

# REVOLUTIONARY TIMES

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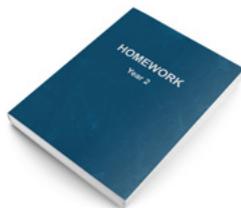


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# Not dead yet

Robert Phillips

My views have hardened during 2015. This is what I've learned:

## 1. They see what we see

Wherever and however bad leaders and bad organisations try and hide, they will be exposed. Just ask Thomas Cook. Or Amazon. Or Toshiba. Don't hide behind lawyers. Forget trying to spin. Conversations are happening anyway. You might as well join in. Better still: behave better and say a proper sorry when only a proper sorry will do.

## 2. Cynicism increases with age

If you're pale, male and stale with "retirement" less than a decade away, it's easier to be a cynic than a disruptor. Your younger colleagues and employees, however, will see you for what you are. Don't be the business equivalent of a disco-dancing sad dad. Get out of the way, aggressively diversify, let the next generation through. Don't taint them with the narrow cynicism of a lifer with an eye on the pension pot.

## 3. Lust for authentic leadership is real

"Jezbollah" Corbyn says it all; or Donald Trump. There's weariness with sterile leaders and permafrost policies. It may be better to be real and to lose than to fake it and win. Expect more leadership shockwaves as the active and the discontented find their voice.

## 4. Bad economics subjugates good thinking

People are afraid to speak because they have mortgages. Old hierarchies enslave otherwise brave thinkers. There's an army of the intelligent oppressed, desperate

to speak their mind. Some people utter only what they think paymasters want to hear (this includes bloggers and book reviewers, too). I have heard this many times in recent months. Depressing.

## 5. Purpose is not an advertising proposition

However hard the ad-men try, smart decision-makers see beyond the snake oil and sales spiel. Purpose is only purpose when it's real and delivered through actions, not words. Copy-written mission statements are treated with ridicule. If you get it right, understanding your purpose should be the pivot between old world and new.

## 6. The future will (almost certainly) be negotiated

There is a growing realisation that no-one has all the answers: a permanent state of fragility endures; solutions have to be co-produced and consistently scrutinised if they have any chance of sustainable success. Dissenting voices are more productive than obsequious consent.

## 7. Trustworthiness resonates further than trust

Trust is rightly seen as a knackered, bullshit message. Trustworthiness is recognised as the better outcome from relationships where each party listens properly and demonstrates vulnerability to the other. About bloody time.

## 8. Accountability is more important than measurement

People see through the nonsense of needlessly competitive league tables. A return on promise has become as

valuable as a return on investment (the capitalist ultras notwithstanding). Better organisations are humble. They proudly make themselves accountable to employees and customers. The future belongs to wise crowds.

## 9. Just because you're shouting doesn't mean we're listening

Safe spaces for important dialogue trump "men on mountaintops (it's usually men) shouting through megaphones." Better communications requires journeys, not diktats: more time-consuming but more productive. Academics call this generative dialogue. We've been trapped in a Truman Show world of distributive dialogue for too long.

## 10. What Amazon says, goes

They may have ambulances on standby for heat-exhausted workers or encourage dog-eat-dog macho American primacy but – if you're an author and want to sell books – you pretty much have no choice but to play by Jeff's rules. It's an uncomfortable, painful, ugly compromise. But this empire too will end.

The proper reform of capitalism has way to go. It's easier to be cynical than disruptive. But resistance is futile. Smart organisations govern by the principles of tomorrow, not the rules of today. Real leaders will do the right thing, or be found out.

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Ecosystems survive because of a cooperative interrelationship between species and nature. We need to unlearn one, and skill up on the other.

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# Unlearning, 101

Deborah Doane

A sign on the door of [Jaipur Rugs](#), one of the world's most progressive and successful social enterprises, which supports 7,000 weavers in 700 of India's poorest communities, reads: "*higher school of unlearning.*" This isn't just whimsy. It's a statement of the values of a company that constantly challenges the lessons that have been hard-wired into us, about what success in business means. This is a company whose leadership understands the role of humility in business; that even those at the top have something to learn. We all have a huge learning curve about operating in the new world order. But rarely do we think about things we need to unlearn.

