

A RECIPE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

“What is now proved was once only imagined.”

William Blake

Introduction

JRF was established over one hundred years ago in the city of York, a city that has more claim than many to be the kitchen of social change in the UK. The first place in Europe where mentally ill women were held without manacles through the visionary work of William Tuke at the Retreat. The site of one of the first garden villages in New Earswick, the prototype of so much suburban housing in the UK. And the first place where people living in poverty were counted, measured and studied in the ground breaking, influential reports by Joseph, and later Seebohm Rowntree. And now, York aspires to be a Living Wage City, working with employers, voluntary organisations and the local press to ‘stamp out poverty’. It aspires to be a model for a dementia friendly city, one in which all the people of the city, and their visitors, can feel safe, welcomed and able to lead good lives with dementia.

In assessing that legacy of pioneering architecture, influential and challenging research, we witness a tireless journey in pursuit of social justice. But we also witness centuries of social change, and in this lecture tonight I want to try and understand what makes social change happen. What are the ingredients and processes in the recipe?

Because social change does happen. Sometimes dramatically and visibly, and more frequently through the slow accretion of rights, the shifting attitudes, the small adjustments, which mean we suddenly look round and recall.

The past was a different country. They did things differently there.

You do not need to be a starry eyed subscriber to the Whig theory of History, or indeed a Blairite humming “things can only get better”, to spot social change. In the lifetime of the JRF – since 1904 - we have seen:

- The emancipation of women, our right to vote, and our entry into the workforce in large numbers;
- The rising of the school leaving age, and the growth of literacy and numeracy;
- Health gains that could never previously be imagined;

- The development of personal and sexual freedom - changing the shape of family life, sexual identity and our definition of marriage;
- A break in the historic link between squalor and poverty – for the last 30 years it has been possible for even the very poorest people to live in decent homes.

And in terms of behaviour and norms we readily accept that we can no longer smoke where we wish, that driving when drunk is socially unacceptable, that church going is no longer the norm and that automatic deference in response to age or class is not required.

Each of these changes, and a host of others, have in their wake brought other changes, some more positive and others more negative, but taken together they signify a very different society from the one that Joseph Rowntree would have seen as he strolled along Bootham.

Not one of these changes - and all the many others – would have been possible without conflict, without the use of power. Sometimes the mobilisation of the powerless, sometimes the assertion of rights by an otherwise marginalised and silenced minority. The progress of social change owes a huge amount to movements – and it challenges and takes on vested interests, frequently with apparently overwhelming power. This much is, in a sense, self-evident and the celebration of these movements, the history written by the challengers, is a vitally important part of understanding social progress.

Now before I go further I need to acknowledge that there is a vast body of theoretical thinking and writing on the question of social change, the nature and validation of such change, the methodology that is used and the calibration of effect. I don't intend to litter this lecture with theoretical constructs, or reference the extraordinary, powerful and rigorous work by both academics and activists. Instead I want to draw some simple themes from this body of research, and associate it with examples that will, I think, be familiar to people here today. There are plenty of powerful analyses of the nature of social change movements, just as there is a compelling body of evidence about how government is influenced.

Purpose

In this lecture I want to explore what makes social change happen? What are the combination of forces that result in change? And what, if anything, can we do once we have identified them? In constructing this argument I am not suggesting that all change is good, and absolutely not denying that all change has repercussions. But I do want to

examine what agency we have in the pursuit of change, and to argue that simply waiting for history to take its course – the entirely evolutionary approach – is neither effective, nor adequate. I'll also argue that change is in no one body's gift, and that in our increasingly inter-connected world, we need a more sophisticated, more engaged and more fluid concept of social change. I'll go on to demonstrate that it has never been linear, and instead, like all recipes, requires a combination of ingredients and processes, and that outcomes are rarely as secure, as predictable, or as uncontested as observers fondly imagine. And (before this rather forced cooking metaphor falls to pieces) as all confident cooks know, I hope to show that missing ingredients, and unlikely substitutes can have surprisingly good results.

