



“Build back better”—a commentary

“Build back better” has been seized upon by politicians of many colours.¹ It seems to be an acknowledgment of the need to energetically promote renewed economic activity (rather than accept a permanently lower level, as desired by some environmentalists), and at the same time an acknowledgment that things were by no means perfect before Covid and that there will therefore be an effort to foster improvement,² echoing remarks made around the beginning of the pandemic [1], in the spirit of making the best use of an apparently unavoidable crisis.

1. Promoting construction

This is the first, and completely literal, interpretation of “build back better”. Johnson himself made it explicit with the exhortation to the nation to “Build, Build, Build” in the same speech.¹ The UK government’s website now announces that the reforms enabling “Build, Build, Build” will make it “easier to build better homes where people want to live”.³ This phrase acknowledges an awful reality—that during the past decades the quality of residential building has been truly appalling. Indeed this is well documented [2–4]. Since its creation in 1999 the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) produced numerous reports, such as *Protecting Design Quality in Planning* (2003), *Building Projects—Your Role in Achieving Quality and Value* (2004), *Transforming our Streets* (2006), *Good Design: the Fundamentals* (2008), *Improving the Design of New Housing* (2010), and *Simpler and Better—Housing Design in Everyone’s Interest* (2010). The CPRE, Co-Sponsor of the *Housing Design Audit for England* [4] estimates that three quarters of housing development should not be granted planning permission due to poor or mediocre design quality. The shortcomings of the planning system seem to have become quickly apparent since its inception with the Town and Country Planning Act, 1947. In 1957 the noted architect Sir Albert Richardson berated the council of his town for their lack of taste in planning [5]. The extent of the problem is well illustrated by the assertion by James Jamieson, chairman of the Local Government Association, in response to the intention to overhaul the planning system, that 90% of

planning applications are approved by councils—the assertion seems to have been intended to show that there is nothing wrong with the planning system.⁴ We can conclude from this history can that there have been repeated, and very strong, criticisms of the design and realization of housing, which have, sadly, fallen on deaf ears and in consequence there has been no improvement. In fact, the situation is much worse now because the population has grown by 35% since 1947. Hence things are much more crowded, making good design and implementation even more important. The prolific output of CABE suggests, from the titles of its reports, that it believed that the main problem was a lack of ability. That may have been a contributing factor—in which case it is particularly depressing that despite the impressive growth in the number of architecture students during the last few decades there does not seem to have been any significant improvement in the quality of what actually gets built. There is therefore a glaring mismatch here—as there is between the UK’s National Planning Policy Framework’s statement that “permission should be refused for development of poor design that fails to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area and the way it functions” and the “90% of planning applications approved by councils”, which should give a clue that some major factor has been missed.

To cut to the core, “Build, Build, Build”³ is largely missing the point. It has merely triggered argument and disputation. For it to be any use, it should vigorously stimulate a potentially highly illuminating debate about planning, in which the whole country should be involved. This will also help ensure that the outcome will have general assent. A worsening problem (before Covid) has been the growing disparity between the wishes of local residents and what actually happens. This has increasingly fueled resentment and a more general unwillingness to cooperate with the government.

1.1 Domestic housing

A key part of any such debate should be the question of urban tower blocks versus garden cities. The typical contemporary housing development is neither. They

¹ For example, Boris Johnson, UK Prime Minister, in a speech on 30 June 2020; Joe Biden, US presidential candidate, in a speech on 9 July 2020.

² The view of the need for improvement is by no means universally shared; for example, Philip Johnston (*Daily Telegraph*, 8 July 2020) asserts that “The [UK] economy was doing just fine ... a record number of women [in] employment ... Wages were rising at twice the rate of inflation, boosting consumer spending ... investment in UK technology start-ups was stronger than ever”.

