

# RSA JOURNAL

Issue 2 2024

ESTABLISHED 1783

## AUDREY TANG

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for Taiwan, where  
new technologies  
are being used  
to collaboratively  
define the  
future of AI



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**Courageous governance**  
Jude Buffum's cover portrait of Taiwan's first Digital Minister (and the world's first non-binary cabinet official), Audrey Tang, was created in pixel-art style.

**Jude Buffum**  
is an award-winning, Philadelphia-based illustrator and designer.



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Starting in 1783, the RSA published *Transactions of the Society*, which became *The Journal of the Society of Arts* in 1852 ('Royal' was added to the title in 1908). The publication assumed its current name, *RSA Journal*, in 1987.

Andy Haldane



# Escaping a democratic recession

**T**his century has seen the world tilt away from liberal democracy and towards more authoritarian regimes. Some have called this a 'democratic recession'. With around half the world's population going to the polls this year, some fear a further tilt away from democracy. Indeed, could we even find ourselves in democratic depression?

One of the key reasons for failing support for democracies is that, latterly, they have not boosted the living standards of large numbers of people. As global growth has slowed, it has particularly hit the poorest and youngest. The result is rising discontent, especially among the poor and young, at the political system delivering these outcomes.

One of the hallmarks of the RSA is its ability to take a long-term view. When it comes to political systems, that longer-lensed view is decidedly more optimistic. We are living in the first century in human history where liberal democracy is the dominant political regime globally. Viewed through the lens of history, we are close to the peak of a global democratic boom, not in recession.

We also know, looking at research over many years and many political regimes, that democracy is, on average, good for living standards. Democracies more effectively

allocate the scarce resources that make up an economy and support its citizens. The tilt away from democracy is a recipe for slower growth, not faster. A democratic recession makes an economic one more likely.

Another lesson of history is that democracy is malleable. Given the risks facing democracy, this issue of the *Journal* considers some different flavours. In keeping with our theme

**“One of the hallmarks of the RSA is its ability to take a long-term view. When it comes to political systems, that longer-lensed view is decidedly more optimistic.”**

of courage, we highlight examples of 'courageous governance' from around the world.

Audrey Tang (until recently Taiwan's first Digital Minister) discusses the innovative ways in which Taiwan is using new technology to upgrade the democratic process. Her article demonstrates that, far from curbing agency and biasing decision-making, technology can improve the accuracy and legitimacy of the democratic process.

Jane Davidson, former Welsh Environment Minister, discusses a different type of democratic upgrade. The Well-being of Future Generations Act in Wales puts the interests of successor generations at the centre of decision-making — a bulwark against short-termism. It also gives environmental health as prominent a role as economic and social health in policy decisions.

The 'In conversation' interview with Eoin O'Malley and Vlad Afanasiev's article on metrics both consider the role of community-level governance. Afanasiev's work illustrates the added resilience and legitimacy that this can achieve. But O'Malley, who helped initiate the recent citizens' assemblies in Ireland, offers a cautionary note. While early assemblies were successful in shaping public opinion, more recent versions have not always mirrored society and have been rejected by the public.

This is clearly a pivotal year for democracy globally. Restoring it to health will require improvements, perhaps fundamental ones. I hope this issue of the *Journal* inspires Fellows to think, and to act, in ways that support those improvements. The stakes could scarcely be higher. ■

**Andy Haldane** is Chief Executive Officer at the RSA.

# Talent made visible



The Fellows Artists' Network (FAN) aims to raise the profile of the arts across society and the need to tap into ideas from fresh sources, encourage new work, increase access to different art forms and promote artistic work and ideas, particularly for under-represented voices in the arts.

'Made Visible', an art and writing exhibition in the RSA's Vaults, was the result of a project by 2makeit, a charity using creativity to support the rehabilitation of offenders, in partnership with FAN and social enterprise Pictora.

Since 2021, 2makeit has been part of a project supporting men who have experienced the prison system and who are screened into the Personality Disorder Pathway via the NHS and HM Prison and Probation Service. The provision includes one-to-one professional advice and support, a safe place to meet and complementary music and

Above and right: two artworks featured in the 'Made Visible' exhibition

arts activities by 2makeit to promote wellbeing and build the relationships which can reduce the risk of reoffending. Art from the project led to the exhibition, which brought artists together from any background, including those who suffer from labels that may hold them back (eg 'homeless', 'offender' or 'unemployed'),



and exhibited work without labels bringing out hidden talent to be... made visible. The exhibition included work by NHS, charity and probation staff, refugees, those experiencing mental health challenges, and those living in hostels and from prisons as far apart as Brixton and Inverness.

Hundreds visited the show, leaving excellent feedback. Most importantly, the exhibition had great impact and meaning for the service users of 2makeit and Pictora who contributed work and had the chance to see the show, one of whom wrote:

"Some of the images have stayed with me and I thought about them all evening — in one of them, I could see myself and my own struggles within a drawing and it blew my mind. The building was amazing — with all the masonry, paintings and distinguished visitors... it was so good to feel like everyone was there to appreciate the art, support each other and has made me want to start visiting galleries and feel more like it is ok for someone like me to go! It was one of the best afternoons I have had in a seriously long time!"

Such was the response that more exhibitions are in the pipeline. ■

**Andrew Darke**, FRSA is an artist, environmental activist and FAN co-leader.

**Philip Emery**, FRSA is Director of 2makeit and FAN co-leader.

**Mark Power**, FRSA is Director of MillsPower Architecture and FAN co-leader.

Photos: courtesy of 2makeit



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# NEW FELLOWS



**Chantal Coady**

Chantal Coady is a sustainable cocoa expert and founder of Rococo Chocolates. She has been pivotal in changing the UK chocolate scene, weaning people away from sugary confectionery to single estate dark chocolate. While working with the Grenada Chocolate Company, she was inspired to take a radically different approach, ‘tree to bar’: adding value all the way back to the place where it grows. In 2019, Chantal launched The Chocolate Detective, a business that works with cocoa farmers based in Grenada to highlight sustainable chocolate. Chantal is the first person to be awarded an OBE for ‘services to chocolate making’.



**Emma Wilson**

Emma Wilson is the Director of Technical, Production and Costume at the UK’s Royal Opera House, having previously served in the same role at Sadler’s Wells Theatre, prior to which she toured extensively worldwide. She has a PhD in the field of environmental politics and she is particularly committed to sustainability in theatre production, working on steering and advisory bodies in the UK and Europe-wide. Her other interests in theatre include safety in the workplace, opportunities for young people and workplace diversity. She was awarded an MBE for services to the performing arts in the 2024 New Year Honours.



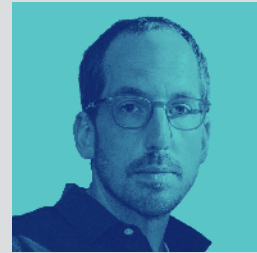
**Charles Ebikeme**

Charles Ebikeme is an academic, researcher and writer, currently working on the intersection of climate change and health. He received his PhD in parasitology from the University of Glasgow, focusing on understanding how drugs work against parasites and how parasites become resistant to drugs. As an independent freelance consultant, he has worked with organisations such as the World Health Organization and Wellcome Trust and is a Visiting Fellow at the United Nations University International Institute for Global Health. He is the recipient of the 2024 Health Innovation Fellowship from the International Center for Journalists.



**Jane Setter**

Jane Setter is Professor of Phonetics at the University of Reading. Best known as co-editor of the *Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary*, she is also the author of the public-facing *Your Voice Speaks Volumes: It’s Not What You Say But How You Say It* and co-author of *Hong Kong English*. Her research publications are mainly in speech prosody, investigating pronunciation and phonology in Global Englishes and in children with speech and language differences. Jane is a National Teaching Fellow of UK Advance HE, a trustee of the English-Speaking Union and an advocate of public engagement with research.



**Christoph Niemann**

Christoph Niemann is an artist, author and animator. His work appears regularly on the covers of *The New Yorker*, *National Geographic* and *The New York Times Magazine*, and has been subject to numerous museum retrospectives. He has drawn live from the Venice Art Biennale and the Olympic Games and has sketched the New York City Marathon — while running it. A member of Alliance Graphique Internationale, in 2010 Christoph was inducted into the Art Directors Club Hall of Fame. He is the author of several books, including, most recently, *Zoo*, and a co-creator of children’s apps ‘Petting Zoo’ and ‘Chomp’.

Photo: Gene Glover for Christoph Niemann



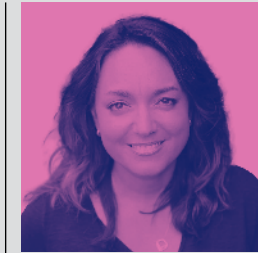
**Nigel Dunnett**

Nigel Dunnett is Professor of Planting Design, Vegetation Technology and Urban Horticulture at the University of Sheffield and Director of Nigel Dunnett Studio. One of the world’s leading voices on planting design, he is a pioneer of the new ecological approach to planting public spaces. His work revolves around the integration of ecology and horticulture to achieve low-input, high-impact landscapes. His approach is based on decades of detailed experimental work and widespread application in practice (including planting schemes for the Barbican and London Olympic Park) and has been widely applied in the UK and abroad.



**Laura François**

Laura François is a Canadian impact strategist and Director of Awe Exchange, a non-profit lab building a case for the emotion of awe in systems change work. Previously, she co-founded The Spaceship, supporting social entrepreneurship education, and led nonprofits including Fashion Revolution Malaysia and Singapore, advancing circular production and ethical labour. She now mentors start-ups on impact storytelling at Fashion for Good. Alongside her awe-based impact strategy work, Laura is editing her first book, *Reload.Earth*, which explores creativity as a renewable resource for changemakers aiming to reimagine sustainable systems.



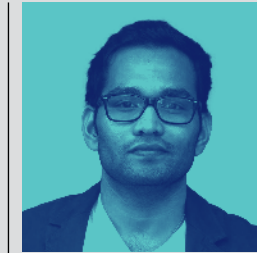
**Melissa Thom**

Melissa Thom is a voice actor who founded BRAVA (Bristol Academy of Voice Acting) to provide training for creative professionals wishing to add voice acting to their skillset. BRAVA Business, aimed at improving communication skills in the workplace and beyond, launched in 2024. Melissa hosts BRAVA’s *High Notes* podcast, featuring conversations on the art and business of voice. She is also a judge for the ARIAS, the UK’s audio and radio awards, and a Women in Games Ambassador. Her voiceover clients have included Rockstar Games (GTAV), Zenimax (Elder Scrolls), Amazon, Google, Facebook, Twitter, Unicef and LL COOL J.



**Chris Houston**

Chris Houston is co-founder and presides over the newly established Canadian Peace Museum in Ontario, which will open to the public in 2025. He is currently Principal Consultant for Humanitarian Associates, in which role he advises innovators and funders on scaling up innovations and programming. Chris previously served as head of logistics for the World Health Organization in Yemen and worked with Médecins Sans Frontières and the Red Cross across Asia, Africa and the Middle East. He is faculty at the University of Toronto’s Global Health Education Initiative and an editor of the *Oxford Handbook of Humanitarian Medicine*.



**Manideep Yenugula**

Manideep Yenugula is the Performance and Monitoring Engineer for The Chickasaw Nation (a federally recognised Native American tribe in the US) in Dallas, Texas. A subject matter expert in performance and monitoring engineering, he excels in leveraging cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, internet of things and deep learning across the IT landscape. He is also a mentor and coach and has authored numerous scientific papers on topics around AI and performance and sustainable cloud computing.

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# DEMOCRACY IN PLAY!!!

START  
GAME!

The ‘Taiwan Model’ offers a playbook for using safe, sustainable and citizen-led AI to revitalise societies worldwide

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Words:  
Audrey Tang

Illustrations:  
Jude Buffum

**G**lobal economic and security instability is placing our free and open societies under tremendous pressure. Not since the 1930s, when the Great Depression and civil turmoil dominated a decade of darkness leading up to World War II, have governments faced such uncertainty. Extremism, isolation, polarisation and populism — amplified by social media and the 24/7 news cycle — are reshaping the geopolitical landscape in ways favourable to authoritarian regimes.

