

*Vicki Robin*

Hi, Vicki Robin here, host of What Could Possibly Go Right?, in which we have conversations with cultural scouts offering glimmers of hope and insight in the middle of the muddle of the mess that we're in. Today's inspiring conversation is with Jane Davidson. She's the author of "Future Gen", in which she explains how as a Minister for Environment, Sustainability and Housing in Wales, she proposed what became the Well-being of Future Generations Act, the Wales Act in 2015; the first piece of legislation in history to place regenerative and sustainable practices at the heart of government. I had such a great time talking with Jane and turns out we have two of the same mentors: one is Donella Meadows, and if you don't know Donella, just look her up. And the other is "Our Common Future", the Brundtland Commission Report in the late 1980s, which defined sustainable development. And Jane had the courage and the grit and the will to put it into practice. So here's Jane.

*Jane Davidson*

<Welsh>. I'm very happy to talk to you today.

*Vicki Robin*

Wonderful, and I'm happy to talk to you. Yeah, I just wanted to, for starters, I wanted to quote a mentor of yours, Morgan Parry, as a way to seed our conversation. He's envisioning a future in which we make all the right sustainability choices, and he said, "We've stopped living as if there's no tomorrow and it feels like a new era is about to dawn." And it's hard to see that in 2020, with the fires and the floods and the political strife and the sickness and injustice. Yet your work gives you another point of view and so thank you for being one of our cultural scouts, shining a light on the road ahead. You can take this wherever you want to go. I just wanted to do that springboard, because I was impressed with that.

*Jane Davidson*

Yeah, and I'm so glad you've chosen that springboard to start our conversation off, because Morgan Parry was a wonderful person. Morgan ran WWF in Wales, and I think your listeners will know about the work of WWF. And he was the kind of person who, when you wanted to say, "No", he would say, "Well, why not? Why not do it this way? Why not think about it this way? Can I help you do it?" And he'd do all those things in a really gentlemanly way and you'd want to do it. And we had that conversation back in 2007, when WWF had produced a document called "One Planet Wales", and I was a new minister in that role in the Welsh Government and I thought this work was absolutely brilliant. Morgan, for me, encompassed what the Brundtland Commission definition of sustainable development was from "Our Common Futures" in 1987; development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. I just thought this was a wonderful way of describing what every single minister in the world should be doing. How could we be in this situation, where politics was becoming shorter and shorter term, when all the countries who are members of the UN had signed up to this definition of sustainable development. And of course, we've had exactly the same thing in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals. 193 countries signed up to the Sustainable Development Goals in 2014. But I was really shocked to find when I was writing my book, that Wales is the only country in the world at the moment, and it's not even a member state of the UN, that has actually put the Sustainable Development Goals into law effectively through creating the first Well-Being of Future Generations Act in the world. So when we think about what can possibly go right, what I'm interested in doing is taking out short termism in politics, and encouraging every country in the world to factor future generations into their thinking, to deliver on that Brundtland Commission definition of sustainable development, and to make sure that we enable future generations to meet their own needs, because of the