Here's three for starters:

**Value:** In spite of what a few softies might think, all that matters to the value of a company is its profit and loss. All that matters to a government is growth and, these days, 'value for money'. Yet when people are asked what they value most in life most will spontaneously answer: my family, my health, my time, my friends. Rarely do they say my bank account, my

big car, my TV. So why do our commercial and public systems still measure value solely by financial return? We have yet to unlearn this and consider other forms of value, such as time, social impact, relationships, or the environment.

**Competition:** Thanks to capitalism, everything school teaches us is competitive behaviour – compete in exams, on the sports field, in the market. But competition can lead to a race to the bottom: pressure to reduce already low wages; substandard working conditions; cutting corners in environmental protection; tax dodging; bribery and corruption. Cooperation, on the other hand, frees up creativity and creates new opportunities to deal with complex sustainability challenges. It's no surprise that the first three adopters of the new Fair Tax Mark – an initiative aimed to reduce tax avoidance – were all cooperatives. Cooperatives have been a compelling tool for those at the bottom too: they have enabled small-holder farmers participating in the Fairtrade system to flourish, for example. Indigenous societies show

us that competition is not ingrained in our DNA; competitiveness is socially learned. Ecosystems survive because of a cooperative interrelationship between species and nature. We need to unlearn one, and skill up on the other.

**Hierarchy:** Hierarchy remains the dominant way of organising, and most of our egos depend on it: we climb to the top because we've earned it, and therefore deserve the power it affords. Yet hierarchy can be one of the biggest barriers to change and innovation. We're hardly going to solve some of our biggest challenges if we rely on top down, command-and-control thinking that squeezes out ideas and initiative and is based on systems of mistrust. Networked organisations have more resilience and are more adaptive to big complex changes. Unlearning our tendency to control will be challenging for many, but will open new and more enlightened doors.

No doubt we need to learn a lot more. But first we need to unlearn what's getting in the way.

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We are not producing well-rounded, adaptable, nimble adults, but instead kids who can jump as high as they are told – to regurgitate what they have just swallowed and then forget it all.

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# Can't we get it right?

Neal Lawson

Back to school...When I see those words I now don't just think of 'a return to school', but of a 'going backwards to school'. As kids sharpen their pencils, clean their shoes and parents spend hours covering books with sticky back plastic – what they are preparing for is an anachronism, a throwback, a land that time forgot. Our whole schooling system is out of date. This is how and why – and even what we do – about that.

Despite decades of reform, as successive Secretaries of State for Education try to prove their worth by meddling from the top down, our schooling system has essentially remained unchanged since Queen Victoria. It advanced for a while before slouching back. Kids sit in rows, shut up and are force fed dollops of cold lumpy facts. They Gradgrind out exam results in the global race to be best of the best. But it's a race that can never be won because there is no finishing line.

Meanwhile parents sweat blood, hunting down the best nursery, the best primary, the best secondary and the best university, all to get the best job. And all to what end? To buy stuff we didn't know we need; to impress people we don't know

with money we don't have. It's not as if there are any jobs that can repay their huge debts – and certainly no homes they can ever afford to live in. Then – leaving nothing to chance – they top it all up with tutors and extra classes to pad out the CV of their investment.

Kids are just pressured to hell. Anxiety and insecurity go through the roof. At the margins school is still a laugh, a place to learn how to be social; but those margins shrink, as the cold hard logic of the global race inexorably eradicates room for anything other than exam performance.

And you know what? It's not working. We are not producing well-rounded, adaptable, nimble adults, but instead kids who can jump as high as they are told – to regurgitate what they have just swallowed and then forget it all. Teachers teach to the test – hoping they can push a D into a C – and everyone one else can go hang. Teachers' professionalism and autonomy is mistrusted in a world that only knows targets and markets.

Even the CBI knows the education system isn't fit for the 21st century. The workplace of today and tomorrow is about

networks and relationships, team working, flexibility and sociability. What matters is how you relate to others, not how far you can stick your fingers down the throat of your mind. The point of school is to help us learn how to live with other people – not beat other people.

Providing an education is our most important social act. It should be open, fun, democratic, collective and personal, based around new technology and the total access everyone has to be the best ideas, lectures and learning material on the planet. Let's go school – but properly.

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I wasn't nasty enough to be much of a bully; rather I just followed the animals who had a gift for perpetual aggressive behaviour. It was easier to join the pack than stand against them.