With India and the US, the world's largest democracy and economy, respectively, going to the polls in 2024 — along with nearly 40 other countries such as Taiwan, Indonesia, Mexico and Pakistan — there is not a moment to waste in recognising the misuse of artificial intelligence (AI) in amplifying election-related risks via deepfake videos, echo chambers, micro-targeting and undermining information integrity. Indeed, these tools and tactics are already being used in attempts to sway opinions and create confusion.

What is needed is the collective courage to wrest back control of the narrative by reinvigorating democracy, as well as restoring faith in our democratic institutions and rules-based order. Co-creation is increasingly seen by the public, private and civic sectors as the best means of paving the way for humankind through the 21st century and beyond.

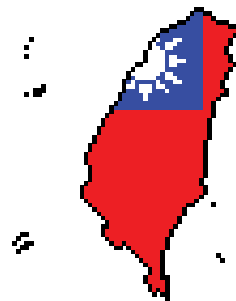
The people must be given a fighting chance to understand how AI systems reply to political questions, the role of model developers in shaping replies, whether models are biased and the meaning of outputs. We cannot ignore the fact that lowering the cost of political persuasion threatens to negatively impact the electoral landscape, exacerbating existing divides and creating different information ecosystems.

### DOUBLING DOWN ON DEMOCRACY

I am proud to share that Taiwan was quick out of the ballot box blocks in January this year with smoothly staged presidential and legislative elections — despite insidious efforts of bad actors to sow the seeds of division and discord. The people demonstrated that free and fair voting is the ideal antidote for the ills of authoritarianism. They also showed the world what can be achieved through a whole-of-society commitment to doubling down on democracy.

The Ministry of Digital Affairs, or 'the moda', cooperated closely with other Taiwan ministries and agencies to heighten vigilance in the lead-up to the elections. This was essential given the number of cyberattacks against Taiwan increased more than six times year-on-year and more than 33 times compared to the same quarter in 2022, according to US IT company Cloudflare. The reality is Taiwan faces more and more cyberthreats by the day, with over 40% categorised as intrusion attacks.

Stable operation of critical infrastructure and key websites was ensured by the moda through



TAIWAN

drills and tests, safeguarding systems and establishing a 24/7 rapid response team. Each distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack was logged, analysed and acted upon. This approach, complemented by frontline monitoring, proved effective, as evidenced by the 22% drop in DDoS incidents compared to 2022.

Anticipatory debunking, or pre-bunking, was another secret of Taiwan's success. Cofacts, a crowdsourced platform set up by gov (gov-zero) — a decentralised civic tech community enshrining core values such as cooperation, information transparency and open results — played a central role in ensuring the integrity of online information.

Malicious and innocent reports alike were studied and assessed on the basis of accuracy and persuasiveness. With the assistance of community-trained AI systems, the results were quickly released, allowing the people to make informed judgements on the veracity of content. As a responsible member of the international community, Taiwan leads in sharing its democracy-related experience and know-how. This approach centres on giving back while engaging with like-minded partners. It plays an important part in ensuring that this island of resilience and its 23 million freedom- and democracy-loving people can contribute meaningfully to tackling issues of global significance.

### GOVERNING AI

Safe and sustainable development of AI systems is one of the many areas in which Taiwan can help. AI systems are machine-based; for explicit or implicit objectives they infer from the input received how to generate outputs such as content, predictions, recommendations or decisions influencing physical and virtual environments. Levels of adaptiveness and autonomy among AI systems vary after deployment.

Global governance of AI systems must be a race to safety, not a race to power. A democratic approach — as opposed to a technocratic one — is the optimal answer for what is an ethical, political and societal conundrum. This encapsulates my

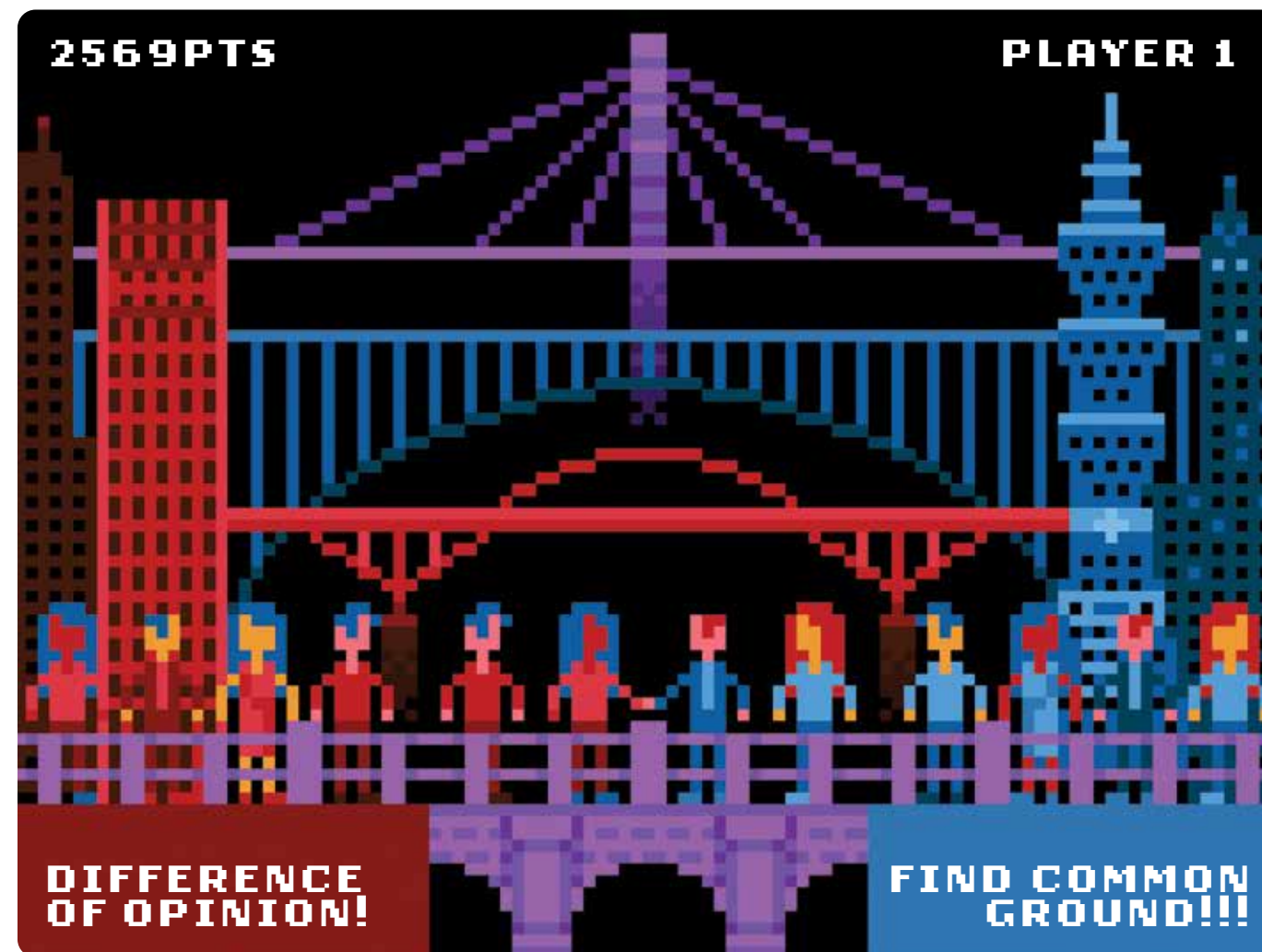
personal mantra of 'deep listening and taking all sides', recognising that intelligence stems from the mind and spaces between people.

To this end, the moda has advanced Alignment Assemblies with the Collective Intelligence Project (CIP) and world-class partners such as Anthropic, OpenAI, The GovLab and GETTING-Plurality research network. Everyday citizens are invited to co-govern AI in the context of information integrity: protecting users from harm; detecting

Below: Audrey Tang, Taiwan's first Digital Minister



Photo: BY-NC-SA 4.0 Kaili Chiang, Ksuperksu / iStock



and labelling AI content; requiring digital signatures for advertisers; making AI systems transparent; implementing citizen oversight of fact-checking; and ongoing monitoring of AI incidents.

The genesis of this deliberation lies in vTaiwan, an online-offline consultation bringing together government agencies and ministries, as well as academics, business leaders, civil society organisations, citizens, experts and lawmakers. Supported by a selection of collaborative open-source engagement tools, the 2014-launched process enables stakeholders to freely and openly exchange opinions on formulating or revising legislation.

### BUILDING CONSENSUS

At the heart of vTaiwan is Polis. This real-time system gathers, analyses, interprets and visually maps in clusters of consensus what large groups of participants think. It is used to address a host of important but generally under-the-radar issues such as copyright, bias and discrimination, due compensation, fair use, public service and broader societal impacts. Its allure lies in a simple yet profound design: people naturally gravitate towards finding common ground, rather than delving into divisive issues.

Above: global governance of AI systems will take consensus

An innovative aspect of Polis is the absence of a reply button. If participants can propose ideas and comments without going back and forth on trivia, it tends to eliminate the troll factor. This produces a value-added result as the focus is on expressing ideas that will garner support from both sides of a divide. Gaps are naturally narrowed by not wasting time on off-piste statements.

In Taiwan, Alignment Assemblies are already laying the foundations for consensus among the people regarding global governance of AI systems, while addressing common challenges and concerns collectively. Through the 111 SMS number, hundreds of thousands of randomly selected citizens were invited by the moda in March this year to co-create guidelines for AI evaluation in the context of information integrity. (111 was set up by the moda to serve as a trustworthy source of government information, reducing the risk of SMS fraud and further strengthening digital resilience.) ▶

“...intelligence stems from the mind and spaces between people”



The topics, pertaining to large platforms and serving as a roadmap for policymakers, are: automatically detecting and labelling posts containing AI-generated content; notifying users exposed to falsehoods post facto and providing them with context; assigning a unique anonymous digital ID to each user to ensure content provenance and accountability; ensuring system transparency; implementing citizen oversight and independent evaluation of fact-checking mechanisms; including information integrity as a criterion for AI model standards; and assessing the effectiveness of information analysis and recognition tools in AI products and systems through generative AI labelling functionality.

This deliberation is enhancing societal resilience, ensuring the people have the capacity to understand and direct the role of AI systems in daily life. After all, innovation comes from co-creation among

**“Governments should employ inclusion and radical transparency”**

**Above: in Taiwan, ballots are counted manually. Each ballot is held up and read aloud**

unlikely collaborators, and governments should employ inclusion and radical transparency in trusting the people.

**COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE**

The March deliberation springboarded off a moda-CIP Alignment Assembly in 2023. The online component and two in-person deliberative workshops took place in Taipei and Tainan cities. Also known as ‘Ideathons’, the events are a way of promoting the future development of Taiwan’s digital industry. They allow everyone to imagine life in the future. The objective is to gather a collection of innovative ideas from the people and, in the spirit of open government, build on them to influence policy formulation and promote industrial development.

It was found that the people want to empower workers to develop their skill sets and upgrade AI competence across all sectors. Notably, they want the public sector to play a pioneering role in fine-tuning and deploying local AI. For all intents and purposes, unnecessary trade-offs between the rapidity of rollout and safety are unacceptable when it comes to transformative technologies. Progress can only be achieved when they are

grounded in participation: to build AI for the people, with the people.

Leveraging society’s collective intelligence is the best way of obtaining more accurate determinations of how AI is impacting the world. A diverse group of people — builders, everyday people, experts and policymakers in many different fields — feeding into decisions about such consequential technology is vital for making the right decisions. We must never lose sight of the fact we can learn from one another.

**RISK RESPONSE — AND RESPONSIBILITY**

Another priority area for global governance of AI systems is social media harms. Isolation and polarisation are symptoms of the absence of credibly neutral institutions in society. The moda is erecting bridges between users and social platforms by encouraging the latter to take greater responsibility for content. If a social platform in Taiwan is used to perpetuate scams, which are flagged and not taken down promptly resulting in financial loss, the parent company is liable for the damages suffered by the users. This re-internalises negative externalities, ensuring the company shares the burden of harms if it does not vet the harms.

The recently established AI Evaluation Center (AIEC) is an additional example of how the moda is supporting global governance of AI systems. As a jumping-off point for comprehensive evaluation of related risks, AIEC combines safety research and development with innovative mechanisms for collective decision-making. Before large-scale damage occurs, steps can be taken to prevent harm and, at the same time, let the people understand how to mitigate the risks in advance.