³ www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-build-build-build

⁴ Reported e.g. by W. Hurst, Sweeping reforms will give new schemes ‘automatic’ planning permission. *Architects’ Journal* (3 August 2020); see <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/sweeping-reforms-will-give-new-schemes-automatic-planning-permission>

consist of many hectares of near-identical houses. This is not in itself new. Karel Čapek comments on “streets of Two Pillars, streets of Similar Railings, streets of Seven Steps in Front of Each House” [6]. In contemporary developments, a little variety is introduced by allowing three or four different styles interspersed with each other. They are typically endowed with gardens so small that the amenity they offer is little different from that of a large balcony—with which tower blocks have *not* traditionally been endowed in Britain. But what is most striking is the almost complete absence of trees. The few that there are seem to have been added as an afterthought, and typically a third or even half of them are already dead within a year of planting, despite the apparent care lavished upon them at the beginning (e.g., carefully supported on two or more poles and protected by a fence). Yet there is an abundance of green spaces, small and large, where trees could and indeed should have been planted—as many as possible. A great tree is a grand and inspiring object and especially on a hot summer’s day the shadeless heat of these modern streets is relentless.

For examples of urban architecture where people really do want to live one should study the works of Le Corbusier. Curiously, as pointed out in a perceptive article [7], his ideas have never really been tried, let alone tested, in Britain. They would be worthy of fresh examination today as a driving force for “Build, Build, Build”. Instead of his visionary *ville radieuse*, we have a dreadful legacy of ghastly tower blocks. Sometimes they are demolished—and replaced by the ghastly, in a different way, low-rise estates of identical houses.

The reason for this terrible situation—truly the elephant in the room, for surely it is obvious, although barely mentioned—is corruption. The 106-page *Housing Design Audit* [4] does not mention the word at all. The 190-page *Living with Beauty* report [3] mentions “corrupt procurement” once (on p. 30, curiously in a section headed “Affordability”), followed a few lines later by “opportunistic developers”. That is all. The reasons for this coyness could doubtless form the subject of another lengthy commentary. Local government corruption forms the subject of a report that was just published earlier this month [8]. Corruption risks are grouped into “councillors engaging external stakeholders”, “managing private interests” and “regulating councillors’ conduct”. The report is brief (40 pages) and probably only represents the tip of the iceberg. Among all the varied activities of local authorities, planning and construction—the core of “Build, Build, Build”—are those in which the greatest opportunities for venality are to be found. The very fact that granting permission to develop agricultural land causes its value to increase 50–200-fold

in the UK means that it is one of the most lucrative investments available to acquire such land and procure the requisite planning permission. Once that is in place opportunities for corrupt procurement abound. The enquiry now under way into the tragic Grenfell Tower fire [9] is providing a rare opportunity for some of the details of such procurement to be elucidated. Roy Wilsher, head of the National Fire Chiefs Council said: “It is imperative we find out why a non-compliant, extremely dangerous cladding system was on Grenfell Tower” [10]. The answer was provided a couple of weeks later by Simon Lawrence, contracts manager for Rydon, the contractor undertaking the refurbishment of the tower: in order to pocket the difference in cost between the cheap, inflammable cladding that was finally used and the originally specified materials [11]. Extrapolating from this revelation, we infer that the fundamental reason for the dearth of trees in modern housing estates is not a lack of sylvan imagination, but meanness: the expense of their provision would diminish the developers’ profits.

1.2 Infrastructure

Another facet of “Build, Build, Build” is publicly funded national infrastructure. Here, the opportunities for local government corruption, may be practically non-existent, complete with housing, since the decision on awarding planning permission is taken away from localities altogether and taken centrally by bodies such as the Infrastructure Planning Commission (IPC). According to “IPC Guidance Note 2 on Preparation of Application Documents under S37 of the Planning Act 2008” (dated 7 December 2009), “the Planning Act 2008 has transformed the arrangement for obtaining development consent for nationally significant infrastructure projects. The new régime offers advantages for all concerned, including improved opportunities for the public, local authorities, consultees and objectors to get involved and have their say”. On the other hand, since nationally significant infrastructure projects are typically much larger than housing projects, the opportunities for corrupt procurement are considerably widened. An excellent example is provided by HS2. Construction has barely started and so far corrupt procurement seems to mainly take the form of HS2 Ltd (entirely owned by the UK Department for Transport) employing far more people and paying them far higher salaries (at taxpayers’ expense) than would be reasonable with respect to the actual work to be done. It has also been reported that the decision to proceed, taken earlier this year, was preceded by heavy lobbying by large construction companies. The prizes for a mammoth project of this nature—entirely underwritten by the State—are the unparalleled opportunities for corrupt procurement.