The ingredients

A sense of crisis – the burning platform

Some social change is triggered by a recognised crisis, a shared acknowledgement that a problem or issue can no longer be allowed to continue unchallenged. The possibly apocryphal story of the shock in the War Office at the start of the Boer war at the malnourished and physically weakened young men conscripted as soldiers, and the impact that had on the creation of a school meals service is one such example. An undeniable crisis, focussing attention on a problem that had long existed.

Another was the recognition that cities without green space were breeding grounds for infection, and the consequent Victorian creation of city parks, offering a green barrier protecting the better off from the TB (and worse) of the inner city slum.

Such crises rarely arise unprompted. There are always social evils that go unremarked, unnoticed and largely tolerated until something happens that renders them suddenly, and powerfully intolerable. Social change driven only by a crisis can be a knee jerk, ill-considered response like the over quoted Dangerous Dogs Act of 1991. Or it can be a sudden reaction to a shocking fact – like the revelation of systematic sexual abuse within the BBC. Equally it can be the justification and motive for a long desired piece of change like the change to gun control after the Dunblane massacre of 1996.

But a burning platform is rarely this self-evident. It requires evidence of detriment, and the creation of a concern, or what is often described as a panic. A lot of effort goes into creating a concern, and it may not always be from benign motives.

One such example is the current concern about obesity and its impact on public health. In the interests of total disclosure I should reveal that I was Deputy Chair of the Food Standards Agency when concern focused on this issue. Undeniably there was a problem. Medical study after medical study revealed that the growing girth of the population was having a detrimental effect on health, and a number of disease and morbidity spikes could be directly associated with rising weight levels in the population. There was a particular concern about the weight of some children, and what this might mean for their long-term health. But what shifted this from the arcane debate about medical causation on the pages of *The Lancet*? In part it was indeed the scale of the problem, the concerns of medics and the skills of those seeking to influence public health. But evidence alone was not, I would argue, the only trigger. Emotions played their part too. The debates of the time teem with concern about the commodification of childhood, and anxiety about the apparent passivity engendered in children by digital technology. So too was an anxiety about the sedentary nature of childhood, the absence of freedom and the loss of a 'golden age of childhood' in which five children and a dog roamed carefree around the Isle of Wight, unencumbered by parents, game cubes or anything more damaging than a healthy picnic. Into this heady mix came an anxiety about absent, working mothers, shovelling frozen pizza at their children instead of home cooked meals. Pictures of over protective, always poor, mothers smuggling chips through school gates achieved iconic status. The non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – the activists always concerned about the nature of the food chain, and the exclusion of people in poverty. Those fighting on public health, meeting those most exercised about the sustainability of the environment. The research community – nutrition specialists, clinicians and social policy researchers.

And at the back of all of this, the pharmaceutical companies, the hugely powerful industry, investing in the development of a drug to tackle obesity and very keen that this should be seen as a medical intervention, and therefore to be paid for by the tax payer, rather than as a lifestyle drug, (remember *Viagra*?), seen as having doubtful health impact. Quite soon there was space for Jamie Oliver, the saviour of the school dinner, and some important, and certainly life changing work was done about the nutrition of children, the labelling of food and the tenor of public debate. Evidence, emotion, commercial need and a sprinkling of essential celebrity – an issue arose, dominated our discourse, and some, comparatively small but nonetheless important changes were made. What was described as the ticking time bomb of obesity was measured, examined, but certainly not defused.

A narrative

So if social change needs a burning platform, it also crucially needs a story, a narrative to explain why something is no longer acceptable. In the dim and distant 1980s I had responsibility for supporting services for homeless people in the centre of London. For centuries older homeless men had congregated in central London, known variously as vagrants, or people of no fixed abode. They were from time to time joined by young people, running away from home, or from local authority care, experimenting with drugs, resorting to prostitution and, along with the older men, at huge risk all the time. The received wisdom then was that while there might be public sympathy, and certainly charitable alms, for the old guys, the young people could never be the object of public sympathy or intervention. And then it changed. Changed dramatically, so that the younger members of the Royal Family championed their cause, fund raising became almost embarrassingly easy, and central government took responsibility, which it more or less has to this day, for the issue of central London homelessness. What happened? Those of us who had been arguing for change of course hope that it was our skill and brilliance that won this major intervention. But of course, as with all social change the ingredients were more complex, more overlapping and more challenging than that.