Alignment Assemblies can also be employed in adjudicating AI risks and harms. One of the most topical is the persuasive power of large language models (LLMs). Studies show that LLMs with access to personal information are far more effective in changing participant opinions than humans are. This opens the door to advancing false or misleading narratives online, particularly via micro-targeting. The legitimate course of action in this case is to recognise the perils of persuasiveness by assessing acceptability and risk tolerance.

Once an area of general risk is prioritised, and there are one or more high-quality evaluations for this area, the next step is to understand what to do in the case of various evaluation outcomes. In particular, it is critical to understand a proportionate response based on these results.

One option is to create a standing panel, starting with domain experts in relevant areas, that can be asked to adjudicate on a severity score for particular evaluation results. This severity score should give a sense of what actions would be proportionate. The adjudication processes can also be recorded in detail, to create a precedent for these rulings, which

**Scan the QR code to learn more about Audrey Tang's vision for the future of collaborative technology and democracy**



can be abstracted into general criteria. This can also take place in an international body, such as the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Power to shape a shared vision of AI should not be exclusive to a handful of companies or economies. Collective intelligence processes democratise knowledge and serve as a powerful catalyst for bolstering mutual understanding. When the public witnesses the fruits of collaboration, it sparks a surge in co-creation, innovation and stakeholder engagement. This virtuous cycle is key to revitalising democracy, ensuring we leave no one behind in tackling emerging challenges to our societies and communities.

**THE TAIWAN MODEL**

In time, Taiwan-facilitated AI norms shall become part of the gold standard, further advancing the country’s standing as a trusted and reliable partner. Global governance of AI systems must not hinge on the unilateral decisions of a few companies reflecting the views of specific groups. It is necessary for cross-sector stakeholders to work collaboratively, so the result can be relied upon in total confidence by every member of the family of nations.

The Taiwan Model, which is an amalgam of the aforementioned approaches and pillars, recognises AI systems as a force for good. It also uncovers opinions and perspectives on an array of issues with the end goals of promoting transparency and moving beyond division to create consensus. The answer lies in ‘Plurality’, or technologies for collaborative diversity, to increase the bandwidth of democracy.

Our mission is to send a strong message that hope is possible and all is not lost when it comes to forging a fresh outlook on the global governance of AI systems. Opportunities can be capitalised upon, and risks mitigated, if the people are given the chance to participate in policymaking processes and, by extension, strengthen societal cohesion.

The clock is ticking on charting a safe, sustainable and viable course for the global governance of AI systems. By dialling up the chorus of voices, as well as harnessing the synergy of the Taiwan

**Below: Lai Ching-te of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) — winner of the 2024 Taiwanese presidential election**



Model for the collective good, the world can mitigate risks and maximise benefits. Let us muster up the courage to make 2024 a year of the democratic bounce back and free the future — together. ■

**Audrey Tang** is a passionate Pluralista who served as Taiwan’s first Digital Minister.

**Jude Buffum** is an award-winning designer and illustrator from Philadelphia.

Photo: Jameson Wu / Alamy Stock Photo



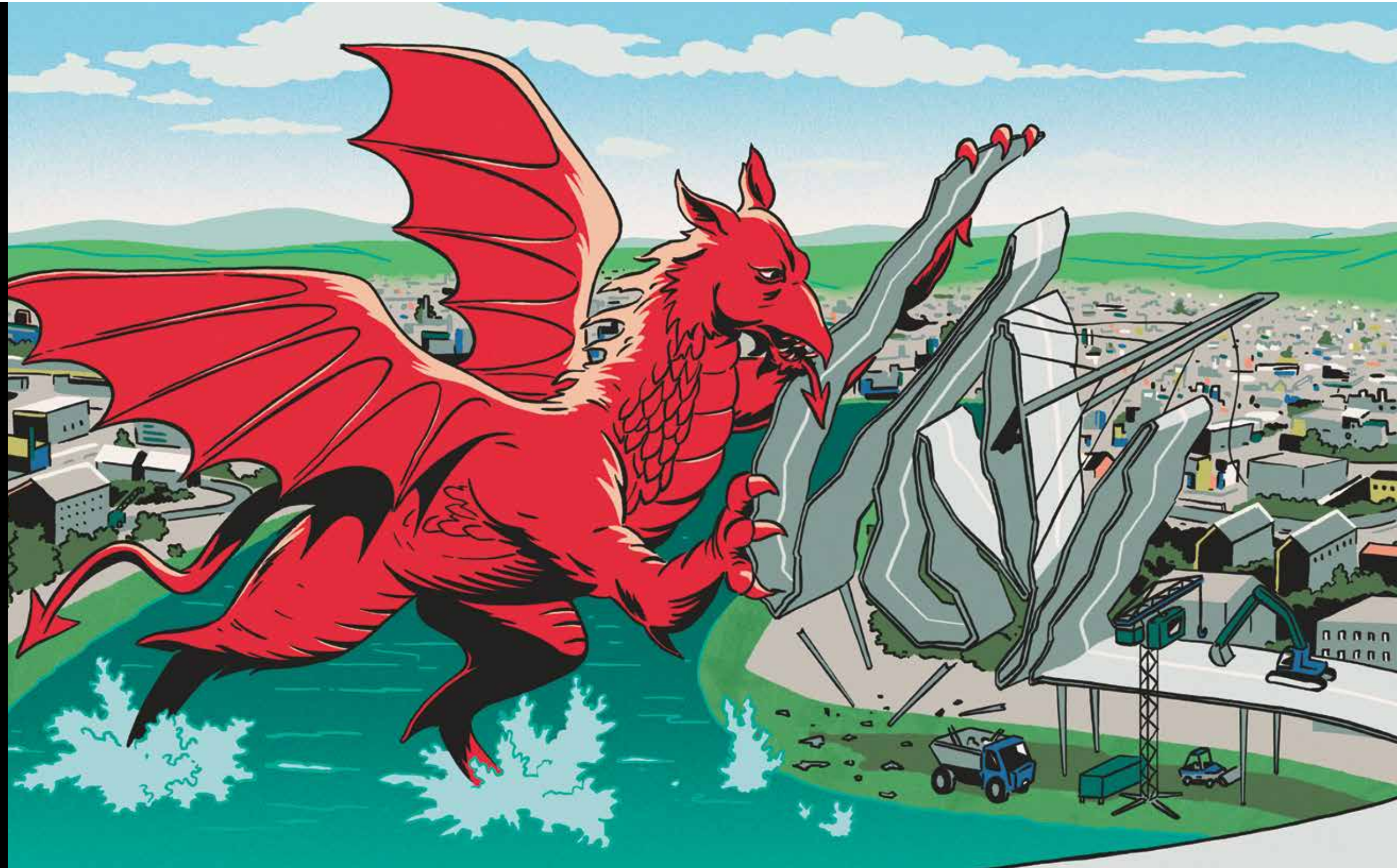
# THE WELSH WAY

Almost a decade on from its passage, the Well-being of Future Generations Act is a testament to the power of courage in good governance

Words: Jane Davidson Illustrations: Calum Heath

“Do unto future generations what you would have had past generations do unto you”

John Rawls



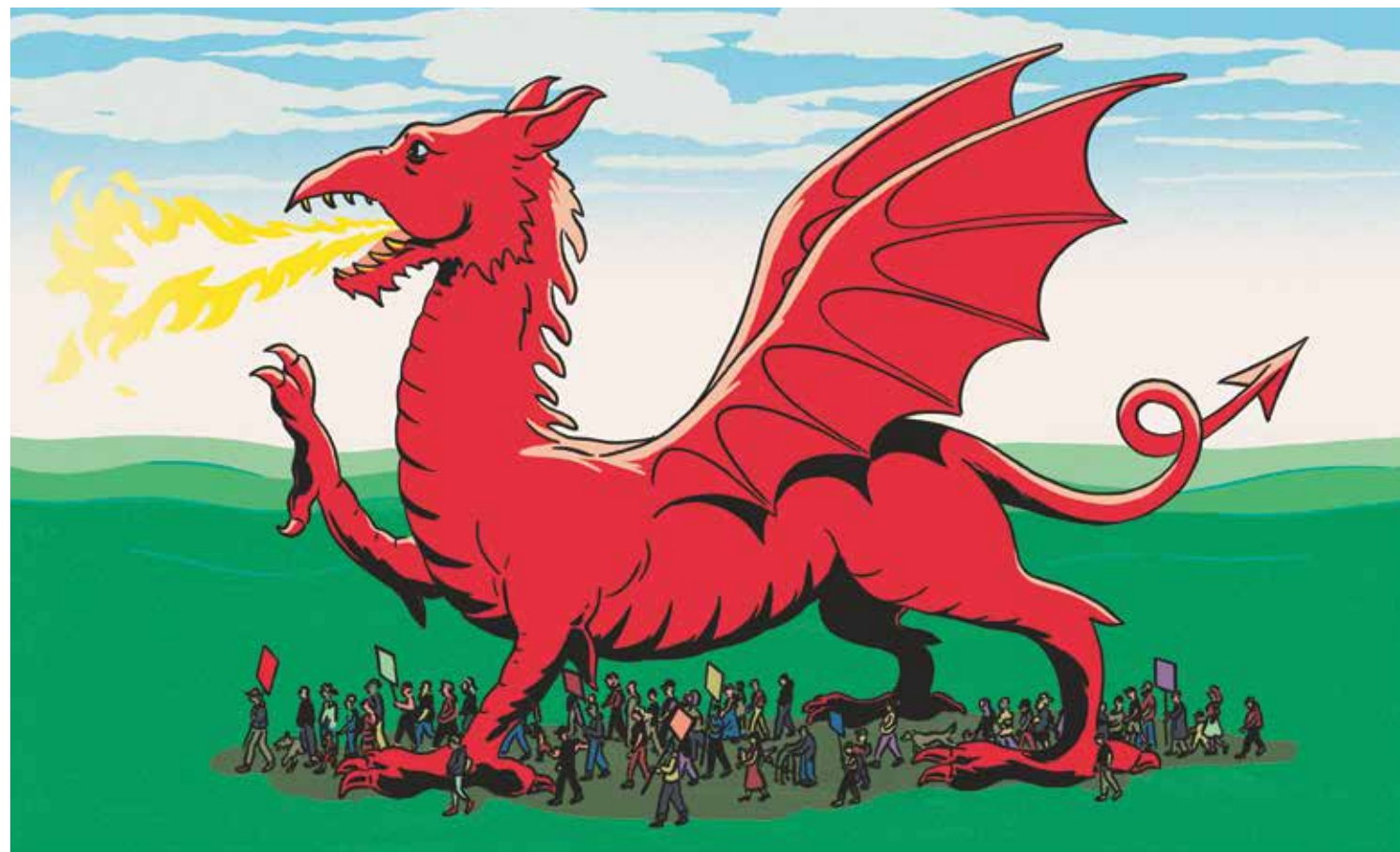
I've spent most of my working life trying to understand why organisations, including governments, take bad decisions. By 'bad' I mean contrary to the factual evidence. We are seeing record ice reduction in the Arctic and Antarctic, record temperatures, record rainfall, record floods and droughts. In response, you would expect public bodies to be calculating risks, making plans to keep communities safe, prioritising spending to mitigate, and adapt to, the current and future situation. Most importantly, you would expect governments to be doing 'whatever it takes' — a well-used political trope — to look after their populations.

But, in fact, the silence on the actions needed is deafening. Somehow, the actions needed are too brave, and the protagonists too fearful of the consequences, to act. We've never needed courage to challenge the system more.

#### Charting a bolder path

And what is courage? From the French *coeur*, meaning heart ('as the seat of emotions', and 'spirit, temperament, state or frame of mind'), the new type of courage we need now is cultivated in the heart, forged and strengthened by us laying down our differences and connecting to each other through love: love for this amazing single planet of ours, love for nature (including humankind), love for our babies and theirs, and theirs yet to come.