way that we act in the present. So I'm at the beginning of a journey, because when you find you're the only country in the world to do this, it's quite a big journey. But there's something about this particular moment, this moment, this COVID moment, when people are starting to think again, what they value. I think it's moments like this that gives us a real opportunity in terms of taking different kinds of approaches. And it's probably appropriate for me at this point just to tell listeners what the Well-being of Future Generations Act is. Very simply, it's about making sure that the people of Wales are factored in, in their current and future generations, into how the world's government and all its public services take decisions. And it's done in three ways. Firstly, there are four pillars that underpin decision making, and many people listening to this call will know about social, environmental and economic pillars under-pinning the principle of sustainable development. But in Wales, we've added that cultural pillar as well, and culture is critically important. Culture is important because it is where our identities come from. It's where our creativity and our imagination come from. But it's also where our culture change comes from. We don't get behavior change, unless we understand the cultures in which we operate. And I live in a bilingual country, where the language of Welsh, Cymraeg, is of equal status to the language of English and where many, many people in Wales speak Welsh as their first language; where many children in Wales are educated through the medium of Welsh, so culture for us is very important indeed. The key part of the Well-being of Future Generations Act in terms of delivery, is to set seven goals. These goals are set in law. And if I just give you an example of a couple of those goals, I think you'll immediately see how very different this is from the way countries normally operate and their governments normally operate. A prosperous Wales is defined in law as an innovative, productive and low carbon society, which recognizes the limits of a global environment and uses resources efficiently and proportionately, including acting on climate change, and which develops a skilled and well-educated population in an economy which generates wealth, and provides employment opportunities, allowing people to take advantage of the wealth generated through secure, decent work. Now, I'm not aware of other countries that have enshrined in law, that principle about a low carbon society, which recognizes the limits of the global environment, and uses resources efficiently and proportionately, including acting on climate change. When we talk about a skilled and well educated population, we're also talking about people taking advantage of the wealth generated through securing decent work. This is not a lowest common denominator approach. This is what we might call a highest common factor approach. And there are seven goals. That's the goal for a prosperous Wales. But a resilient Wales calls for a nation which enhances a biodiverse natural environment, and has the capacity to adapt to climate change. A healthier Wales is a society in which people's physical and mental well-being is maximized and in which choices and behaviors that benefit future health are understood. A more equal Wales is where people should fulfill their potential, no matter what their background and circumstances. Then it goes on with the Wales of cohesive communities, a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language. And a globally responsible Wales is a nation which when doing anything to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales takes account of whether doing such a thing may make a positive contribution to global well-being, and the capacity to adapt to change, for example, climate change. So it's not as if this is a nation which says, We can offload our problems onto someone else. That globally responsible Wales' goal specifically prohibits that. What in many ways is more important in the legislation is you have the pillars, and you have the goals. But you also, in the law, have five mandated ways of working. The government and public services in Wales have to think long-term. They have to think preventatively, they have to integrate their objectives in relation to the goals, they have to collaborate with others. And most importantly, they have to involve those about whom decisions are being made in those decisions. And thus, in Wales, a tiny country, a population of about 3 million, there is the first legislation in the world that not only enables the country to deliver on the principles, the Sustainable Development Goals, but offers young people in this country and the

generations to come as yet unborn, a new future, because the government and the public services in Wales are now charged with the responsibility of making sure there is a future for those people. And I'm really excited about that.

*Vicki Robin*

Yeah, I just want to say that while you're talking, number one, I want to cry because it's so not my country. I mean, it's so painful to live in the midst of exactly not that. You could put "Not" in front of every policy, "Not" in front of every value, and you would sort of end up with the United States at the moment. At the same time, I feel like there's this pathway, Where I live, I live on an island with 80,000 people, it's not many. But you know, maybe it's possible in the United States to do this county up. So, I just like to hear your reflections, thinking about how many places in the world are unravelling, as you're ravelling. What could you say is the secret sauce? Is it your size? Is it your history? What is the secret sauce that allowed Wales to pull this off? Besides you, and your massive enthusiasm. What is that? Tell us. Give us some guidance and advice and hints and clues based on what you see elsewhere in the world.

*Jane Davidson*

Well, it's never about one person. I think that's really, really important. What started us off in Wales was the fact that when the National Assembly for Wales was created in 1999, which was when the UK Government devolved responsibilities to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, Wales had very, very few powers at the time. But the parliamentarians who created the first Government of Wales Act, the first piece of legislation that gave us any powers in Wales since 1404, which is when the previous Welsh parliament was; in their wisdom, they actually had followed the Brundtland story, and they gave the new National Assembly a duty to promote sustainable development and everything that it did. And we tried to do that over a decade and what we found was that, when you have a duty that is as wide as that, nobody knows how to interpret it. When you don't have a mechanism for delivery, nobody knows how to do it. Therefore, what is particularly important about the Well-being of Future Generations Act now is that, I might have proposed it and I proposed a lot of components of it, but I left politics in 2011. And it was that next generation of politicians who actually created that legislation, but in doing that, they therefore stood up for the ideas that have been so popular in Wales for actually a number of generations. I think partly, it's because Wales was at the heart of the Industrial Revolution and therefore, we were a very dirty country with people living lives in the pit, on the quarry face, working with iron and steel. They were living appalling lives. They were making people rich, but they weren't making people rich in Wales. They were making people rich elsewhere. The first million pound check ever was signed in the coal exchange in Wales. But that money was leaving Wales. I mean, Wales became famous for exporting wealth and exporting teachers, many of whom went to the United States. But the message at the moment in the context of other countries is that there is something about being a small country. But there's something about being a city, or a town, or a university, or a business. All those categories of organization are also doing work like this, in their own settings. If you think about the cities, the 40 cities that have signed up to delivering on climate change; if you think about the number of towns that have joined the Transition Movement; if you think about the number of people who are doing incredible work, holding the fossil fuel industry to account. And if you think about two of the people who have influenced me most in my life, they are American, Vicki, and they've been so important to me. One is John Rawls, with his theory of intergenerational justice, and that simple statement, "Do unto future generations, what you would have had past generations do unto you." And the other, of course, is Professor Donella Meadows. And what I loved about Donella, and she just sent goosebumps up my spine when I first read her, was the fact that she was one of the first people who taught me that evidence is not enough. Because she put her evidence out there in terms of "Limits to Growth" back in the 1970s, when she thought that