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# Bullying ain't good

Gary Mead

Dr Couchman for chemistry, Mr Moon for religious instruction, and someone whose name I have forgotten trying to drum German verbs home. In my mediocre state secondary school they never stood a chance. Couchman was brilliant – built his own TV set out of scrap – but psychologically fragile and easily smashed into submission, especially after he admitted to being a white witch who danced round a fire wearing just a piece of string. Moon was tall, Harry Potter glasses, gentle, excellent at chess – and easily distracted. The German teacher: our class of bastards, 15-16 year old girls and boys, enjoyed goading him until he wet himself in front of the class. Only after he killed himself (under a train) did we discover he was a survivor of Nazi concentration camps. Our music teacher tried to cope by whacking us on the head with a thick book.

It was warfare.

The idea of going back to that is unspeakable.

But I was rescued. An Art teacher who never taught us but just wandered

around, playing music, speaking gently, encouraging – and ejecting all bullies. He left teaching. An English teacher, who let us speak freely and allowed us to discover our own stupidity – if we could. He later turned out to be a serial visitor to prostitutes, but before that he saved me.

I wasn't nasty enough to be much of a bully; rather I just followed the animals who had a gift for perpetual aggressive behaviour. It was easier to join the pack than stand against them.

I asked one of my oldest friends who is a teacher in a state junior school in London what he most dreads about the start of a new term. "I think overall it's that fear of not being good enough; of wanting to feel you have all the answers but knowing that you don't and that any slip will leave you vulnerable." But you only fear failure if somewhere there lurks a bully ready to attack you...

It's taken years to learn enough courage to stand up and walk away from bullies.

I learned shame quite early (RIP my unknown German teacher) but how to handle relentless aggression, without

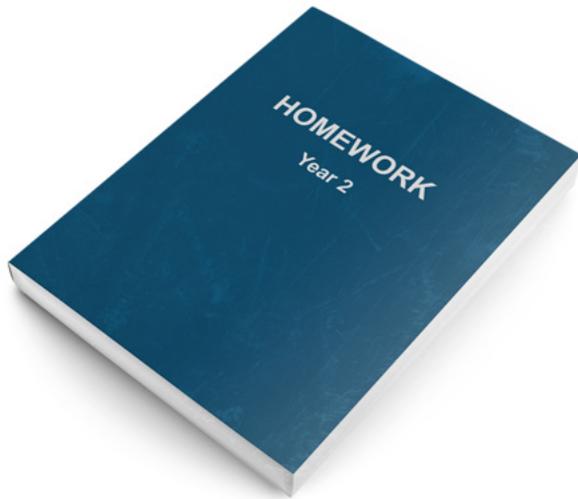
simply lashing back, has taken a long time. For bullying is profoundly destructive not just of the bullied, but the bully, too. Learning how to deal with corporate thuggery has been a lifelong experience. We could all do with lessons in human decency. Fat chance. Thank God I don't have to go back to school.

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# Politicians need grubby hands

Christine Armstrong

Forget Ibiza and Cornwall or some mate's yacht. In this time of career politicians, where Jermyn Corbyn incites mania just by talking like a normal person, politicians need to get out more. And we, the public, need to understand them better too. So I propose that they all use two weeks of their long summer holidays working in the organisations on the receiving end of policy. Not for a nodding-and-smiling, helicopter-drop photo-shoot in a net hat, but for two weeks of doing something useful. Like being on reception, answering phones, cleaning up, helping out and engaging with the great British public.

Top of my list of suggested internships for politicians are government services: inner-city schools, hospitals and GP surgeries, social services teams, police

stations, fire stations. Next up are the recipients of policies: everything from small businesses to big corporates. Along the way, critical services: airports, train stations, motorway maintenance teams and a couple of quangos and NGOs. The use of normal public transport – eating in canteens and inclusion in the after work social – will of course be essential. This is, after all, what good companies do: at Pret and M&S no one gets away without regular stints on the shop floor, so that decisions are never taken a vacuum. Showing that no one is too grand to do what needs to be done.

And when I say all politicians, I mean the Lords too. If you want your daily allowance, your grand status and the chance to influence government policy, get your

hands grubby. If you'd rather not bother, feel free to hang up your ermine and potter home. But when finally, as most of us will, you arrive in a hospice and wish it was different, reflect that if you'd worked there for a bit you'd have had the chance to change it.