Perhaps we need to change the culture of 'how' we take our decisions? Instead of focusing on 'what' needs to be done, perhaps we should focus on 'how' to achieve the 'what'? After all, good processes are integral



### “It shouldn't be considered courageous to promote the idea of a liveable world for current and future generations”

to good outcomes. The challenge lies in reframing our mindset and governance models to enable bold, evidence-based actions. It shouldn't be considered courageous to promote the idea of a liveable world for current and future generations, but it is. It is a reboot; a big step change away from how decisions are usually taken. If, in our current paradigm, we won't take decisions commensurate with the evidence, how can we factor in generations yet to come?

#### Leading the way

Wales has become an unlikely world leader in this space. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 is the first and still perhaps the only legislation in the world that provides a legal basis to deliver on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Based on the Brundtland definition of sustainable development, 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising on the ability of future generations to meet their own needs', the Act aims to protect the rights of future generations alongside current generations in everything the Welsh government and its public services deliver.

The Act is structured as a governance framework. On the face of the Act are seven clear goals — the 'what' organisations are required to achieve — but also five ways of

working: the 'how' Welsh public services are required to deliver. Unusually, the Act includes the Welsh government itself: all are required to think long term, to act preventatively, to collaborate with others, to integrate their outcomes and, very importantly, to involve those about whom decisions are being made. Significantly, the Welsh government does not mark its own homework: there is an independent Future Generations' Commissioner and the Welsh Auditor General to apply external pressure, as ultimately can the courts.

What difference has the Act made? In simple terms, it is a value system which enables decision makers to be more confident about the actions they propose. Individual actions, such as turning down a new motorway in favour of valuing nature or making 20mph the default speed limit in residential areas, are newsworthy only because they challenge the norm. Banning the smacking of children and running a universal basic income pilot with teenagers

leaving the care system are responses to poor outcomes for children, which have remained resistant to the usual measures. What we are already seeing, in the nine years the Act has been in place, is how these decisions are now part of a logical framework where economic, cultural, societal and environmental decisions are part of a whole new philosophy. My own role as Chair of Wales Net Zero 2035 is about how we can accelerate climate responses in Wales in fair, just and nature positive ways. This work would not have happened without the Well-being of Future Generations Act. Interestingly, many other countries across the world are looking seriously at this governance approach, not least to deliver on their SDG obligations by 2030.

#### Better, braver governance

What is good governance? Dr Victoria Hurth from the Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership recently said: "Governance, simply put, is how we make decisions around here." If we want to promote 'good governance' we would want to govern well, and that should be how we make decisions around here.

How do we encourage courageous governance in the interests of all species? As it is the government which sets the tone and the agenda in a democracy, good governance and decision-making can help foster trust where culture wars and short-term decisions have festered division. How do we put our arms around those who are acting in accordance with the science and support them on their journey — when some governments are becoming increasingly draconian about anyone who challenges their actions? How can we turn this moment into a movement for change?

So, when I talk about courageous governance, I'm not talking about the old, rigid governance systems that measure without values, without heart. I'm talking about new governance models that can help us to deliver against new outcomes, with head, hand and heart, and urgently. New flexible systems, with processes designed to enable

innovative solutions. We should make space for solutions to emerge and the models must be inclusive, able to listen to what's emerging from different places at different levels.

My fundamental argument is that 'good' governance can yet save us all. And I use the word 'good' deliberately. Some will see governance as an unlikely saviour, particularly those who have spent their lives in thrall to a bureaucratic mechanism that takes time and effort but delivers no benefit. We are in new territory now. The Earth has revolted, and each storm, fire, drought and flood that overwhelms and claims the lives of people somewhere on this single precious globe of ours is part of a bigger picture. The challenges ahead are huge, complex and systemic, but we hold the solutions in our hands if we are brave enough, courageous enough, to execute them. In the interests of current and future generations, we cannot fail.

The RSA has a proud history of being at the forefront of significant social impact for 270 years, with its unique global network of changemakers who work collectively to enable people, places and the planet to flourish in harmony. Its most recent Design for Life programme explicitly recognises the importance of the natural world for all our futures. I believe now is the time, and the RSA is the global organisation best placed, to collaborate widely with others to set up a Courageous Governance Commission to help, inform and support governments and organisations to foster a liveable planet for another 270 years. ■

**With thanks to Anna Nicholl, Maria O'Connor, Simon Milton and Andrew Corbett-Nolan, and to all those who responded to my LinkedIn challenge with their thoughts.**

**Jane Davidson** is a former Welsh Minister for Environment, Sustainability and Housing. She is also an author and environmental activist and previously chaired the RSA in Wales.

**Calum Heath** is a UK-based illustrator who counts *The New Yorker*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Vice*, *Politico EU* and *Wired* among his many clients.

#### Recommended reading

**Jane Davidson's #futuregen: Lessons From a Small Country** tells the story of how Wales became the first country to put sustainable practices at the heart of government decision-making to protect future generations, exploring how and why this groundbreaking legislation was forged in Wales.

# BOOKS

What RSA Fellows and staff are reading



## Wandering Stars

Tommy Orange

Reviewed by  
Anna Markland

Tommy Orange's second novel effortlessly traces

a family's path from the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864 to post-Covid Oakland, California. A cast of unique characters, each with a distinct voice, explores what identity, authenticity and legacy mean when your culture is actively being erased. These individual narratives are also often intertwined with stories of addiction, and exploration of the escape and control it promises.

To help us make sense of this alienation and longing for connection, the reader gets to 'listen in' on deeply personal conversations — from a mother sharing a moment of hope with her unborn child, to an adoptive father trying to bond over a DNA test, to the internal monologue of Richard Pratt, a prison warden and pioneer of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School (one of the first off-reservation 'Indian boarding schools'). The author juxtaposes historic and modern-day attempts at eradication of Native American cultures, with the Indian boarding schools of the 19th and 20th centuries set against the opioid epidemic's effect on Native American young people today.

Orange has an incredible gift for making historic context feel truly alive — inviting us to grapple with potential blind spots in the well-meaning intentions of white liberals today, as well as demonstrating an approach to how we might sit with our own intergenerational history.

Anna Markland is the RSA's Head of Innovation and Change.



## Who's Afraid of Gender?

Judith Butler

Reviewed by  
Victoria Kinkaid

This book takes you on a journey

of how the anti-gender movement is growing and galvanising support worldwide, targeting not only gender rights but reproductive rights and equality for women.

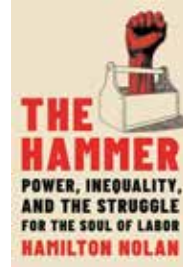
Butler explores the anti-gender views of some of the most powerful organisations in the world to draw our attention to how sex and gender is becoming more politicised and restricted.

I found this book very academic and therefore quite a tough read. I think the language and concepts were quite complex, making it less accessible to the average reader.

Overall, however, it is a fascinating book and really made me think critically about how the word 'gender' has been harnessed by anti-gender institutions who seek to restrict the freedoms of multiple groups, including women. It also lays out the importance of feminists not being divided by their views on gender, and instead forming a strong coalition against the degradation of gender rights.

The book is a critical plea and call to arms for the world to wake up and see the attack on gender and how it will impact children's education, trans healthcare and access to essential reproductive services. From it, I will take away the importance of reading both sides of the arguments and exploring texts from people whom you perhaps disagree with in order to allow you to make an informed counter argument.

Victoria Kinkaid is an army doctor and a co-founder of The FGM Education Project.



## The Hammer: Power, Inequality, and the Struggle for the Soul of Labor

Hamilton Nolan

Reviewed by  
Heather MacRae

This book, which explores the evolution of the American labour movement, often feels like three books in one.

The first includes case studies of unions such as United Food. These are brought to life by emotionally loaded insights into the various grassroots organisers advocating for better pay, working conditions and health insurance. The second 'flies the flag', championing American union leader, Sara Nelson, the international president of the Association of Flight Attendants – CWA, AFL-CIO. The third, and final, theme challenges readers who "get pissed at your jerk boss, at your too low salary, at incessant and unreasonable demands" to join a union.

This is probably one of the most strident books I have read — and I would have given up after the first chapter if I hadn't been asked to review it. My determination to read to the end, though, rewarded me with a unique view of America, as Nolan takes great pains to detail not just the lifestyles but the hair — and even the pet dogs — of the activists he champions. And I enjoyed descriptive rants such as: "Las Vegas is... a pulsing, neon-drenched magnet of excess set in a parched desert valley... an abomination against sustainability, good taste, and common sense."

Heather MacRae is Chief Executive of the Ideas Foundation.



## Our Moon

Rebecca Boyle

Reviewed by  
Jolyon Miles-Wilson

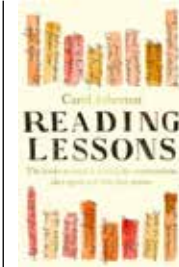
We know the moon — that silent observer, ever-

present. But how well do we really know it? Reading this book is a mind-expanding experience. It begins — as all good stories do — at the beginning, with how the moon came to be. From there, we embark on an epic journey of knowledge, stopping at the momentous milestones of our shared history: the evolution of life from the sea, the creation and control of time, the advent of civilisation, the mathematics of the stars and the day the moon first pulled a human to its surface.

Boyle takes us through cosmic and Earthly history, from the dramatic and violent origin story of Earth and our moon to the Apollo missions and the pieces of moon we brought back, all the way recounting the unique, intimate and consequential relationship between our planet and its silvery satellite.

This book is a captivating read. Expertly weaving learnings from astronomy, archaeology, classical and contemporary history, evolutionary biology, psychology and more (and introducing us to a colourful cast of characters along the way). It informs, but also inspires. For all the wisdom she imparts, Boyle preserves the sense of mystery and mysticism that our ancestors must have felt when they looked up at our ethereal companion.

Jolyon Miles-Wilson is Senior Quantitative Researcher at the RSA.



## Reading Lessons: The books we read at school, the conversations they spark and why they matter

Carol Atherton

Reviewed by  
Nia D Thomas

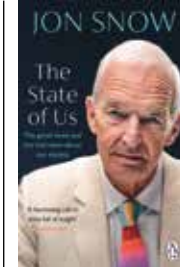
This book explores the English literature texts that children and young people are taught across the country — their meanings, underlying messages and the discussions they elicit in the classroom. It is beautifully written and has a unique format, as each chapter is structured as an English literature lesson, with the teacher's notes included.

I read *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller in school over 30 years ago; I remember thinking it was boring, mundane and uninspiring. But reading Atherton's commentary about the story hidden between the lines of the play's dialogue was enlightening.

Reading the chapter dissecting Dicken's *Great Expectations* evoked the same sense of immersion I had while reading it, enriched by Atherton's stories of her own experiences. I loved the quotes she included from children, who shared their thoughts on the story's bleak and twisting journey and colourful characters. Out of the mouths of babes tumble the wisest words!

Whether you're a lover of literature or didn't 'get' these books at school, revisiting them through Atherton's eyes is a real joy, and to be guided by someone as proficient as she is an absolute privilege.

Nia D Thomas is a doctor of self-aware leadership and director of a children's charity.



## The State of Us

John Snow

Reviewed by  
Mike Findlay-Agnew

Anyone watching Channel 4 News between the late

1980s and 2021 will be familiar with its former news presenter, Jon Snow, and his vast array of colourful ties.

His extensive career more than qualifies him to comment on the 'state of us' — and his book is a compelling read for anyone with an interest in modern day politics, how the media operates and the big issues we are facing in the UK today.

Snow eloquently describes his passion for supporting people who are often overlooked in society, particularly in education, employment and the media. It's wonderful that Snow, with his own acknowledged privileges in life, is writing reflectively about this.

I especially appreciated Snow's poignant commentary on the prevalence and persistence of poverty as the cause of much inequality in Britain. From the book's preface, which references recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation data on destitution, to his accounts of the lives lost in the Grenfell Tower fire, Snow both intellectualises and humanises what we are going through.

*The State of Us* has a good combination of facts, humour, self-deprecation and optimism. For anyone wanting a realistic account of the big issues of today from a familiar face, this is an excellent and accessible read.

Mike Findlay-Agnew is CEO of the International Network of Street Papers.



IN CONVERSATION

# “We might... design a process that would allow citizens to disagree with each other without necessarily hating each other”

Over a decade on from their genesis, one of the architects of Ireland's original citizens' assemblies speaks with **Andy Haldane** about lessons learnt

—  
Photos: Kevin Lake

**Andy Haldane:** We hear a lot now about democracy being under threat. Words like 'democratic recession', a re-tilting of the political playing field towards more populist or authoritarian regimes. What's your sense of that? How fragile are our democracies?