actually if you told governments what the problem was, they would act upon it. And I think in 1987, when we had the Brundtland Commission, and of course, also that was the decade of the first Earth Summit. I think they thought that too. And when I started in politics in 1999, I thought that too. I thought all you had to do was enable people to understand what was going on, and that they would take the appropriate action. It's a massive wake up call to somebody like me who's been a politician, to realize that they don't. They don't, because there are other things driving them. Their constituency of voters is driving them; their ideology, their party's ideology, is driving them. And actually, they're so far down a route sometimes, it becomes almost impossible to come back. That's why Donella became so important, because she said, "You have to have that science. You have to have that evidence. But you have to have other components as well." And in 2002, when she wrote her 30 year update to Limits to Growth, of course, she talks about the fact that you have to have visioning. You have to have the networking when you engage with as wide a number of people as possible. You have to have the truth telling, so that people really understand and truth telling is critically important, and is often absent now, in the context of governments because governments often surround themselves with sycophants who actually support their views and the truth telling doesn't necessarily get near them. You have to have learning from that truth telling. But above all, you have to have loving. And I just think that, however dark the day is, it's that point there's always a dawn. It's so important to think that if we build this obligation to future generations, we have to go through the dark to that dawn, because there will be a dawn. We know that younger people now, 80% of British young people understand the threats of climate change. Now, I don't know what those figures are in America. But I bet it's more than 50% of young people understand the threats facing them. How can they not when we've seen the fires and the floods this year? How can they not? Well, if they're interested in nature, they're seeing what's happening to both the Arctic and the Antarctic, and the consequences in the context of ice. We're seeing all sorts of houses for sale where I live sadly, because people don't want to stay there, because they're getting flooded. You're seeing tremendous loss of houses, and luckily, less loss - but I'm sure there'll be wider loss - of life that's probably anticipated, as the fires have just munched their way through your states. Of course earlier this year, we were seeing what happened in terms of, I think what's now meant to be 5 million animals losing their life in Australia in the context of fire. So we're in very dangerous times. But COVID is a moment, and if we can turn that moment into a movement, where people wake up to what really matters - and what COVID has done here in the UK, and particularly in Wales, which has had, I suppose, the strongest health response to COVID. You know, we've been kept in lockdown longer; we've had a much more health rather than wealth approach to COVID from our First Minister. It's been similar actually in Scotland, too. But that has actually meant that people in Wales have felt much more supportive about their politicians here. I think if we just think of all those things that are happening at the moment in terms of COVID, or the big agenda around Black Lives Matter, after the murder of George Floyd; if we then think about climate change, what we have in the Well-being of Future Generations Act in Wales is a values framework that can provide answers to all of those. And all I'm trying to promote is, this is all about good decision making. When I talked about how you make decisions, if you can think long term, if you can be preventative, if you can be collaborative, if you can integrate your thinking with others, if you can involve those about whom decisions are being made in those decisions. This is not just about well-being of future generations. This is OECD advice on good decision-making. So good decision-making factors longer term solutions into the mix. What we've seen in COVID in the UK is sometimes decisions made by the UK Government that have been overturned in a day - about examinations, about COVID, about housing, about giving free school meals to the poorest children - decisions over taken in a day, when if you'd been thinking about future generations as Wales was doing, all those decisions were already taken with the interest of future generations in mind, and they could be taken in a timely manner, and they

could be taken with evidence. But it's evidence plus hope, evidence plus hope and love, has to be the kind of equation that takes this significantly forward.

*Vicki Robin*

Yeah. It's so beautiful. I feel inspired myself. Anyway, I want to thank you so much, Jane. This is marvellous, and I know people will be really inspired. So thank you.

*Jane Davidson*

Oh, Vicki, thank you so much. I just think that it's all about seizing the moment. It's that carpe diem. And if I can just leave you with one thought: Britain has returned to loving nature through COVID. And I don't think anything is more exciting than that, because we have to look after our natural environment. Because if we don't, we don't survive as a race. Ecology does come before economy, and therefore just the love affair that people are now in with nature, that on its own gives me hope. So let's both just seize these moments, carpe diem. Look for the new dawn. But fundamentally, just promote an idea that good decision-making factors in more than one generation.

*Vicki Robin*

Excellent. Thank you.

*Jane Davidson*

Thank you. <Welsh>

*Vicki Robin*

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