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# No more frigid fingers

George Pitcher



I remember returning to my boarding school in the early '70s. The summer holidays didn't end when we left home in my father's Hillman. There was a tangible moment, usually during the afternoon of the September day before, when I switched from family and free to school survivor. I knew the moment because I started to throw things into my hand-me-down trunk – collars and studs, draw-string rugby shorts, pretentious books, an aftershave bottle filled with Dad's whisky.

I usually returned early on the day itself, partly because I wanted to get ahead of the game with study furniture and dormitory allocation, switching the labelling for a corner bed if necessary before the train boys arrived. I bade farewell to the pretty girl from the next village and left her to the attentions of the handsome day-boy at the local state school.

If the holidays finished when I started filling the trunk, term started when the Hillman took a turn on the old A361 and the rugby posts appeared by the road. By that stage I'd hardened from the sensitive and likeable youngster of August to the whiplash-tongued cynic who would make it through another tour of duty, like a return to barracks. My fingers closed around packets of No. 6 cigarettes in my coat pocket. I didn't smoke, but they would be the term's penitentiary trading currency.

I wasn't unhappy at school. Far from it, I prospered. We were the generation modelled on Lindsay Anderson's movie *if*: I wanted to be Malcolm McDowell, delivering his speech before he's beaten by the Head of House: "The thing I hate about you Rowntree is the way you give Coca-Cola to your scum and your best teddy bear to Oxfam, and expect us to lick your frigid fingers for the rest of your frigid life." I even joined the shooting team.

We were the generation that went to school in '68, when the student barricades went up in Paris. We left in '73, having assisted much of the punitive system to destroy itself, full of hope and trust. But it was always "Back to School". We weren't just going back to the institution; we were going back in time to a command-and-control structure that clung desperately to the old ways, a folk memory of Empire, white supremacy and the effortless superiority of our class.

I was nearly expelled in my last hour at school for bunking off Speech Day – though I hadn't mounted a machine gun on the roof. A couple of hours after that I bade farewell to a great friend of the previous five years who I knew I'd never see again, with a perfunctory Mockney "See yer" before he cycled away without looking back. There was to be no looking back after that, no going back, no Back to School.

The past 40 years or so have delivered a different perspective on that time. We always went Back to School – backwards in time – but we never left it as we found it. We changed it from within – we quietly abolished the fagging system without telling the staff, quit "New Boys' Tests" (little more than ritual humiliations) and beatings (ditto), we embraced the local community and broke the unspoken homo-erotic agenda by talking to girls; the school eventually caught up with us and accepted them as pupils.

And, with one or two lapses, the best of this generation has never stopped doing that. We thought we'd left school, but the truth is that we were never going Back to School, we were going On to School, moving things on, refreshing and reforming, always learning.

The lessons for now are apparent. The years we're in feel very much like the

period between the summers of '68 and '73. There is something in the air. But, just as then, the old certainties are still clung onto by those afraid of what they're losing. In politics and business – particularly in financial services – the sense of entitlement is palpable. Don't change, we're told, or there will be chaos. Chaos being defined as the lack of triple-digit property inflation, an alternative to stewardship of a "middle-ground" in politics that is nothing of the sort, and a challenge to the idea that everyone has to profit financially from any enterprise for it to work.

But Jeremy Corbyn has lit a fuse on British politics. There is a hunger for authenticity, and not always comfortably so, as we witness the rise of Trump in the US and Le Pen junior in France. The tired old control of Western populations cannot stand up to the pressures of migration exacerbated by Western foreign policy. Economies can't prosper any more on the principle of an elite swiping the top off an economy, like a barman swiping the head off a lager.

As in the early '70s, many more people get this than we might expect. It's why Corbyn is winning and Tony Blair looks like a public-school housemaster ordering the boys (and girls now) to turn their music down and get back to their Latin prep. There is once again great hope. Yes, it's dangerous, but then it always was. And look where we are now – immeasurably better off in every way than we were when we were warned by the defenders of the old ways in the '60s and '70s that we risked wrecking everything with our anti-establishment ways. We're always back at school, learning, changing. And the greatest lesson is that there are no certainties. But we have faith in the future. Let's go there. No more frigid fingers. No more frigid lives.

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