**Eoin O'Malley:** We can see in countries in the European Union — Hungary, for instance — that there is retrenchment from ordinary, working democracy. We can also see in opinion polling that younger generations are less attached to democracy. Millennials and Gen Zs declare that their attachment to democracy is not as strong, not as intrinsic, possibly because they don't believe that it's delivering for them in the way that it delivered for our generations. When I grew up, I perceived democracy as rock solid and something not up for grabs, not even open ▶

## “When I grew up, I perceived democracy as something rock solid and not up for grabs, not even open to debate”

to debate. It probably now looks like it is open to debate and weaker than I would have previously thought.

**Haldane:** How would ‘representative democracy’ differ from ‘deliberative democracy’?

**O’Malley:** Representative democracy is essentially us as citizens sending people to parliament to govern on our behalf. In a general sense, all democracy should be deliberative. We’d like to think that, in the House of Commons or the Cabinet Office, they are deliberating, thinking rationally, coming up with reasons for the decision.

When we talk about deliberative democracy, a lot of the time we’re thinking about ‘mini-publics’, where we take a random sample of people and ask them to think about a subject in an intense way. This gives us a sense of how ordinary people would think about an issue if they were exposed to different arguments, and if they were forced to deliberate, to talk with others who don’t hold the same views as them.

**Haldane:** Presumably, having a forum where different perspectives can be debated, deliberated, maybe consensus sought, would be particularly useful for issues where there are otherwise deep divisions or disagreements about what the right course might be.

**O’Malley:** Yes. It’s probably not an ideal method of making decisions for technical things, whereas if you have moral issues, where no one is right or wrong, we simply have different value judgements, a deliberative forum will be useful to air different perspectives. Hopefully then you can, if not achieve a consensus, at least achieve some sort of compromise or position where more people are happier than not.

Another way of thinking about it might be in terms of ‘losers’ consent’: that the people who lose the battle on that issue at least feel that they have been listened to, they consent to having lost and won’t bring it up again and again. The idea of losers’ consent is important in any form of democracy, that you have a group who maybe don’t win the majority, they don’t form a majority, but at least their position is respected and reflected in some ways in the outcome that’s been decided.



Scan the QR code to watch the expanded interview and others in our ‘In conversation’ series



**Haldane:** What were your reasons for setting up ‘We the Citizens’ in Ireland, and what was the model you had in mind?

**O’Malley:** It was in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, which affected Ireland more deeply than most other places. The political system had taken a bit of a battering. People started to think, how do these people who we’ve trusted for generations get it so badly wrong? We were going to have a situation where there was a potential for, not quite an uprising, but for a government having to introduce, say, tax increases or new charges, and there could have been civic upheaval in some way.

We were thinking, how do we prevent that from happening? What are the policies that will be acceptable to the people, what are the ones that won’t be acceptable, and how would we find out about this beyond just doing an opinion poll? A colleague had worked on introducing a new electoral system in Canada and they had used this idea of a citizens’ assembly. We got funding from a philanthropist, and tried out the ‘We the Citizens’ experiment, where we brought together about 100 people randomly for a weekend to think about difficult decisions where there are difficult trade-offs... should we introduce a property tax or not, or should we introduce water charges or not?

We got a sense that this was a worthwhile experience because you had ordinary citizens thinking about the trade-offs that were involved. It probably would make it easier for politicians to make those decisions knowing that, after a debate, ordinary people think this is acceptable. Or that, even after a debate, there is still no way they would want something like water charges, for instance.

**Haldane:** Not long after that, in 2015 and 2018, you convinced the government to embark on citizens’ assemblies on some big and contentious issues in Ireland around same-sex marriage and abortion. How did you get from your initial weekend away to these national issues being debated, first by citizens and then by referendum?

**O’Malley:** We got lucky to some extent, in that we had done this in 2010 and there was an election in 2011 where there was a new coalition government between a centre right Fine Gael and a centre left Labour Party, who both needed some way out of problems that they had in forming their coalition agreement. The Labour Party insisted on wanting to have something on same-sex marriage; Fine Gael was more conservative and didn’t want to do anything on that.

We arrived with a present, which they thought was an immediate way out of their

problem — they could just send it to a citizens’ assembly. There was a constitutional convention set up that considered about five or six different issues. Same-sex marriage was one of them. It was a fairly contentious issue, but not deeply, deeply contentious at the time. But you had different groups coming in, and there was this sense that in policymaking you get to hear people’s lived experiences and [those] came to the forefront.

You also had the different groups speaking to each other... they were forced to address each other. You got to tease out the potential difficulties that came to the fore. Politicians then were able to go back and say, “Okay, these are the issues that people have, these are the ones that aren’t really issues, and these are things that we probably should just leave alone, and these are the ones we can fire ahead on.”

**Haldane: That then paved the way for a referendum on the topic?**

**O’Malley:** Yes, it paved the way for the referendum on same-sex marriage, which then was passed very easily, even though in Ireland we still have that image of ourselves as a conservative Catholic country. That probably had been broken already, but there were still concerns among the political classes that the Church could suddenly rise up and make this difficult. It probably did help the political classes to see that we have nothing to fear from a referendum on this issue. And it was even more important in the abortion debate.

There was a deep division within our society about abortion, so much so that, for about 30 years, politicians had steered clear of the topic completely. The courts ended up having to do a lot of the policymaking with difficult cases and there was not a huge appetite among any group to deal with this issue. The idea of a citizens’ assembly was irresistible because it allowed politicians to stand back.

They set up a citizens’ assembly on abortion and it met over the course of almost a year. It heard from lots of different people and ended



up recommending a much more liberal regime than would have been expected. The Oireachtas, the Irish Parliament, repeated that exercise; they invited more or less the same people in front of a parliamentary committee and discussed it. And what you saw was that a lot of pretty conservative parliamentarians changed their minds, just as many pretty conservative citizens had changed their minds as a result of the citizens’ assembly.

It was then put to the people in a referendum. There were still a lot of people with strong opinions about it and there was a sense that the citizens’ [assembly] gave it that legitimacy. It probably helped it to some extent in passing the referendum, but the most important thing that it did was that it steeled politicians. They felt able to talk about the topic and were able to anticipate what people’s objections would be.

## “If you are going to do a citizens’ assembly, you need to have hard questions”

**Haldane:** So, two referendums on contentious issues went the way of the citizens’ assemblies. But more recent experience has produced a very different outcome. [*Two referendums on proposals to modernise wording in the Irish constitution — on the family and the role of women — were heavily defeated despite being supported by an earlier citizens’ assembly on gender equality* - Ed.]

**O’Malley:** Even though we can argue that they worked pretty well in demonstrating the debates about same-sex marriage and abortion, one of the things we did find out in We the Citizens was that processes are easy to manipulate. The same thing happened in the more recent citizens’ assembly on gender equality.

People, when they hear experts, tend to agree with them — so if they don’t hear strongly opposing views, they will just go with whatever the experts say. One of the things we need to do with a citizens’ assembly is have a specific question, a difficult question and one where people’s values might differ somewhat.

Gender equality was neither specific nor difficult. We had in the Irish constitution an old-fashioned clause which said mothers in the home provide great service to the state and to the family, and so their position should be supported by the state. A lot of people, not unreasonably, found that sexist and archaic and wanted to have it removed. The gender equality citizens’ assembly, however, didn’t get into the arguments for and against. You could, for instance, make reasonable arguments that marriage as an institution supports children and is something that the state should support. But none of those views were heard because the experts were all of one opinion.

Equally, we could see the same on the issue of childcare. You could reasonably argue that children benefit from having one parent staying at home. There are arguments for and against whether we’d be better off with families that had one parent working and one parent staying at home rather than two parents working. That issue wasn’t addressed.

The outcome of this citizens’ assembly was a wish list of nice things that we could have and the government should fund. Citizens’ assemblies should ask participants to confront difficult questions, questions that policymakers have to confront where you have real trade-offs. None

of those trade-offs were asked of the citizens in this. They produced 80 or 90 recommendations, which all required more money. Everybody was in favour of them. So, if you are going to do a citizens’ assembly, you need to have hard questions.

**Haldane: What would your advice be to the Irish government today about whether to keep on going with citizens’ assemblies?**

**O’Malley:** In the Irish government the enthusiasm has ebbed away, mainly because of the experience in the most recent referendums on marriage and the family. There is a sense that citizens’ assemblies aren’t quite the panacea that everybody said they were. My advice to the Irish government would be, if you’re going to do it, make sure it’s specific, that there are difficult choices, and that you’re hearing both sides of the argument. There probably aren’t that many issues that are going to work for that. There are problems when it becomes almost as if [the citizens’ assemblies] are legitimate in and of themselves.

**Haldane: We started off talking about the fragility of our democracies. One of the values of the RSA is optimism about the future, so how do we act with courage to strengthen our democracies to avoid those fragilities?**

**O’Malley:** If we think about what some of the weaknesses are a lot of them come from online misinformation and disinformation. We might use a deliberative process in a way that could enable people instead of creating echo chambers, or design a process that would allow citizens to talk to each other and disagree with each other without necessarily hating each other. I think deliberative democracy can teach us some things about that, and we can see that digital democracy enables us to scale up to allow lots of people to have a voice.

We should be able to think about how we can go from 100 people in the room, how we could scale it up digitally to allow 100,000 people or 1 million people to talk to each other in some way that enables them to see the other side’s perspective and the perspective of the politician making difficult choices. ■

**Eoin O’Malley** is an Associate Professor in politics at the School of Law and Government at Dublin City University and a regular columnist for the *Irish Independent*.

**Andy Haldane** is Chief Executive Officer at the RSA.

**Kevin Lake** is a UK-based photographer who specialises in reportage, street photography and documentary-style portraiture.

### Recommended reading

“Something I enjoyed recently is *Under the Influence: Putting Peer Pressure to Work* by economist Robert Frank. He teases out the implications of the insight that people are heavily influenced by what others around us do, thinking about how we can create benign social environments that foster pro-social behaviour.” **Eoin O’Malley**

# Measure of success

A new approach to metrics is bridging the gap between scientific measurement and human experience, strengthening civic participation, and laying out a path to thrive through adversity

**Words:**  
Vlad Afanasiev

**Illustrations:**  
Graham Samuels

What's the first thing that comes to mind when we think about governance response to unfolding planetary crises? Currently, economic and industrial interventions dominate our public discourse, while innovations in social governance tend to be viewed through the lens of either justice or simply 'nice to have'. We have known for some time that environmental breakdown, pandemics, the vulnerability of our food systems and inflationary landscapes are events that reinforce each other, producing unpredictable risks and compounding effects, a condition frequently described as a polycrisis. We now also understand that, not only will the polycrisis be most

acutely felt by specific communities of place, but that this is also where the most effective response could and should happen.

Community resilience, as part of the broader social capital, is increasingly being recognised as a positive force in the face of these threats. From digital support networks distributing masks during the Covid-19 pandemic in Taiwan or neighbour care groups grappling with heatwaves in Australia or Pakistan, to wide-scale civic resistance against Russian aggression in Ukraine, these inspiring examples show that, when things go sideways, decentralised decision-making and self-organisation can be significantly more efficient than systems of top-down governance.

Unfortunately, our dominant theories of governance are unable to recognise the value of thriving communities capable of action, collective sensemaking and agile planning. They often fail to distribute power to scales and networks that adequately meet the embeddedness and complexity of the challenges before us.

Our institutional and bureaucratic architectures require new forms and procedures of democratic self-governance.

**The Cornerstone Indicators**

I work at Dark Matter Labs, an organisation that is developing options for the fundamental transition of our

economies in the face of the planetary emergency. We believe this transition is impossible without creating governance innovations that position citizens as the main agents of change. Last year, we launched an initiative called the Cornerstone Indicators, which aims to reimagine the role of metrics and indicators to become tools for radical civic empowerment by allowing citizens to decide on what impact in the community they want to see and measure.