As a counterpart to the thesis that construction is always associated with corruption, let us now examine the more subtle and complex case presented by a large commercial and industrial waste incinerator currently being built in the Vale of Marston, home of the famed Captain Sir Tom Moore. It received its Development Consent Order (DCO) from the IPC in 2011. Provided certain criteria are met, such as the capacity matching the local generation of waste, and the adjacency of an industry able to use the heat and power generated, there may be a case for waste incineration. These criteria are satisfied, for example, by the existing incinerator at Runcorn, which disposes of the waste of nearby Manchester, a large city, and which is adjacent to a large chemical factory. They are not satisfied in the Vale of Marston [12]. It used to be full of brickworks due to the abundance of Lower Oxford Clay, but it is now a rural and residential area. Indeed, since the closure of the last brickworks in 2008, enormous local efforts have been expended in order to create lakes and woodlands on brownfield sites. This consideration “weighs heavily against the proposal” according to the IPC panel.⁵ Health impacts were explicitly excluded from consideration.⁶ The overwhelming reason given by the IPC panel for granting the DCO was “the Government’s strong support for energy generating plants, including those fueled by waste. The need for such plants is stated to be ‘urgent’ and, in our opinion, the benefits of meeting this need outweigh ... all other matters considered by us”.⁷ The urgency turned out to be very ephemeral, since the emphasis is now on recovering materials and, besides, the quantity of waste being generated is in steep decline. These trends were evidently not apparent in 2011. Nevertheless, considering that an incineration plant has a typical working lifetime of 30–40 years, it would have been appropriate for the IPC to have looked ahead. The decision to grant the DCO was challenged by the local authorities (Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire councils) and their petitions of objection were considered by a joint committee of the House of Lords and House of Commons in 2012 [14]. Their general objection was rejected by a majority vote (4–2). It was unfortunate that Central Bedfordshire Council had weakened its case by granting planning permission for a large wind turbine near the proposed site, which vitiated the arguments of

adverse visual impact and reindustrializing a tranquil rural area, and the concept of creating a nature reserve. Health impacts were explicitly considered when an operating permit was sought from the Environmental Agency, but in a desultory and inadequate fashion [15]. It was granted, but the decision was subjected to judicial review [16] and appeal [17] brought by local residents, but the ultimate outcome was unsuccessful.

The disposal of waste is perhaps a less prominent vehicle for corruption than construction.⁸ Incineration costs about four times as much as landfill in the UK, but a tax amounting to some 500% of the actual cost is now imposed on landfill, hence the waste generator can save money by sending waste to an incinerator, which can be run profitably while still attracting business. Given the strenuous efforts to promote the Marston Vale scheme commercially (by a consortium of private developers), presumably it offers an attractive return on the investment. The main issue is the large social cost, which is borne not by the developers but by local residents and taxpayers. Apart from the adverse visual impact recognized by both the IPC and the joint Parliamentary committee, a waste incinerator emits copious CO₂ (about 1 tonne per tonne of waste) and other toxins.⁹ Because of the low calorific value of residual waste [20], the quantity of electricity generated from burning it is very feeble. It is unfortunate that panels like that of the IPC—and this is a general problem throughout government—are very weak on quantitative assessment; had they attempted it, it would have been apparent that the contribution of waste as fuel for energy generation is rather insignificant and undeserving of the overwhelming consideration it received.⁷

In summary, the “new régime” embodied by the Planning Act 2008 may well provide “improved opportunities for local authorities, consultees and objectors to get involved and have their say”, but they are essentially ignored in the ultimate outcome. Coase has suggested that judicial decisions (in which we can include those of bodies like the IPC) tend to favour apparent economic development [21]. This tendency might suffice to account for the series of decisions in favour of the Marston Vale incinerator. Nevertheless, the ultimate decision is perceived as an injustice. Unlike the case (*Sturges v. Bridgman*) considered as an example by

⁵ Ref. [13] para. 6.25.

⁶ Ref. [13] para. 6.23.

⁷ Ref. [13] para. 6.26.

⁸ In some jurisdictions, corruption associated with waste disposal has been well documented [18].