Essentially the narrative changed and this changed because of events. A comparatively minor change in the details of social security payments, known then as the Board and Lodging payments, suddenly meant that homeless people could no longer live in the patchwork of usually insecure, frequently dangerous, but always hidden bed and breakfast hotels across London. They were visible on the streets. The newly formed charity, Comic Relief, adopted young homelessness as their UK cause, and so film makers and journalists were introduced to people on the streets. Financial deregulation in the city – Big Bang - meant that the condition of London, and in particular its visual appearance became an interest for countries across the world. Crucially a narrative developed: the young homeless people were described as society's rejects – throwaways and runaways – the national scandal of a wasted generation. When the opposition party political broadcasts in 1989 showed pictures of young people bedding down in cardboard boxes we knew that focus groups for all political parties, all over the country, had identified with these – very ordinary young people – and the narrative that central London homelessness is a given was bust. There are still homeless people in every town and city of this country, but the responsibility is no longer ascribed only to the individuals. Central government, local government and others all have a responsibility, and homelessness is no longer a quirky lifestyle choice, the result of chaotic personal lives, but instead a legitimate concern for public policy, and critically, intervention.

Far more recently we have seen the shifting narrative in the context of the food banks, and in this story we can see very clearly the struggle to create the dominant narrative. For there are three competing narratives about food banks. The first is about the enormous generosity, and instinctively powerful response of people in the face of need. Every supermarket car park bears witness to the generosity of individuals, both those giving their time to collect and those donating from their heaving trollies. And the food banks themselves offer testimony to the organising power of churches, mosques, temples and communities as they distribute food to their hard pressed neighbours. That is one, warming narrative. There is another narrative, which is about people so desperate to eat that they queue for their shopping bag of rations. People sanctioned by a thoughtless and punitive regime, driven to rely on the kindness of others for meagre support. And there is the third narrative, which is of naïve providers, creating a need by offering food for free, and so tempting people who would otherwise cope adequately, to pick up their tins of beans and disposable nappies without having to pay. There may well be truth in each narrative. There is certainly supporting evidence, of a kind, for each. But fundamentally, the one you hear is most likely to be the one that confirms your world view.

The battle for the dominant narrative is a vital tool for anyone involved in social change. Just for a flippant moment imagine how different our environmental debate would be if the emotive, and ugly term ‘fracking’, had been instead, ‘organic fuel resourcing’. Same approach, different narrative, and just possibly a very different public response. Apply the same to the way in which, following the US example as so often, public narrative about state support for people in need has moved, quite consciously and deliberately, from the warmth and reciprocity of ‘social security’ to the distant, and one-way term ‘welfare benefits’.

A powerful narrative has been developed which has allowed a major overhaul of our system of support for people without earned income – whether through ill health or unemployment unable to work. This narrative has some powerful and compelling strands. It describes people in this position as living in an entirely different world, motivated entirely differently and behaving differently. It contrasts their lifestyle with that of the hard working population – blinds down, feet up, television on. It is supported by media portrayals, both on television, and in the news press, and ably amplified in sound bites. The high proportion of these people, it is said, are the main reason for our financial crisis, and the repeated assertion is that ‘we all know’ someone who is defrauding the system. The mistrust that exists about public services feeds a strong belief that there is unfairness within the system, and connects with those who have always criticised our

system of social security – I would say for excellent reason. A burning platform, and a narrative demanding urgent intervention, lead inexorably to a policy position that is now known (slightly inaccurately, I would argue) as welfare reform, and we are told this is shown in poll after poll to be the single most popular thing the coalition government have done.