Now being developed across multiple locations, the Cornerstone framework was initially prototyped in Sweden in collaboration with citizens of Västerås and Samhällskontraktet, a platform for social innovations operated by the local university and municipality. The nine-month design process started with a statistical analysis that combined best international practices of wellbeing frameworks, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Canadian Index of Wellbeing and New Zealand's Living Standards Framework. It was then followed by online surveys on local social media groups and the city council's website asking participants to rank multiple factors themselves. Taken together, statistical and subjective inputs helped us to identify the universal dimensions that are most relevant to communities in Västerås, then group them into different thematic clusters, such as physical safety or trust and security.

At the core of the Cornerstone process were several participatory workshops where, over a four-month period, a group of citizens developed and explored different scenarios of how their district might look in 2035. Using visualisations and storytelling, the group was presented with multiple potential ecological and political scenarios. Participants were asked how they would feel and act under different conditions, defining how their collective future might unfold in the limitations and potentials of each case. Finally, all inputs were combined and



## BUILD YOUR OWN COMMUNITY

What type of neighbourhood would you like to live in? Does it have a playground? A library? A library of things? Artist Graham Samuels has constructed all the components for you to choose from to build your ideal community. So go ahead and take a break (and grab a friend!) to cut out the illustrations along the dotted line and assemble as you see fit.

We want to see your creations, so make sure to share your photos online and tag us for a chance to be featured on our social media pages!

#RSABuildYourCommunity

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- @thersaorg
- www.linkedin.com/company/thersaorg

# FROM CUTOUTS TO COMMUNITY

It's time to get creative! What components are most important to create a healthy community where everyone has a chance to thrive?



**“Quality of life and societal health should be the starting points from which we operate; this is often forgotten in a system that optimises itself for financial profit and growth”**

considered for the design of the first set of indicators, of which five were chosen and have now been adopted by the city.

In contrast to existing impact measures, each Cornerstone Indicator combines and scores across 17 different aspects of wellbeing to create a single intuitive indicator that is easily relatable and has a visual representation that allows it to be understood immediately. For example, one of the selected metrics, ‘The number of households that enjoy not owning a car’, implies a set of factors such as climate awareness, air quality, the state of public transportation, trust and safety of the community, while also conveying a change in attitude and mindset regarding personal mobility.

The main role of the Cornerstone Indicators is not so much to describe municipal performance, state of infrastructure, or behavioural patterns but to give agency and create a shared story of how a community could thrive in the constraints of planetary emergencies.

They are not substitutes for global measures, or intended to be used as hard evidence but, rather, they are interfaces and balance points between scientific measurements and our human lived experience. They exist to help us think, listen, reflect and learn.

### Beyond wellbeing

Quality of life and societal health should be the starting points from which we operate; this is often forgotten in a system that primarily optimises itself for financial profit and growth. Yet, in the age of polycrisis, wellbeing can no longer be our only aspiration, but must be considered in the context of systemic and sustained risk. In order to thrive and grow through adversity, our theory of democratic governance should include what we think of at Dark Matter Labs as ‘critical capabilities’ of our society. From collective intelligence to civic agency, these are those intangible assets that can be optimised for, invested in, and recognised as no less critical than physical or financial ones in the transition to come.

The Cornerstone Indicators provide one example of how our governance frameworks, such as metrics, could be redesigned to facilitate the mentioned capacities of society. If we find more ways to build them, they will reinforce each other, becoming more than the sum of their parts and creating the societal context for the necessary transition to happen. The challenges we face are contextual and systemic. Our governance response should be, too.

For example, we need to harness the capacity for sensemaking and collective intelligence of a community, neighbourhood or city to understand unfolding events and navigate uncertain environments. With the rise of artificial intelligence and social media, and the increasing complexity of life in general, it is increasingly difficult to process the landscape of information overload and identify credible facts. How can we redirect attention from the stream of disinformation towards critical knowledge, such as skills for the future transition and mitigation of

crises, that communities need?

It is also essential to find a way to imagine a shared future and construct a guiding narrative. We have seen that issues that require the most coordination, such as climate change, pandemics and geopolitical rivalries, also become the most polarising. By designing spaces to hold different opinions and construct a consensus without compromising plurality, we can build widespread civic consent. Without it and the legitimacy it provides to a higher authority, the required transition for liberal democracies is hardly imaginable.

Finally, we need to build agency and decision-making capacity to act for the future on a scale where it is efficient to do so. The complexity of the polycrisis landscape cannot be effectively managed via a centralised, top-down approach. Our governance architecture should resemble the intricacies of natural systems, operating through networks and distributing agency and power closer to the reality on the ground. Only by doing so can we achieve systemic agility and speed required by the high volatility and uncertainty of the future.

### What next?

Later this year, Dark Matter Labs plans to publish more case studies and an open-source roadmap that can help communities replicate the indicators. Scan the QR code for more information about the Cornerstone Indicators project, to get in touch or to offer feedback.





# A school of one's own

**M**aria Georgina Grey (1816–1906) was an educationalist, writer and pivotal figure in the fight for women's rights in 19th-century England.

Alongside her sister, Emily Shirreff, Grey created the National Union for Improving the Education of Women of All Classes, a pressure group dedicated to advocating for women's educational rights.

In her 1871 address to what was then known as the Society of Arts, Grey laid out the Union's primary aims:

1. The equal right of women to the education recognised as the best for human beings.
2. The equal right of women to a share in the existing educational endowments of the country, and to be considered, no less than boys, in the creation of any new endowments.
3. The registration of teachers, with such other measures as may raise teaching to a profession as honourable and honoured for women as for men.

Central to Grey's aims was the idea that men and women should be awarded the same opportunities — though this was often misunderstood by



**“Grey's involvement with the Society was instrumental in the Union's early success and sustained influence”**

her opposition, who confused equal opportunity with unfair advantage. But Grey was not asking for special exceptions to be made, and her objective for women to be given the same advantages as men was a goal with which many members of the Society agreed.

Grey's involvement with the Society was instrumental in the Union's early success and sustained influence. It provided her with her first audience, supporters for her ideas, a committee (comprised largely of its own members) and a platform, the *Journal of the Society of Arts*, for disseminating news about her meetings and initiatives.

By the 1880s, the Union served as a focal point for various organisations interested

**Above:**  
Maria Grey  
Training College  
in Twickenham,  
its location  
starting in 1946

**Below left:**  
Maria Grey

**Below right:**  
Grey's sister,  
Emily Shirreff

**Scan the QR  
code to read  
the 1871  
Journal report  
of the paper  
Grey read to  
the Society,  
'On the  
Education of  
Women'**



in women's education. As these organisations deepened their collaboration, the Union became superfluous, ultimately leading to its dissolution. But its legacy lived on through initiatives such as the Girls' Public Day School Company, which established 38 day schools for girls. Today, it is known as the Girls' Day School Trust, and continues to provide quality education to girls across England and Wales. Grey also helped found a teacher training college in 1878, later renamed The Maria Grey Training College for Women.

Whether they know it or not, women across the UK owe much to Maria Grey. ■



Photo: N Chadwick / Maria Grey Training College / CC BY-SA 2.0

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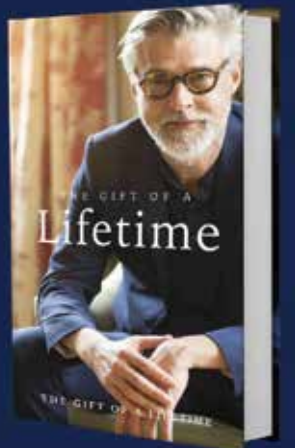


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# Courage in action

The latest Festival brought together a range of high-profile speakers offering remarkable stories of courageous acts to make the world a better place

Words: Mike Thatcher

A rainy Saturday in March saw RSA House packed to the rafters as more than 200 Fellows met for the third annual Fellows Festival to discuss the theme of courage in the year of our 270th anniversary.

This festival was the biggest yet, with the London event following a series of global meetings and regional gatherings across the UK (see page 49). Fellows heard from high-profile speakers, took part in workshops and enjoyed live music and dance.

Each speaker offered examples of courageous acts that could make the world a better place. There were many stand-out moments, but it will be hard to forget Kwame Kwei-Armah's passionate speech calling on the government to have the courage to invest sustainably in the arts.

Having just announced his resignation as Artistic Director of the Young Vic,

Kwei-Armah said he could no longer be "complicit in undermining" the culture sector. The current funding situation had created an "atmosphere of fear", and he urged the public to put pressure on politicians to come up with a "Big Idea" to fund the arts sustainably.

## Post-Covid courage

Arts funding was also examined at a session involving Lucy Kerbel, Founder and Director of Tonic, Kate Varah, Executive Director of the National Theatre, and Amanda Parker, an arts and cultural sector consultant.



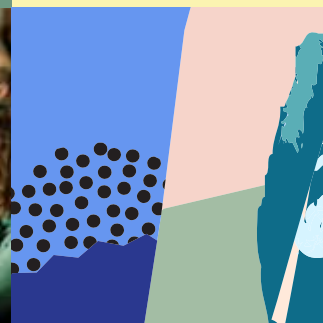
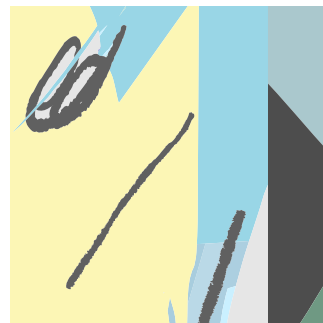
**"I almost think that running one of our organisations during Covid wasn't actually as hard as it is now."**

Kate Varah, Executive Director, National Theatre



**"I've just resigned from the best job I've ever had. I am neither tired, nor was I fired."**

Kwame Kwei-Armah, Outgoing Artistic Director, Young Vic



Photos: Laura Aziz, loliputa / iStock



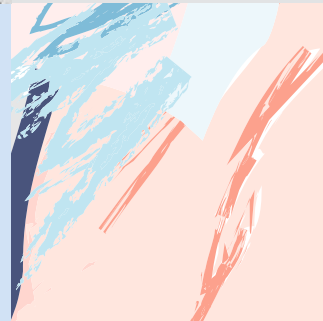
**"When it comes to the UK's cultural sector, being courageous right now means being clear-eyed about the likelihood that the sector is going to shrink."**

Amanda Parker, arts and cultural sector consultant



**"I have met most of the front bench of the current political parties. I have yet to meet one I would give a job to."**

Tim Smit, Executive Chair and Co-founder, the Eden Project



They discussed post-Covid courage and the need for pragmatism as the sector inevitably shrinks. "What's essential is ensuring that, in that shrinkage, we don't lose diversity. That we don't become a homogenous blob," Parker told Fellows.

In the session on community, Tim Smit, Co-founder of the Eden Project, discussed leadership in the UK. He highlighted the "lack of courage in middle-aged men" and the poor quality of politicians across the parties, while Emily Bolton, founder of Our Future, described the work her organisation is undertaking with the local community to help Grimsby's green transition.

Bolton emphasised that there was creativity beyond London. "I love the people I work with in Grimsby — brilliant, innovative, not waiting for anyone to come and fix their problems, just getting on and doing it."

## Culture wars

In the courage and empire session, author and journalist Sathnam Sanghera was asked about the abuse he received following the publication of his books *Empireland* and *Empireworld*. He pointed

out that interpretations of the past were constantly changing as evidence emerges, but that many historians were regularly threatened through 'culture wars' often taking place on social media.