⁹ It is noteworthy that while the Environment Agency gives prominence to “minimizing” risks of pollution, it allowed the operator of the incinerator to use nonselective catalytic reduction (NSCR) instead of selective catalytic reduction (SCR) in order to remove nitrogen oxides from the combustion emissions [19], even though the latter is far more effective at removing them (but is rather more expensive). Hence use of the term “minimizing” is clearly unwarranted.

Coase, which only involved a tiny number of people, the incinerator is an undertaking on a vast scale that affects tens of thousands of people. Injustice breeds resentment, the scale of which is also correspondingly large. This is not a good basis on which to cultivate social harmony, and the satisfaction doubtless felt by the IPC, the Environment Agency and the developers upon achieving their goals might turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory. The deliberations of the IPC and the joint Parliamentary committee are remarkable for their narrowness of vision and lack of an integrated view. It is not corruption in the usual sense, but rather incompetence. The system as it stands is manifestly *not* fit for the purpose of delivering a beautiful and harmonious environment. Unless this is addressed, it is hard to see how we can “build back better” in any meaningful sense.

An even more far-reaching view takes up the implications of Coase’s conclusions. Dworkin has pointed out that they imply that wealth is a value, and its maximization is therefore an ultimate goal [22]. This is a worthy topic for a national debate, and one to which we shall return.

2. Investment

Economic development requires investment, and as has already been pointed out, the development of land, a finite resource, and scarce in crowded Britain, offers very attractive returns. The results of construction may persist for many decades, hence it is particularly important when considering what, and how, to build to have some fairly reliable means of ensuring that what does get built promotes social harmony. Because of its durable and obtrusive physical presence, the built environment impacts more strongly on the daily lives of citizens than other areas of activity. That is why it is particularly important to get it right. “Build, Build, Build” implies a headlong rush and even more neglect of social costs than is already the case.

A cardinal principle of the circular economy [23] is to use less and do without. This immediately implies less need for infrastructure. Since Covid, we are travelling much less—can HS2 still be justified, when its benefits were already marginal even before the pandemic? Citizens are strenuously trying to generate less waste—do we, therefore, need new giant waste incinerators? Air traffic has fallen to a fraction of its pre-Covid levels—do we still need to expand airports? If the answers to most of these questions are “no”, we need to think about other ways to restore our economy.

Another cardinal principle of the circular economy is doing more with less. This calls for enormous ingenuity, inventiveness and innovation, above all with material things. Moore’s law is striking evidence for what can be achieved, and DNA sequencing has made similar progress. Göran Wall has pointed out the enormous potential for achievement in the field of domestic energy supply [24]. Nanotechnology provides the means for unprecedented utilization efficiency of atoms and molecules. Yet investment in these fields is notoriously hard to come by, even with arrangements such as the UK government’s (seed) enterprise investment schemes (SEIS and EIS), which, especially for SEIS, reduce the financial risk in a research-intensive start-up to practically zero. Philip Johnston’s assertion that “investment in UK technology start-ups was stronger than ever”² is rather misleading. For journalists, investors and the layperson, “technology” has come to mean almost exclusively information technology and fintech; these start-ups are based on software, not on material things and their foundation is somewhat nebulous.¹⁰

The root of the problem, which is that materials-based innovation tends to offer lower returns on investment than software and land development,¹¹ has been ascribed to greed, which may be defined as the overweening desire to maximize monetary returns to the exclusion of all other considerations (perhaps nothing exemplifies this better than securitization), but greed is not as fundamental and durable as it may appear [27]. The reason for the problem is actually quite simple—the artificial scarcity, and hence expense, of capital, as was pointed out by Keynes more than 80 years ago [28]. Capital, in the form of credit, can be readily created in unlimited quantities [29]. But there is an enormous vested interest against such creation. Keynes wrote of the “*euthanasia of the rentier*”, but the actual trend is in the opposite direction [30]. Were the recent proposal that every citizen, upon reaching the age of 18 years, should be given 20,000 GBP [31], to be implemented it would represent a dramatic reversal; it would be hard to imagine a simpler measure to unleash “build back better”.

