

Do we have time to shift values?

“Do we have time to shift values?” This is a question that is often asked when people respond to *Common Cause*. This blog, itself an expansion of the [FAQ](#) question of the same title, offers a response.

Clearly, we don't have long to bring down greenhouse carbon dioxide emissions very markedly before we hit devastating levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere – with profound, effectively irreversible, effects upon our climate. Often, when people ask “Do we have time to shift values?”, they are posing the question in the context of the urgency of addressing climate change. In this context, we need to effect major changes in how our economies are run, and we need to effect them very soon.

In formulating a response to the challenge posed by climate change, it is important to hold in mind that these reductions in greenhouse gas emissions need to be (i) sufficiently *ambitious*; (ii) made sufficiently *soon*; (iii) sufficiently *durable* to be maintained for a long time to come.

Implicit in the question “Do we have time to shift values?” is the belief that some alternative strategy could perhaps provide the requisite ambition and durability, and deliver these emissions reductions in a short time-frame. Also implicit is the suspicion that, while the strategy of ‘shifting values’ may be sufficiently ambitious and dependable, it is likely to take a long time. Too long.

This blog, then, provides some responses to this important question.

Does Common Cause advocate shifting values?

Recall that values are important at two different levels. Firstly, in terms of which values are ‘engaged’ at any particular point in time. It seems that almost everyone holds intrinsic values at some level. There is also evidence that the *majority* of people hold intrinsic values to be *more* important than extrinsic values. This understanding, which is consistent with the evidence from social psychology, challenges the more simplistic perspective that – whatever the subtleties – people can basically be grouped into clear categories according to their dominant values in a way that predicts their behaviours and attitudes. This may not be the perspective that social marketers who use values surveys to segment audiences intend to create. But this view is often implicit in what they do, and it creates conceptual barriers to the more nuanced understanding shared by most social psychologists.

So at one level, the approach that we advocate with Common Cause is not about *shifting* values so much as *engaging* intrinsic values – values that are *already there* in almost everyone. At this level, then, it is not a question about whether we have enough time. Intrinsic values are there to be engaged now. For more evidence that this is the case, see our recent report, *Communicating bigger-than-self problems to extrinsically-oriented audiences*. You can download it [here](#).

At another level, of course, we do look forward to a future where space is opened up so that intrinsic values can be more readily expressed at a cultural level. If this happens, it will be as the inevitable result of the repeated engagement of intrinsic values in the here and now, and the careful design of public policies, social institutions and business practices to make it easier to express intrinsic values and to tackle factors which currently promote extrinsic values.

Does appealing to intrinsic values imply trade-offs?

The second assumption implicit in the “Do we have time?” question is that there is a trade-off involved in appealing to intrinsic values: that somehow appealing to intrinsic values in order to motivate pro-environmental concern is likely to be counterproductive. This leads to the conviction that we are faced with a choice between a long hard slog to change values – with no guarantee that we'll ‘get there’ in the end – and settling for easier, smaller wins.

We don't see things this way. We have presented a lot of evidence that intrinsic values may be quite the best way of motivating pro-environmental attitudes and behaviour. We have presented evidence, too, that these values can be engaged among audiences who are relatively more oriented towards extrinsic values. We also know that appeals to intrinsic values are less likely to lead to collateral damage (where people

adopt a specific pro-environmental attitude or behaviour in one sphere, only to be more likely to adopt an anti-environmental attitude or behaviour in another – maybe many others). So intrinsic values may well be the most effective way of motivating pro-environmental change in the here-and-now.

We need durable and ambitious change

It is not enough that we achieve emissions reductions soon. We also need to achieve them at a very ambitious level, and in a durable way – year-in, year-out, for a very long time to come. Most seasoned environmentalists are only too aware that, firstly, even where there is political will for change, the scale of change achieved is woefully inadequate. They are also aware that even those policy changes that are made can prove to be all-too-easily reversed when, as a result of an economic downturn, or a change of government, or some political crisis, hard-won environmental provisions are unpicked.

Ambitious change – for example, change that pushes beyond the short-term business case for sustainable development – will be premised upon intrinsic values. Durable change will be premised on strengthening public consciousness of the imperative to care for future generations, or the world's poor, or other species. It cannot be premised upon some proxy for these values.

Consider, for example, the dangers of appealing to energy security in order to promote investment in renewables. This imperative is just as likely to be pressed into service to justify new investment in coal, oil shales, or deep-water oil. But more than this, appealing to security values may well undermine opposing set of values that underpin people's openness to change: something that appears crucial for any society willing to accept a rapid low-carbon transition.

Similarly, consider citizens who have been conditioned to think of short-term economic growth as being more important than long-term environmental sustainability. This is a perspective that is likely to be promoted by subjugating environmental need to economic needs. Such subjugation is implicit in premising action to address climate change upon 'green growth' or 'the business case for sustainable development' or 'competitiveness in new environmental sectors'. Citizens who have been conditioned to think in this way are surely less likely to express outrage when environmental regulations are torn up in the pursuit of greater economic competitiveness.

The most durable environmental changes will be built upon a set of values consistent with environmental concern. They will be motivated by intrinsic values.

What sort of future do we want?

Happily, these intrinsic values are also associated with stronger friendships and communities, and higher levels of wellbeing. Let's set aside, for a moment, the question of what level of climate change we can avert, and what level we must now adapt to as inevitable. If our responses to all social and environmental challenges, and the way we adapt to living with them, are premised upon an appeal to our intrinsic values, then it seems that these responses will be more humane, our communities stronger, and our individual lives more fulfilled.

Conclusion

Overall, then, we reject the assumptions underlying the question: 'Do we have time to shift values?' On the contrary, we don't have time *not* to appeal to people's intrinsic values. We must immediately begin the process of building an ambitious response to environmental challenges, premising this response on grounds that are dependable for the long-term.