we have politicians, uh, pandering to certain causes today is because, rightly or wrongly, the loudest voices, uh, and the media does not help, are talking about those issues.

So if you're talking about immigration for example, then uh, the politicians will fall into line. So, I mean, you know, for politicians it's all about how do they keep their job. And that's, that is what it is. For some of them, yes, they want to do good. For a lot of them, it's just how they keep their jobs, right?

So if they believe that, um, doing good, saving the planet is what people care and care about, and is how people will decide whether you, you will, they will vote for you or not. Then, um, you know, then that, that will change their minds because, um, I mean that is what democracy is all about.

Uh, but unfortunately I think that, that that message is not getting out enough. Um, even, I mean, even in the developed world where we suddenly see some people trying to link, uh, you know, actions against climate change and all that, are making things more expensive and all that, and, and that does not, um, help, right?

So I think we need to, people need to send out the message that they want the politicians to take action on this. And, and that was, that will be how they, they vote. And, and I think that politicians will definitely listen.

Jan: What I like about that message is it's not just turning up once every three or four years, or however often, and voting...

Nik: ...yeah...

Jan: ...and, but it's actually a continuous process...

Nik: ...definitely...

Jan: ...of, of political engagement.

So I'm a bit of a politics geek as well. So that, that [laughs] resonates with me rather strongly.

Paul: And I think we should probably draw to a close then. But just, before we do that, just a final question, just start looking at the future or the near future, certainly.

Where do you see the sustainability agenda going next? What are you thinking are the most substantive challenges that we're facing right now that are gonna be addressed?

Nik: Well, on one hand, I, I mean, it's not going to go anywhere in spite of, uh, efforts to, you know, push it, uh, to, to the margins. But, uh, obviously the more urgent thing people will be talking more and more about, uh, you know, uh, have we crossed that threshold of 1.5 or two degrees Celsius, and all that.

But fundamentally, I think, which we do not talk about enough, and something that I learned only when I became a minister, is on adaptation, right? Because, um, you know, we, we need to realise that even at 1.5, that best case scenario that seems more difficult, uh, today than ever.

Even if keeping it at 1.5, there will be sea level rise. There will be, you know, changes in urban heat islands, and all that. So how do we adapt to that? Uh, and then we also have to bear in mind that it might be worse, right? It might be two degrees or more.

So how, and that effort on adaptation, which we are already seeing, the floods are getting worse, uh, you know, the heat waves are getting way worse. You

know, Malaysians, we used to think that we can cope with a lot of heat, but now we realise that there is a limit.

Um, so I think these things need to be worked out, um, and, and adaptation is the next, uh, aspect that, uh, the world needs to focus on beyond net zero and all that.

Paul: Well, Nik, that has been a great conversation. It's been wonderful to get the insights into someone who has worked in government ,and who has worked globally with other governments as well, just to see that perspective on how sustainability is seen and within and without government.

Nik: Thank you.

[Theme music]

Paul: It really is interesting, Jan, to get that inside line, that internal perspective on what it's like to be in government trying to bring about change when it comes to sustainability, environmental policies.

Jan: And there are many things I took away from our conversation, but two big ones is storytelling...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Jan: ...and being able to do that well. Um, but also that, that hope is still something that we ought to be both an active, you know, developer of our own hope, but also maybe not to transmit unhopefulness.

Paul: It was interesting to me as well, to see the growth of the group, the party that Nik's a member of, and how that almost parallels the Greens in this country as well.

It seems like they've got a lot more members of Parliament than the Greens have over here, but just that proportional growth from something that was a really minor voice to becoming a lot more major, really reflecting the change in attitudes there has been globally.

Albeit we might start to worry about a swing back the other way with the, some of the politicians we've mentioned. But yeah, just seeing that growth over so many decades.

Jan: And uh, when Nik was talking about civil society actors, I was really struck, he said that, you know, there were people who were there at the Rio Conference in 1992...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Jan: ...and so that's actually, I'd never thought about those folk. I mean, I, I was around and I knew it was going on, but there was no way I was ever going to be at that. In fact, I've, I've never been at any one of these big meetings for, for quite obvious reasons...

Paul: [joking] ...probably for the best...

Jan: [laughs] ...yes, indeed. I'm not, not nearly able to sort of access that level of, of power and influence.

But those Rio legacies are absolutely something that, um, I might go away and think about how we could capture that within the Pentland Centre, because there'll be both business leaders as well as political leaders who have been, you know, active and on the ball since '92, which is a decent period of time ago.

Paul: We've talked in the past about Paris and the, you know, the climate agreement there and how that's effects have rolled on down the years. We've talked about the plastics treaties and the discussions there, and how they roll on and continue to, uh, roll on through, through the years.

And yeah, it's just another aspect of that. Even just going back even further, yeah, to that 33 years ago and seeing that those effects and the people who were there are still active, still have a voice now, albeit in a different environment, both literally and metaphorically.

Jan: And we also have touched down in this sort of broad ranging, um, interview, we've touched down in places like waste, which we've had quite a bit of work on...

Paul: ...and Indigenous Tribes as well, because that...

Jan: ...indeed...

Paul: ...that's something that we've discussed as well, Indigenous People and the effects on them.

Jan: But also I thought it was quite interesting is that, I mean, I, I know Brazil's there and I think Brazil is an amazing country, but, but Brazil wouldn't necessarily leap to the forefront of our mind in the UK if we're thinking about global actors. Um, but that's quite important to realise that, you know, other groups...

Paul: ...I almost disagree on that. In as much as, because Brazil is the home to the majority of the Amazon, and what happens in the Amazon affects what's going on all around the world and the global tipping points that we talk about and the, the fact that the Amazon and the deforestation there.

I think that in that regard, I think Brazil has a big role to play and I think that the politics in Brazil with Lula and Bolsonaro, the two very extremes of the political system there and seeing how it goes on with all the logging companies, yeah...

Jan: ...ah, maybe it's just my wee blind spot, but it was nice to see Brazil back in the, in the conversation.

Paul: I, I think it's a New Zealand prejudice [Jan laughs] that the New Zealand people are obviously have a prejudice towards people from Brazil...

Jan: ...who, if you don't, if you don't flank the, the Pacific, we don't care. Is that what you're saying...?

Paul: ...exactly, yeah. Because Brazil only has an Atlantic coast, you're just not interested.

Um, but for once you were not the most famous New Zealander mentioned on the podcast either, because...

Jan: ...ooooh look, I would give almost anything to meet Jacinda, but yeah, I doubt that's gonna happen either. [laughs]

Paul: No, but such a good example though of that voice that can speak at a global level. And I know that she is no longer the Prime Minister of New Zealand, but she still has that influence and voice. You still see her featuring here, there and everywhere in the media.

Jan: And I think that storytelling that she offers up is, is amazing.

Paul: Mm-hmm. Yes, yeah.

Jan: So, do you feel tired, Paul? You ready for a wee rest?

Paul: Frequently. [Jan laughs] Especially after an hour spent in your company, Jan.

Um, I feel reasonably lively. I'm ready to give it a go again next year.

Jan: Good. Good. So, so we've got, you know, a merry midwinter celebration coming up for, for some folk in the, the northern latitudes...

Paul: ...I'll just say Happy Christmas, uh, because that's what it is. [Jan laughs] Whether you are in summer or winter, it is Happy Christmas...

Jan: ...oh, that true...

Paul: ...and it will be a new year. So, yeah, we'll say Happy Christmas, Happy New Year to all of our listeners. We will be back in the new year with a whole series of new guests covering some more fascinating topics, all touching on sustainability and business.

Jan: I look forward to it.

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

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]