It is a sign of great fragility of our economy that—as has now been pointed out in the post-Covid recovery—restaurants and passenger flights are not viable with less than 80% occupancy. The eagerness of Transport for London to reduce underground train services in the early days of the epidemic, following the dramatic fall in passenger numbers, hence ensuring that the closeness of

¹⁰ Quite literally, if so-called “cloud” computing is taken into account.

¹¹ To the extent that governments are minded to heavily invest in scientific research and development, despite the dubious track record of governments in this field [25, 26].

passenger contact was maintained or even increased, doubtless contributed very significantly to spreading the disease [32].

In order to attract investment, entrepreneurs are obsessed with scale. While this is fine, even indispensable, for certain activities—one cannot make a very large-scale integrated circuit (i.e., a computer “chip”) or an affordable motor-car artisanally—it is sadly misplaced for a great deal of our modern economy. While a US friend of mine was happy that he could walk into any branch of the restaurant chain Denny’s and find his favourite table with his eyes closed, the essence of *restauration* is surely the skill and flair of the individual chef and the staff, which are completely vitiated by the concept of a chain. The same applies to hotels, retailers and practically every kind of service. Chains abrogate the notion of *Ortsinn*, the sense of place [33], which is a vital ingredient of social harmony.

Cheap capital would greatly relax the imperative to maximize returns and foster much more variety and quality. Housing, too, would benefit—individually built by local contractors, and providing a creative outlet for the army of architectural students graduating each year (5000–6000 in the UK). If planning laws are relaxed to foster such a trend,³ let us rejoice. At things stand, however, it is likely that we shall see even more injustice in the shape of vast and vastly lucrative but depressingly mediocre housing developments pushed through in the face of local opposition.

3. *Vive l’entrepreneur!*

With millions of conventional wage- or salary-earning jobs likely to disappear as economies emerge from the Covid pandemic, it is said that we are on the threshold of a new age of the entrepreneur. After all, independence of thought and action—in short, freedom—lies at the very heart of civilization, and does not the entrepreneur embody it?

The mindset of the contemporary entrepreneur can perhaps be best understood ostensibly, by studying the words and writings of well-known figures. Luke Johnson is widely considered to be a paragon of the entrepreneur, and was recently interviewed by Sir Anthony Seldon in the “Fireside Talk” series organized by the University of Buckingham.¹² He began his entrepreneurial career as an undergraduate, organizing a nightclub for fellow students; after he left the University, he went on to build up several chains of more or less dreary eateries such as Patisserie Valerie, Pizza Express, Signature Restaurants

and Strada (they were mostly acquired when small and then aggressively expanded). Among other things, he also founded Integrated Dental Holdings and built it up to become the largest chain of dental surgeries in the UK. He ascribes his success in entrepreneurship to the maxim “Never give up!” Disney is cited with admiration as an example of someone who went bankrupt before founding “what became the world’s biggest media empire”. In the eyes of the contemporary entrepreneur relentlessly focused on growth—scale and profits¹³ rather than quality and meaning—to become the world’s biggest is the ultimate goal. Nevertheless, one might observe that, for example, Studio Ghibli, which is five or ten times smaller than Disney, may have made a considerably greater contribution to civilization. Ultimately Johnson ascribes his success to a combination of luck and continually embracing trial & error, with which one can well agree.

What are the goals of this success? To answer this question let us turn to the entrepreneur Simon Dolan’s endearing book *How to Make Millions without a Degree* [35], which is otherwise full of sound advice. Chapter 6 describes some of his entrepreneurial heroes and how they ended up. Philip Green “enjoys a fabulous billionaire lifestyle”. Eddie and Malcolm Healey are “enjoying their luxury homes and exotic holidays”. Richard Desmond “is living a multimillionaire dream lifestyle and has property all over the place”. Graham Kirkham “owns just two homes”. Many of those described in this chapter have fallen from grace since the book was written. Only John Bloor has done something with the fruits of his entrepreneurship that can be said to embellish the nation—he saved the formerly iconic Triumph Motorcycles from ruin and turned it into a profitable business.

Sometimes an entrepreneur becomes a philanthropist. An example is Bill Gates of Microsoft, who formed the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. It mainly supports medical work, thus following a well trodden path in which there is anyway a continuously high level of human interest and activity. One of its major successes is considered to be the delivery of insecticide-treated mosquito nets. Yet this is hardly innovative—the discovery of its efficacy dates back more than 30 years [36].