Public acceptance is the holy grail of narrative, because without that there will never be space for politicians and policy makers to move. But public acceptance is neither fixed nor ever amenable to the presentation of evidence alone. The Overton window is the theory that describes as a narrow ‘window’ the range of ideas the public will accept. On this theory, an idea's political viability depends mainly on whether it falls within that window rather than on politicians' individual preferences. At any given moment, the ‘window’ includes a range of policies considered politically acceptable in the current climate of public opinion, which a politician can recommend without being considered too extreme, or too mad, to gain or keep public office. The challenge for those seeking to drive social change is to shift the window sufficiently. Frequently this is done by the outlier, the apparently extreme position that allows the window to shift.

On a macro political issue, it was until five years ago unthinkable to propose – in what passes for polite conversation - that the UK should leave the European Union (EU). There was instead an uneasy consensus around the narrative that being in the EU, tiresome though it might be, served the national interest. That is no longer the case – the window has shifted to encompass the serious proposition that we should and could leave. What has created this shift in the Overton window? In part it is events. The crisis in the Eurozone has rocked confidence and replaced cost where there used to be benefit. In part it is emotion – a sense that in troubled times sovereignty trumps co-operation. But it is also the emergence of more radical outliers, prepared to assert noisily and angrily the absolute necessity of severing links that have shifted the window and enabled more mainstream politicians to also propose this sort of fundamental change.

The social change which is most frequently cited is the change in attitude, and in law, to homosexuality. How did we move from Section 28 in 1988 prohibiting discussion about homosexuality in schools, to the legislation of equal marriage in 2013, and indeed celebration last weekend? What happened to the Overton window, which first allowed a subject to be banned for discussion, and within 25 years become the subject of feel good films, and lawful blessing? Certainly rational evidence gathering, superbly targeted lobbying and the creation of powerful alliances made change possible. But who can doubt that it was the angry challenge from radicals and activists, most famously but by no means solely Peter Tatchell, that shifted the debate and provided that move in the

window that allowed politicians to move? The anger, protest and outrage outside the corridors of power was needed if committee rooms in the House of Commons were to draft the legislation. Those who wave placards, threaten strikes, demand the impossible, dream the unthinkable and embarrass the mainstream are as vital to a movement of change – and more importantly the achievement of change, than those who forge consensus and identify acceptable narratives.

To quote Bernard Shaw in one of my favorite quotes

“The reasonable man adapts himself to the conditions that surround him... The unreasonable man adapts surrounding conditions to himself... All progress depends on the unreasonable man.”

Rationality and the accumulation of evidence has its essential place. But the angry outlier, the unreasonable man or woman, the extremist protestor, is essential in shifting the window through which policy can change. Social change is not a rational process, and anger and emotion, the groundswell of opinion that says this is unacceptable, is an essential ingredient in change. Social change is messy and complicated. It will always involve a range of ingredients, and the notion of a recipe for change that does not first recognise the power of anger, the force for change – the marchers and protestors, the mass movements of people, fails to grasp an essential part of the recipe.

It is also part of the recipe that has changed most dramatically in recent years. The digital revolution has transformed the ways we analyse information, and the ways in which we communicate it. It has affected our evidence gathering, and hugely enhanced our capacity for understanding. But most dramatically it has affected, is affecting and will increasingly affect, the ways in which we organise, identify fellow feeling, and develop affiliation and solidarity. Photographs of horrors in Syria, or the Ukraine are beamed from mobile phones across the world in seconds. No longer can we say ‘we didn’t know’. But so too is interpretation, and connection. The power of hashtag politics, rapidly shaping mood, shifting debate and communicating reaction, is too often dismissed as mere ‘clicktivism’, contrasting the painful huge personal commitment of more traditional forms of protest with the easy click of a ‘like’ button. But I think this misreads the way in which organisation and social movements are changing. The democratisation of social movements, and the way in which all sort of people can be engaged can be seen through the powerful blogs of disability activists like Kaliya Franklin, the creator of diary of Benefit Scrounging Scum. In the passionate movement of people with learning disabilities around Justice for LB, and their protest against Southern Health, have found voice and expression this way. But even more than providing a platform for individual

experience and testimony, vital though this is, they have also generated a different sort of mass movement, forcing social change in very different ways. 38 degrees undoubtedly irritates politicians. It plays a vital part in driving social change by expression of affiliation.