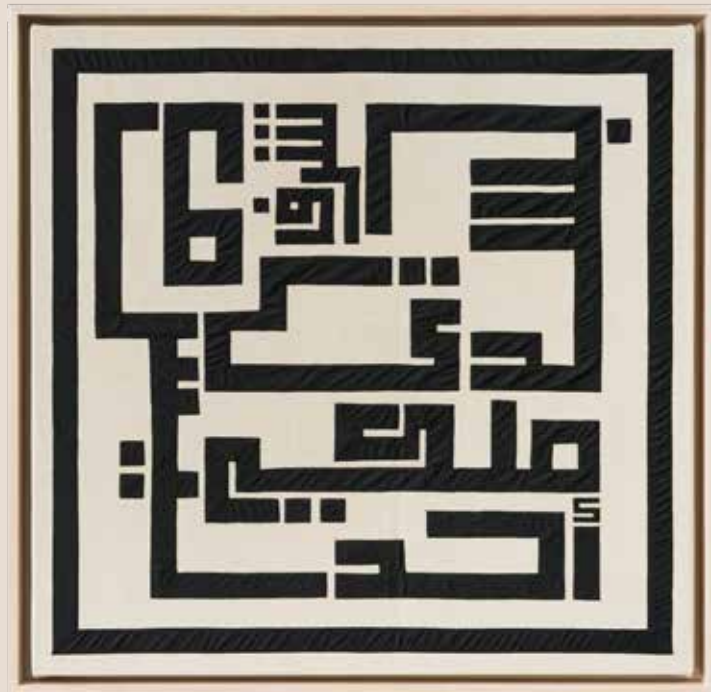
Culture wars also surfaced in the session on courage and climate involving environmental psychologist Lorraine Whitmarsh and wildlife writer Kabir Kaul. According to Whitmarsh one way to respond to anti-climate change attacks is to investigate deliberative democracy, such as citizens' assemblies.

Kaul, an 18-year-old RSA Fellow, stressed the importance of highlighting positive news stories, particularly on a local level. "If we can highlight those positive stories, hopefully that will empower people. Yes, we've got a long way to go, but there are very good things that are still happening." ■

Mike Thatcher is Head of Editorial at the RSA.



Scan the QR code for a longer version of this article and to watch video of Fellows Festival sessions



ART SCENE

# THE ART OF PROTEST

Provocative, empowering and unapologetically feminist — Ghada Amer's body of work defies conventions and challenges perspectives

—  
Words: Nadia Khomami



One morning in 1986, a young Ghada Amer walked into her first painting class at elite French art school Villa Arson, in Nice. Born in Cairo in 1963 to an agronomist mother and a diplomat father, Amer moved to France with her family at the age of 11. Even now, speaking to me over Zoom from her studio in Harlem, New York, where she lives with her partner and collaborator, the Iranian artist Reza Farkhondeh, she appears equal parts dumbfounded and upset by what happened next: “He let in all the men and then he closed the door and said, ‘I don’t teach to women.’”

### The awakening

Even more enraging at the time, says Amer, was that “everybody thought it was okay. Afterwards, I went to the library and asked them to give me a book about women painters, and the librarian said, ‘there’s nothing like this.’” It was then that Amer had something of an epiphany. Though she was already in her third year of art school, she says she had never before considered that she and her classmates were being “brainwashed”.

“Until then, I hadn’t realised that all of art history was built on men. I looked again at everything they were teaching us, and I couldn’t find any women, except one or two who were either crazy or played the role of the villain.” Today, Amer says, she believes that professor did her “a very big service”, as the incident spurred her quest to discover her own artistic language.

Amer was a teenager when she first realised she was an artist at heart. “I used to always draw when I was a kid. And then, in my last year of high school, I got severely depressed. I was bedridden, and the only thing I could do was to draw. Art saved my life. It is still saving my life.”

It was around this time, while visiting her family in Egypt, that she also encountered a magazine called *Venus*. Its creators had photocopied pages from *Burda* (a German fashion magazine most widely known for its inclusion of sewing patterns for clothes) and added veils and hats over the heads of the white, European models. It was a shock for an artist whose *raison d’être* has long been women’s self-determination over their own bodies, and it spurred her to reject ways of making art that had been dominated by men.

### The discovery

“I thought, if men invented painting, I’m not going to touch it,” she recalls. “I have to invent something that will look like their paint but be different.” She landed on embroidery, a craft traditionally considered to be feminine in both nature and practice — aspects she wanted to turn into “a strength”.



**“I thought, if men invented painting, I’m not going to touch it. I have to invent something that will look like their paint, but be different”**

At first, she chose in her embroidery works to depict “bored women” performing daily chores or quotidian activities, but she soon came to see this as submission. “I needed another image that would totally contradict the embroidery. I decided it was women posing in porn magazines.”

The decision paid off. Today Amer is best known for her embroidered images of women in autoerotic poses that have been traced from pornographic magazines, often layered with acrylic or gel. They depict naked women in ecstasy or with other women. Her aim, she says, was to radically reimagine pornography as something depicting female desires and fantasies; she wanted to invert an aesthetic in which men are the bearers of the erotic gaze and women merely its object.

This perspective is evident in works ranging from *Couleurs Noires* (2000) and *The Woman Who Failed to be Shahrazad* (2008) to *Les Grands Nymphéas* (2022), which features the image of intertwined females repeatedly across a 275×366 cm canvas (the title is an homage to Claude Monet’s *Water Lilies*).

“I was very oppressed sexually, as a Middle Eastern woman,” Amer says, but “these images made me like sexuality and my body, to make peace with it. For me, there’s no difference between eroticism and pornography. ‘Pornographic’ is a moral adjective on eroticism. If someone doesn’t like it, it’s ‘porn.’”

### The revolution

Over the course of a career spanning more than four decades, Amer has created paintings, drawings, sculptures and installations that reflect her commitment to women’s rights and the subversion of moralistic attitudes towards women’s bodies and sexuality. As with her embroidery paintings, she often chooses media or techniques that are considered traditionally ‘feminine’, such as gardening. For *Women’s Qualities*, Amer asked people in South Korea (2000), New York (2020) and Sunnylands, California (2021) what qualities they would attribute to women and incorporated the most common statements into flowerbed plantings.

Her work, Amer stresses, is “never a call to action, it’s a call to think”. She prefers gradual change to overnight transformations, saying “I believe in a very long revolution of awareness until we can make change.”

In this manner, the artist has also tackled a broader range of incursions against human rights and what she sees as media-led stereotypes. In 2005, for example, a time still dominated by responses to the terror attacks on the World Trade Center, Amer created *Reign of*

Top left:  
*The definition of the word Freedom in Arabic* (2007)

Bottom left:  
*The definition of the word Peace in Arabic* (2007)

Below:  
*My Body, My Choice* (2022)



Scan the above QR code or visit [www.ghadaamer.com](http://www.ghadaamer.com) to view more of Amer’s work

*Terror*, which she says was a “response to the accusation that all Arabs are terrorists”.

“All of the media was brainwashing us,” she says. “Arabs are this, Muslims are that. It was unbearable for me. They were using the word terrorism so much that it lost its meaning.” She decided to look up the word’s definition in dictionaries, discovering that it “basically doesn’t really exist in Arabic”. Her resulting artwork, installed at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, consisted of a bright pink wallpaper into which she inscribed numerous definitions of the word, along with paper plates, cups and napkins decorated with the phrase “‘Terrorism’ is not indexed in Arabic dictionaries”. The paper products were used by students in the school’s cafeteria, which also had some of its walls covered by the wallpaper.

In 2022, Amer presented *My Body, My Choice*, which explored the “regression of women’s rights”, at the Goodman Gallery in London. That same month, it was revealed that the US constitutional right to abortion confirmed in *Roe v Wade* was being upended. Widespread protests against the Supreme Court decision turned the phrase “my body, my choice” into a rallying cry. “I think that all artists can feel the future,” Amer says now. “We are like oracles.”

### The future

It’s a future Amer is increasingly concerned about. She believes people in the West have become complacent about hard-earned rights and freedoms. “And the women do not fight



Images: courtesy Ghada Amer and Goodman Gallery



**“Capitalism has attained a huge level of injustice. People are suffering... and the first ones who will suffer are women”**

hard enough,” she says. Amer cites the rise of the ‘trad wife’ [short for ‘traditional wife’, a trend popularised on TikTok whereby young women forego work outside the home for performing domestic duties for partners], saying “This is not a very good sign. I feel that the balance is shifting.”

What’s the reason for this? “I think capitalism has attained a huge level of injustice. These ‘trad wives’ are sick of working for nothing and sacrificing the family. People are suffering. Look at how much people have to work to make ends meet. Maybe it’s better not to work and to just cook, I don’t know. But for sure, it’s economic injustice that is causing this. And the first ones who will suffer are women.”

With potential for major upheaval around the world this year as major elections take place in at least 64 countries, including the US and

**Above:**  
Amer’s exhibition  
**QR CODES  
REVISITED—  
LONDON** at  
Goodman Gallery,  
London, 2023

**Right:**  
1. *Darkness*  
(2023)  
2. *Revolt*  
(2023)  
3. *Refuse*  
(2023)  
4. *Wake Up*  
(2023)  
5. *One is  
not Born*  
(2023)  
6. *Your  
Silence*  
(2023)

UK, Amer cites freedom of speech as one of the rights “taking a big hit”. “We’re witnessing it with college campuses in the US. You can’t revolt against injustice or against the killing of civilians, it’s crazy. Ceasefire means peace and love.”

I wonder if any of it is inspiring her newest art? Amer says she’s currently working on a piece that incorporates the famous Desmond Tutu quote, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.” But in general, Amer points out, her best art doesn’t emerge “in the middle” of conflict, but after a period of consideration: “I like to speak about it later”, she says with a smile. ■

**Nadia Khomami** is an arts and culture correspondent at *The Guardian*. She writes regular features and interviews notable figures from across the arts industry

Images: courtesy Ghada Amer and Goodman Gallery



# Power shifts

For one Fellow, a federal future is the path to a truly United Kingdom

Words: David Kauders, FRSA

There's a pervading sense that, in modern Britain, nothing works as it should.

Many individual policy failures have brought about near-Victorian conditions. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's 2023 annual 'Destitution in the UK' report reads like a Dickensian novel: rising child poverty; deteriorating healthcare; insanitary housing. Recent news articles even report people using pliers to extract their own teeth because of the lack of reasonable access to NHS dental care.

It's not surprising, then, that the public have low levels of confidence in parliament. A study by the Policy Institute at King's College London found that confidence has halved since 1990. Meanwhile, a Focaldata survey examining the entire political system reported that 90% of UK citizens believe it needs reform.

In their book, *When Nothing Works*, academics Luca Calafati and colleagues describe three pillars of society: disposable (or residual) income, essential services and social infrastructure.

All three have been wrecked by deliberate policy

choices, they argue, warning that UK policies are stuck in a quagmire, with too much regulatory weight given to market-oriented economists. Indeed, the share of national output going to employment fell by nearly 10% between 1976 and 2019, contributing to Britain's poverty.

## Power failure

The Westminster model of absolute power has failed. Moreover, it has contributed to British economic and social decline. This became clear when the emotions and misrepresentations of the Brexit campaign collided with the principle that sovereignty is the Crown in parliament.

Centralised power simply cannot adequately respond to the complexity of the 21st century and exponential rates of change affecting all levels of society.

How, then, can the UK build a more effective, participatory democracy and improve its political governance?

## Federal government

The cultures of the four nations (Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England) are different, so the UK is long

overdue adopting a federal structure, which would enable decisions to be taken at the most appropriate level. Without this, there is the very real possibility that the UK will eventually break up. Switching to a federal structure would be a bold move, but one which works well elsewhere. However, such sweeping reform needs a written constitution regulating political governance.

Citizens need the right to put policies onto a democratic agenda. Young people need more say in determining their futures. And we need a democratic process of consent to legislation, instead of meaningless royal assent.

## Voice of the people

The discussion starts now. What should a modern constitutional settlement look like? Labour created the Brown Commission, led by former prime minister Gordon Brown, to examine public dissatisfaction with politics. It called for more public involvement but offered an inadequate solution: electing a powerless upper house.

My concept is an elected People's Council that would replace both the House of Lords and the Privy Council. This would be completely separate from five unicameral legislatures, one federal and four national.

Dispersed power would replace central power, with sovereignty being the people of each of the four nations. The People's Council would provide a channel for all citizens to be heard and for strong checks to replace those that are so weak and ineffective today.

The federal legislature and People's Council will need to escape the bias towards English issues caused by England representing 84% of the total population. One simple solution would be to apportion

Photo: Kate Cooper / iStock



## “What is the point of adversarial politics when many neighbouring countries outperform Britain by consensus?”

numbers of members using a segment of the Fibonacci series. As an illustration, a representative federal assembly might consist of eight Northern Irish members, 13 Welsh, 21 Scottish, and 34 English — 76 members in total.

### Necessary questions

There are valid concerns about whether the present chaos is capable of resolution by any

government, and we need to ask ourselves: What is the point of adversarial politics when many neighbouring countries outperform Britain by consensus?