In summary, the entrepreneurs of today are too exclusively engaged in the accumulation of mere wealth, following the example of Frank Munsey, who “may be taken as an outstanding example of many others which

¹² <https://soundcloud.com/user-565215737/in-conversation-with-luke-johnson-are-entrepreneurs-born-or-made?in=user-565215737/sets/sir-anthony-seldons-virtual> (29 July 2020).

¹³ Cf. the parable of the private Moscow ice cream seller [34].

might be cited. Munsey, who early in life came to New York from the State of Maine, was a cold, self-contained man, possessed of great astuteness and even more tenacity. For a number of years he worked harder (to use his own words) than any man ought to work; and during that period his ventures were constantly on the verge of bankruptcy. Eventually, however, the magazines which he founded made a fortune, which he increased manifold by other enterprises. He never married, and upon his death [in 1925] it was found that the bulk of his estate, then estimated at about \$40,000,000, had ... been left to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It is noteworthy that in his lifetime Munsey was never known to evince any artistic tendencies—indeed, his magazines, although strictly moral, were rather debasing from any artistic standpoint, and if he had any interest in the Metropolitan Museum it was sedulously concealed. The truth seems to be that he did not know what to do with the wealth which had been at such pains to gather” [37].

The colourful entrepreneurs from a previous age, such as Cecil Rhodes (died 1902), are now in disfavour. It is worth repeating an anecdote about him [38]: he “once asked Lord Acton why Mr Bent, the explorer, did not pronounce certain ruins to be of Phoenician origin. Lord Acton replied with a smile that was probably because he was not sure. ‘Ah!’ said Cecil Rhodes, ‘that is not the way that Empires are made.’” Money is seemingly morally neutral; it is too risky nowadays today to dare to espouse some grand vision of the world—too many people might not agree and cause trouble. Note the “seemingly”. It is an ageless truth that “Ye cannot serve God and mammon” [39]; on a higher level serving mammon is not neutral. It is notable that Lord Jim O’Neill, who doubtless ranks as one of the “great and the good”, praises Goldman Sachs, where he worked early in his career, because everyone was accepted solely on his or her merits, for what he or she could do.¹⁴ He did not feel it necessary to state that unconditional acceptance of serving mammon is a prerequisite for working at Goldman Sachs. Such service is not morally neutral because it precludes large realms of human thought and activity.

More in the spirit of Nikolai Gogol’s Konstantin Feodorovich Kostanzhonglo, for the great Victorian engineers “the thought of making man’s dwelling-place more commodious cast into insignificance anticipations of personal enrichment” [40]. But as the 19th century

drew to a close, “The elevation of society was lost sight of in a feverish desire to acquire money. Beneficial undertakings had been proved profitable; and it was now assumed that a business, so long as it was profitable, did not require to be proved beneficial” [40]. But Don Cupitt praises mammon [41]: “Mammon is an internationalist. He wants people to be healthy and well educated. He wants peace and stability, progress and universal prosperity”. This could well be the credo of the Gates Foundation. But ineluctably we come to a contradiction. The entrepreneur craves and requires freedom, but wealth is inimical to it.¹⁵ Totalitarian states want citizens to believe that they can have both—the Nazi party in Germany (*Brot und Freiheit*) in the 1930s,¹⁶ and in the present-day People’s Republic of China. The effulgent economic growth of the latter has beguiled many citizens into accepting the most draconian system of social surveillance and control known to man. Success is possible—but it is the method of the “Wolfsvater”, who by raising his four children with the utmost severity was able to send three of them to the prestigious University of Peking, and the fourth will hopefully be accepted by the *conservatoire* [43]. But of course many students are admitted to the University of Peking without having had such an upbringing, so what lesson is to be learned? Luke Johnson has a correctly identified luck being a part of entrepreneurial success, in the widest sense, and we would scarcely be human if that were no longer the case.

Expressed starkly, the choice is bread *or* freedom, for which Brexit is a very apposite illustration. In reality it is a trade-off rather than a choice; it is only the latter if one tries to maximize one or the other.¹⁷ But the freedom of “not working for others”, mentioned by Luke Johnson,¹² is something of an illusion. Particularly for an entrepreneur of Johnson’s stamp, success depends on pleasing as large a number of the public as possible—one is not only working for, but even a slave to their often fickle desires.