So far I have argued that a burning platform, recognised as such with sufficient detriment to force change, is a vital ingredient. So too is a narrative that both explains the problem and suggests that it is not inevitable. And more than a good helping of challenge, of anger, of drive too. And that social media has changed the way in which we do this, and will change it in the future too.

But together this mix of ingredients may simply describe a problem. They may generate anxiety and anger in equal measure, and promote a real recognition of wrong, but they may not produce change.

To achieve that you need two other crucial ingredients. The first is a tested, proven solution, and the second is surprising friends.

There are social challenges which by and large are either ignored or accepted. Seen as inevitable, they invite occasional compassionate concern but rarely any sustained attention. This is because they're seen as either inevitable, insoluble or a combination of the two. Starvation and famine in the developing world was for centuries just such an issue. An object for charity, a cause for concern, but until the latter half of the last century, not something which serious people addressed as suitable for social change. So too occasionally is the spectre of poverty in the UK. Far too often it is seen as simply inevitable, collateral damage in a fast moving and otherwise successful economy. Domestic violence was until relatively recently seen as something undoubtedly deplorable, but not really subject to change.

Part of the purpose of the narrative is to shift these issues from being ignored, and social movements organise and protest to ensure that the narrative shifts. But a solution is also needed. Unless we can see a social problem as both sufficiently detrimental to demand change, and sufficiently tractable to warrant it, the probability is that it will be ignored.

Street homelessness moved from being part of the street scene of central London to being something meriting a major government programme, because it was seen as sufficiently damaging – to the individuals, but also to the well-being of Londoners, and the reputation of the city - but also because it was seen as capable of resolution. There were proven things that could be done. These things were valued and costed and they worked.

Domestic violence moved from being one of the risks of marital life, to something disgraceful, in large part because refuges were established and demonstrated that removing mothers and children from abusive households was possible, and resulted in improved lives.

Nutritional labelling was introduced by the major supermarkets because it was seen as a solution to the major public health crisis identified, and there was sufficient, though hotly contested, evidence that labelling could drive behaviour and consumption.

Surprising friends

And none of these solutions would have any impact at all if it were not for advocates, the trusted intermediaries and the surprising friends. Every policy maker and politician will have a finely tuned sense of vested interest, and will be able to identify, with alarming rapidity, the self-serving, and the lobby that is one dimensional. While this does not seem to necessarily hinder change when it benefits the banks or the airlines, the energy industry or financial services, the charge of representing a vested interest is always used to stop social change. Intermediaries which interpret, which provide added cover, which offer respectability and different perspectives, are a vital part of any recipe for social change.

So too are the surprising friends. The crisis in house building is a problem for the very many people who cannot get housed. The fact that the solution to this crisis – building more housing – so closely aligned with the priorities of house builders, estate agents and employers, has more than helped turn this social housing challenge, into one with real change imminent. It is the economic requirement of the builders, the expressed need for housing for a growing workforce, as well as the anger and lobbying of campaigning organisations, which has resulted in the faint beginnings of the understanding that house building is as much part of the infrastructure of growth as HS2. Yes to Homes is a powerful and successful coalition of interests. It shows the common ground that can be made – it also illustrates the perils of mixed motives.

Because movements for social change need to bring together different interests. Surprising friends can provide external validation, they can interpret and they can bridge. But the purists are right to mistrust. Not for nothing does the word collaboration have two meanings – to share and to betray. Successful social change will have several parents, but like some real life parents they may all be slightly disappointed in what they have produced. Compromise, shared objectives, the construction of a shared narrative will all strengthen the likelihood of achieving change. They don't guarantee universal satisfaction with the outcome of that change.