Should we wait five more years while a (possible) Labour government struggles with the havoc they have inherited without the truly creative thinking and democratic consent required for tackling the deep changes that are needed?

I don't think so.

Escaping the dead end that Britain has reached requires constructive public participation.

Academics have examined policy alternatives using deliberative citizens' assemblies. Academia and think tanks

should recognise that our present political governance needs major redesign, and citizens' assemblies could debate these questions — now. Only the people can provide answers.

Tinkering with details to improve the present system is worthy, but unlikely to bring the country to a prosperous, cohesive future. Only a federal nation can truly unite the United Kingdom. ■

David Kauders, FRSA is an investment manager and author of books about economics, finance and the United Kingdom. His most recent book is *Reinventing Democracy: Improving British Political Governance*.

Georgina Weaver, FRSA contributed to this article.

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# Fellowship



For those Fellows eager to connect locally, Circle offers designated area spaces, enabling direct engagement with area managers and other local Fellows. This feature promotes a closer Fellowship community at the local level.

**Creating a safe and supportive environment**

We uphold our commitment to responsible community management, and monitor and support the Circle community to ensure everyone feels respected and that Circle is a safe space for open collaboration. We do so by combining automated flagging with community-led reporting, followed by staff reviews of flagged content.

The creation of community guidelines was a collaborative effort with the Fellowship, and has been refined based on feedback. Since launch, we have updated the guidelines to include guidance on coverage of party political campaigning in anticipation of this year’s general election, and enhanced our moderation of profanities.

In its first year, over 99% of posts on Circle remained unmoderated. Those that are moderated typically involve posts with an aggressive tone or attempts to promote commercial interests.

Now in its second year, Circle continues to evolve, shaped by the active participation and feedback of the Fellowship, and we will continue to embody that spirit of open collaboration and community-building globally.

If you still need to activate your Circle account, please do so through My RSA and get involved in our flourishing online community. We look forward to your contributions. ■

**Line Kristensen is Director of Fellowship at the RSA.**

**IMPACT**

## Circle celebrates one year of uniting Fellows globally

On 15 April 2024, Circle, the RSA’s innovative global online platform, celebrated its first anniversary, with more than 4,000 Fellows having joined the community from around the world. Circle has revolutionised the way Fellows chat, connect and collaborate, and has enabled decentralised interaction across borders.

The platform has been a fertile ground for numerous new micro-communities, with Fellows actively engaging in the ‘Ask and Offer’ space to exchange support and opportunities. Our online community has enabled young Fellows to connect directly, and we have gathered more than 300 contributions from the Fellowship for the Day One initiative.

Micro-communities align with the RSA’s Design for Life mission and

unite Fellows across diverse locations, interests and identities. Notably, the Responsible Artificial Intelligence Network was the first to emerge from Circle discussions, rapidly growing to include more than 400 Fellows.

The platform has been pivotal in fostering meaningful interactions among Fellows and helping RSA networks to reach their potential. Phillip Ward, Sustainability Network Lead, underscored Circle’s value: “Enabling Fellows to communicate and collaborate was crucial for the Sustainability Network. Circle is providing that for us, and we are beginning to see its potential. It is replacing our reliance on ‘broadcasts’ from the centre via newsletters with an interactive web, allowing Fellows to seek out and converse more broadly.”

Photo: Rudzhan Nagiev / iStock

# Connecting with the Fellowship

A regular request from Fellows is for more opportunities to meet the RSA senior leadership team. In response, RSA Connect was established to enable members of the executive team to travel beyond London and meet with Fellows to find out about the work they do, hear feedback first-hand and strengthen connections.

So far, the executive team has visited 15 locations — from Truro to Dundee — with a meeting in Cardiff scheduled to take place as the *Journal* goes to press. RSA directors and CEO Andy Haldane have met with Fellows, providing updates on our Design for Life mission and interventions while fostering a renewed sense of connection with the wider Fellowship.

Andy told the *Journal*: “The RSA Connect events confirmed for me that, in the Fellowship and across all four corners of the UK, we have a treasure

Right: participants at RSA Connect, Glasgow



trove of expertise and experience second to none.”

Fellows have commented that they value the connections the Fellowship enables them to have with others who share similar interests and goals, with a focus on fostering these connections, acquiring new skills, and leveraging expertise to support Design for Life interventions as well as their own social causes.

Much of the feedback received links to work in motion from the Fellowship team, including:

- The desire for connections, meeting other Fellows and focusing on bringing people together based on place, themes and identity.
  - An appreciation of the need for a focus of the work outside of London.
  - A desire for more youth activity, with Fellows keen to hear about the youth mentoring pilot, the success of the Youth Fellowship and the Youth Advisory group.
- RSA Connect will continue in the autumn, visiting more locations every month. ■



YOUTH SUPPORT

## Young Fellows to benefit from ‘substantial’ bequest

Derek Winterbottom, a Fellow since 1976, has indicated that he will leave a substantial bequest to the RSA and, from this year, will grant a sum of money annually to defray the subscription costs of young people who wish to become Fellows.

Derek is the author of more than 30 books in the fields of history, biography and education, and was a teacher for many years. He is the heir of his late parents who owned well-known hotels in Lancashire and North Wales. The bequest will be used to further educational and professional opportunities among young people.

He told the *Journal* that the decision to make the commitments came about because he had “spent most of his life learning in schools, teaching in schools, writing about schools and being a school governor”.

According to Line Kristensen, RSA Director of Fellowship: “We are delighted and honoured that Derek has chosen to leave a bequest to the RSA. Donations and bequests from Fellows make a vital contribution to our charitable work and this better enables us to support the next generation of Fellows.” ■

Photo: Toichik / iStock



Left: speakers Nicola Fleet-Milne and Alex Nicholson-Evans at the Birmingham event

IN THE REGIONS

## Courage takes centre stage at Fellows Festival events

This year’s Fellows Festival was more ambitious than ever before — with UK gatherings taking place in Cardiff, Southampton, Newcastle and Birmingham, as well as the London event (see pages 36–37), and online sessions for those in Italy, Oceania and the US.

### Seeds of change in Cardiff

Fellows who met in Cardiff celebrated the ‘seeds of change’ for a regenerative future. Hosted by Fellowship councillors Anna Nicholl and Damian Joseph Bridgeman, the meeting took place at sbarc/spark, Cardiff University’s ‘home of innovation’.

Conversations opened and closed with an icebreaker led by ‘man whisperer’ Kenny Mammarella D’Cruz, who encouraged participants to share their thoughts on the theme of courage. Attendees also reflected on a piece of art presented by Zandrea Stewart and listened to a reading by opera singer Jeremy Huw Williams.

According to Lee Sharma, CEO of innovation platform SimplyDo, “The few hours at the RSA Fellows Festival were just amazing. It was an incredibly diverse group, but all connected by the theme of ‘change’ and doing things differently.”

Photo: Hannah Louise White, Illustration: Sarah Filmer

### Scenius in Southampton

Southampton’s festival took place at Bugle House near the iconic Southampton Docks. The event began with a talk from historian Cheryl Butler, FRSA, followed by sessions on courage from speakers including Ben Clark, Director of Future Worlds at the University of Southampton, and Satvir Kaur, former Leader of Southampton City Council.

Artist Sarah Filmer created a live illustration of proceedings (see below), alongside video content captured by the team at Southampton’s Business and Intellectual Property Centre.

According to Ann Longley, Fellowship counsellor for the South East: “The term Scenius, coined by Brian Eno to denote ‘the intelligence and intuition of a whole cultural scene’ inspired us to continue unlocking the full potential of our local ecosystems. It was a fantastic



Fellow-led event that served to galvanise and activate Southampton’s growing Fellowship.”

### Creative courage in Newcastle

Newcastle’s Fellows Festival was held at the Northern Stage venue, with a line-up of speakers all talking authoritatively on the theme of courage.

Jonathan Sapsed, Professor of Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Newcastle University Business School, discussed the Northern Creative Corridor and the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, while Tris Brown, FRSA, Founder and Director of the Northern Rose Consultancy, spoke on courage in decision-making in local and regional government.

### Full steam ahead in Birmingham

The Central Fellows Festival was a collaborative effort between Fellows, local organisations and Birmingham City University (BCU), hosted in BCU’s STEAMhouse centre.

Speakers included Anna Bright, Chief Executive of Sustainability West Midlands, Alex Nicholson-Evans, Director of Living for the Weekend, and Nicola Fleet-Milne, CEO of FleetMilne.

Participants enjoyed the wide range of speakers, and the opportunity to network with Fellows from across the region and meet representatives from local organisations that share similar values — feedback that could equally be applied to any of the regional Fellows Festival events. ■



## LAST WORD

One young activist's growing understanding of the shifting landscapes of opposition and power

Words:  
Vibha Venkatesha

**M**y activism was born out of the global rise in ethno-nationalist rhetoric and violence in the wake of 9/11. A deep love for my community, a working-class and immigrant-heavy neighbourhood in Detroit's suburbs, shaped both my identity and an inherent solidarity with and desire for justice. But there was hate there, too, and I still cross certain streets to avoid the places where I was assaulted or called slurs. It was a turbulent time to grow up brown in America. I didn't know anything about human rights back then. All I knew was that I loved my friends, and I wanted change. So, I became an activist.

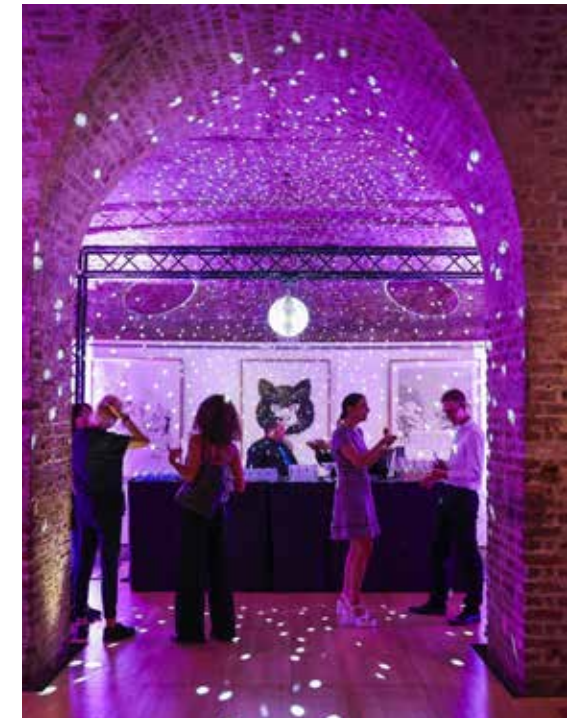
In the wake of the 2016 US presidential election, my community faced another spike in hate. By then, I had the tools to fight back — whether by organising hundreds to rally against Executive Order 13769 (which suspended the admission of refugees from several predominantly Muslim countries) or campaigning for my university to cease sharing student information with ICE, the agency that enforces US immigration. We found solidarity and fought back together against a tide of beliefs we knew we could not stand for. We were lauded for our resilience, courage, and resistance. It felt easy to identify the opposition and unite against it.

But no issue exists in isolation, whether racial justice, reproductive justice, climate justice; these causes overlap and are rooted in deeply entrenched systems of oppression and harm. The resistance we began to see was the resistance of institutions, and even of the movements themselves, as they became co-opted and diluted by those in power. We found ourselves set against those who had once risen up against the status quo but now stood to benefit from it. From bureaucratic red tape to indifference and inertia to outright opposition to change, we now faced the same systemic harm but whispered instead of shouted.

To build a better world, we must commit to dismantling barriers to progress internally as much as externally. The more I find myself in powerful rooms, whether government offices or UN headquarters, the more I look around and wonder: who is missing from this table? What perspectives are we not hearing? What keeps them from the table and how do we change that?

When our activism isn't just for show, when the voices of those most directly impacted by injustice are centred, heard and valued, only then can we channel the power of resistance into meaningful change. ■

# RESISTANCE



It's never too early to book your festive dinners, receptions and end-of-year parties at RSA House this season, for 20–220 guests.

020 7451 6855 | house@rsa.org.uk | [thrsa.org/rsa-house](https://thrsa.org/rsa-house) | @rsahouse

Charing Cross and Embankment

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Find out more about hosting your festive celebrations with us



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Photo: Gingersnaps Photography



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