4. What is to be done?

Rather than accept the pedestrian and visionless proposals of “Build, Build, Build”,² which is actually *plus ça change* with a little bit of tinkering to entrench the present régime even more firmly, we should be striving to unleash a new entrepreneurial order. Some of the ingredients for creating this order are:

¹⁴ <https://soundcloud.com/user-565215737/in-conversation-with-lord-jim-oneill-can-the-british-economy-recover-from-covid-19?in=user-565215737/sets/sir-anthony-seldons-virtual> (14 July 2020).

¹⁵ Accumulated wealth binds its holder in a web of constraints and worries, as wittily pointed out by George Mikes (*How to Be Poor*; London: André Deutsch, 1983). On the other hand the offspring and heirs of the accumulator often happily spend it all away.

¹⁶ The incompatibility was already perceived by contemporary commentators, e.g. [42].

¹⁷ It might be tempting to commoditize freedom and assign a price to it, but that leads to other difficulties.

1. abundant capital, the lack of which is often the main barrier to realizing an entrepreneurial idea;
2. introducing EdEGG [31], which, perhaps surprisingly, can be done without any increase in government expenditure;
3. letting the number attending universities decline [44];
4. promoting open source hardware;¹⁸
5. acknowledging local supremacy in planning;
6. planting as many trees as possible in our desolate modern housing estates.

N^o 6 has the advantages of being immediately implementable, promoting arboriculture—and hopefully a goodly variety of trees both beautiful and useful will be planted—and will also serve to improve air quality [45,46].¹⁹

N^o 5 does not necessarily mean restoring supremacy to local authorities. At present we anyway have the highly unsatisfactory situation that the town councils of smaller towns tend to have no planning powers, which are exercised by the larger district in which the town is located. If local authority corruption proves to be ineradicable [8], then final decisions should be made by *ad hoc* committees formed from inhabitants of the immediate vicinity of the proposed development—or even by a direct vote of residents and businesses in the immediate vicinity. Technical matters, such as compliance with relevant laws and regulations, would be dealt with by the existing planning staff.

The most important measure is N^o 2. N^{os} 1 and 2 mutually support each other. It is often said that the young have had to make the greatest sacrifices because of Covid—this would be a great and powerful compensation.

Beneath the veneer of grand speeches, there is practically no practical movement towards a liberal régime. The vast sums spent on furlough and business support are temporary measures that reinforce the *status quo*. “Eat Out to Help Out” is a mere gimmick. EdEGG would not even increase government expenditure—although in the present climate of government thinking that might be seen as a weakness. At a stroke EdEGG—with less bureaucracy and restrictions than proposed by its authors, which to some extent rather defeat its objectives—would tremendously level up opportunity. Of course, opportunity can never be perfectly equal for

everyone—but the variation in opportunity should be no bigger than the variation that can be ascribed to luck. EdEGG, or something similar, would enable, but on a far vaster scale, the kind of transformation observed after the 2008 financial crisis, when notably many redundant bankers set up small restaurants, potteries and the like in provincial towns and villages. They presumably already possessed the capital needed to make the change. EdEGG, alongside abundant capital, will universalize the opportunity of entrepreneurialism. It will also redress the current school-leaving exam fiasco.

Why is there such resistance to any initiative that would make a real change? Is it fear of the mob? This is rarely discussed. George Orwell, reflecting on his life as a Paris *plongeur*, makes some perceptive comments [47]: “Fear of the mob is a superstitious fear. It is based on the idea that there is some mysterious, fundamental difference between rich and poor ... But in reality there is no such difference. The mass of the rich and the poor are differentiated by their incomes and nothing else ... what do the majority of educated people know about poverty? ... From this ignorance a superstitious fear of the mob results quite naturally. The educated man pictures a horde of submen, wanting only a day’s liberty to loot his house, burn his books, and set him to work minding a machine or sweeping out a lavatory. ‘Anything,’ he thinks, ‘any injustice, sooner than let that mob loose.’” Aldous Huxley solved this problem by the deliberate creation of cohorts of real submen incapable of higher ambition than working in “enormous treadmills of boredom” [48]. So far, official policy to tackle Covid-19 has been to impose more and more surveillance and control over the population, suggesting that fear of the mob is still an influential factor.