The recipe for social change has these ingredients: the burning platform, a compelling narrative, extreme supporters, angry movements, brought powerfully together through social media, surprising friends and solutions which, if not tested and proven, at least seem to have a chance of working.

This recipe derives a lot of its power from emotion. Our workforce and our electorate are more educated and questioning than ever before. We are less inclined to believe what we hear, and one of the huge assets of social media and the digital revolution is that it has enabled us to hear, and communicate, with such disparate voices. But it is also, as many commentators have finally noticed, a feminised public discourse that values connection, identity and sensibility as much as structure. That's why it matters so much that politicians can convey what passes for real emotion when they visit sites of disaster. That is why we look to them for emotional intelligence, and that is why we ignore feelings and emotion when we develop our narrative at our peril. Gay marriage was licensed as much because of the sons and daughters of decision makers, the emotional sense of security and stability that the notion of marriage furnishes, as it was by the legalistic application of a framework of human rights and equal value. And that is why all three main political parties in the UK, and probably many of the less mainstream ones too, will foreground issues of family and relationships in their 2015 manifestos.

What none of this prevents, however, is the power of events. Does anyone really believe that we would have achieved a ban on smoking on the tube were it not for the Kings Cross fire in 1987? Does anyone think that the Environment Agency approach to flood management would have changed were it not for floods in the south of England in 2013/14? And does anyone believe that we would have a framework for the regulation of food in the UK, were it not for the shock of BSE and salmonella? The challenge for those of us desiring social change is to be alert to the events, to be ready with solutions, and to recognise the massive power of events in making social change happen. It is events that can create the 'educable moment' and provide the pivotal moment at which change can happen. But events without evidence, without recognition of crisis, and without suggested solutions, will be simply events. Not moments for social change.

Evidence, that cherished jewel in the crown of JRF and other organisations like us, plays its part of course. It helps to identify the issue, it forms and shapes the narrative, and it can test and propose solutions. But evidence alone does not drive social change. For JRF and for all other organisations with a focus on lasting, positive social change, the evidence is fundamental. But so too are the powerful emotions that drive attitudes, shape assumptions and determine how we hear things. If we ignore those emotions we

will be tone deaf in our response to events, and that means the opportunities for social change can be lost.

JRF has a long history of pursuing social change. Our founding memorandum commits us to ‘find the causes of social evil’ and ‘change the face of England’ and one way or another we have been doing this since 1904. JRF and its sister organisation, the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust (JRHT), has lived through turbulent times – two world wars, and a number of economic crises, the impact of automation and globalisation, the emergence of the trade union movement and its period of waning influence. The end of deference and the growth of celebrity. And scientific and technological advances of a scale and at a rate that Joseph Rowntree could not have imagined. But we have brought a number of constants to the task of social change. We have commissioned investigations and research, we have counted people in poverty – through Seebohm Rowntree’s surveys and now through our annual monitoring report on poverty. And throughout that time we have been committed to developing solutions to the problems we have investigated. Just as Joseph Rowntree built New Earswick to provide green and pleasant housing for his workers and managers away from the slums of central York, so too we build new environmentally sustainable housing fit for the 21st century. With our roots deep in neighbourhoods, we have developed retirement communities and supported people who were previously in institutions, to live independently, and continue to provide long-term stewardship and support.

We do all of this with a purpose of achieving positive lasting social change. We are committed to the eradication of poverty, and know that in order to achieve this we need to persuade people that it is both real and damaging – that it is a crisis, there is a burning platform. What is more, we have to persuade them that it is not inevitable. That we have it in our shared power to eradicate it. That there are solutions. We can contribute evidence, we can help to make connections, we can bring together surprising friends and allies – but we know that successful social change only happens because of hard, sustained work, and the engagement of all sorts of different people, and different interests. The painstaking amendments to the minutiae of legislation, the Twitter conversations, the films and the stories, the developing power of data analytics, the understanding of the details of experience, the voices of the dispossessed – all of this is part of the way in which social change is achieved. None of it happens by magic – the recipe is much more powerful than that.