Apart from ignorance, the influence of many generations of tradition in Europe works to maintain the *status quo*. In China, the attitude is different: “actually there are only two social classes in China, the yamen class ... and the non-yamen class who pay the taxes and obey the law ... the top-dog and the under-dog, who take turns. With their cheerful fatalism, the Chinese bear this scheme of things quite nobly and well. There are no established social classes in China, but only different families, which go up and down according to the vicissitudes of fortune” [49]. It may be too much to expect this attitude to become established in Britain, but it

¹⁸In 2009 Daniel Steenstra started a project to develop an open source medical scanner at Cranfield University. More recently it has been suggested that the UK’s 5G network could be developed using open source hardware and software.

¹⁹It was remarked by Nicholas Fairbairn in the 1970s that the desolation, at least in Scotland, was a quite deliberate attempt by socialist politicians to foster resentment, as a result of which the inhabitants would be inclined to vote for the Labour Party. One recalls that during his exile in Zürich, Lenin contemplated launching his revolution in Switzerland, but abandoned the idea when he realized that there was insufficient resentment to support it because of the general equitability of society there.

would suffice for “the love of money as a possession” to be “recognized for what it is, a somewhat disgusting morbidity” [50]; as Keynes pointed out, “When the accumulation of wealth is no longer of high social importance, there will be great changes in the code of morals”—this was written only a few decades after Weir’s comment on the “feverish desire to acquire money” [40].

What if, effectively, nothing is done?—that is, the policies of “Build, Build, Build” will be pursued and surveillance and control will become permanent. If the government indeed fails to seize the moment and engage a public uncertain of the future,²⁰ one can envisage three possible outcomes:²¹

- severe social unrest and uprising, with an unpredictable outcome;²²
- civil disobedience, akin to the movement fostered by Mahatma Gandhi to gain independence for India;²³ possibly crowded beaches, raves etc. ignoring government advice are already a sign of this;
- indifference—again a Chinese trait—“in a society where legal protection is not given to personal rights, indifference is always safe and has an attractive side to it difficult for Westerners to appreciate” [55].

It is also perfectly possible that the majority will accept a continuation, even intensification, of the *status quo*. The House of Lords Select Committee on the European Communities expressed surprise that there was not a greater degree of public outrage after the many revelations of financial fraud in the European Community (the predecessor of the European Union) [56]. Similarly in 1996 in Hungary, the affair of Márta Tocsik, who expropriated many hundreds of millions of forints from the state exchequer during the period of rather chaotic privatization of state assets, excited very little outrage among the public—the predominant response of individuals was that “we would have done the same, had we had the opportunity”. In our own time, the many irregularities periodically reported about HS2 Ltd evoke little more than a transient velleity of disapproval. As Keynes realized, it is the moral framework that needs to

change, and within the existing framework, change is not so easy. Another factor that needs to be considered is the strong and growing movement to raise awareness about and promote action to prevent climate change. Temporarily self-suppressed during the pandemic, it may now resume activity with renewed vigour. It would appear that “Build, Build, Build” is inimical to its aims and the two movements are likely to collide.

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²⁰Public engagement cannot be guaranteed, even in a time of crisis. It is a sobering thought that crime tends to increase during wartime, as has been documented in the USA [51,52], and supported by anecdotal evidence from the UK.

²¹There is no need for the construction industry to be short-changed by the abandonment of “Build Build, Build” in its present form. As already printed out, houses or other kinds of dwellings would continue to be built, but individually; and if HS2 is abandoned, the energy could be diverted into a host of locally desired smaller projects [53].

²²It has been said that a major motivation for the draconian lockdown policy in the UK—despite the fact that its economic consequences are likely to result in more deaths from impoverishment than if nothing had been done [54]—was the fear that hospital overload would result in widespread civil protests and disorder.

²³It is said that Gandhi was inspired by an essay of H.D. Thoreau, published in the USA around 1849 with the title “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience” or “Resistance to Civil Government”.

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