



Conversation with Lord Williams

KPMG Board Leadership Centre



Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Williams, joined our FTSE350 Board Leadership Centre meeting to discuss 'Responsible Business'. A thoughtful, balanced and assured commentary from someone often cited as "one of the greatest thinkers of our time", Lord Williams spoke to a broad range of topics from the environment and digital development, to universal basic income and who (and what) we reward as a society. He skilfully marshalled his thoughts under the three headings: What COVID-19 is changing; what the crisis **could** change; and what **should** change. Here we share the key themes that emerged:

What is changing, and likely to stay with us?

Attitudes: The crisis has raised awareness of those in isolation in our society, and that a significant number of our population are 'warehoused' as far as care is concerned. The level of reported COVID-19 deaths in care homes has hit the nation's conscience and hearts hard.

We have heard some encouraging stories about people waking up to the needs of their neighbours, the elderly and disabled, reinforcing that isolated people need to be on everyone's radar. This reflects a change of attitude and perception that will probably stay, unequivocally for the better.

Traditional working patterns: All of us have had to quickly adapt to new and different ways of working – a mixed blessing for lots of people. On one hand, the discovery of new rhythms and digital patterns of working that can be done without necessarily long working hours in the physical office, has also raised questions around what we expect of the workforce and about what we expect of ourselves in work. So, a potential positive outcome is greater freedom from a "slavery to long hours outside the home". However, working from home can mean there are fewer boundaries set by travelling to and from the workplace. Work and home may merge too much.

Institutional intervention: A crisis the magnitude of COVID-19 has seen large-scale, dramatic, government intervention. This has provided assurances that people can rely more on national governments than might have been expected. The downside is the anxiety expressed about the development of a surveillance society and the surrender of personal information to government.

Is there now a stronger case for government intervention in protecting the environment too? Here, in stark contrast to the immediate health crisis, the advice has gone unheeded by governments around the world.

What could change?

Role of government: The actions needed to respond to the crisis have highlighted the need for contingency planning in terms of care, public health and communities – ideally that taking place outside of the political and electoral cycle and with a great deal of international cooperation. It's not that contingency planning has been totally absent, but hopefully the economic backing needed will now be higher up the agenda.

In the last decade or so, people have expressed a certain amount of scepticism about what governments can do in a deeply interlinked world where the sovereignty of the nation-state can be secure in theory but not necessary in practice. The COVID-19 crisis has brought front and centre the question of how we make government work responsibly, creatively and how it should exercise its role of protecting society, not just against external attack but against the whole complex of weaknesses and vulnerabilities which we have learned about in the past few months.

Travel: The recent months have seen us unable to travel both professionally and personally. Reasonably cheap and unlimited travel, especially air travel, are built into what we take for granted. This has not been possible for a few months and we have managed, so maybe we could change our ongoing expectations around how much we should be travelling.

“ Those of us with strong commitments to the environmental cause might be pardoned a wry smile at the extravagant use of phrases such as 'following the science' in justifying Government intervention in the health sphere when scientists across the world would say there is a pretty powerful case for governmental intervention to protect environmental concerns.”

What should change?

Environmental priorities: Since lockdown we have become used to a less polluted environment, clearer skies and less crowded streets. That's something which most people have noticed and will not want to lose overnight. Behind that lie issues about the sustainability of our practices in the long-term and the possibilities of rebuilding an economy with a definite tilt towards very much higher levels of environmental responsibility.

A new renewed and restored economic model would need to lean more heavily on environmental development including the development of new 'green' jobs. The pandemic has been intensified, if not directly or indirectly triggered, by various kinds of environmental irresponsibility. Given environmental sustainability is also an issue of public health in the long run, it would not be surprising if this were one of the main areas of learning from this period.

The vulnerable in society: The pandemic has highlighted the vulnerable people in our society – not just our elderly community or those at medical risk; but those whose jobs are drastically insecure. Many jobs have been lost and because of this we have a population – especially amongst younger people – whose prospects of employment at the moment are pretty bleak.

Changes could include some form of universal basic income – something that at one time was considered unthinkable. But there's also the question of what and whom do we reward. Do we adequately reward those who are most committed to the routine, menial, prosaic jobs required to keep the wheels of society turning – such as care workers and those in public services?

What might be the implications of the demographic employment patterns in those sectors? There is also an important role played by migrants in many areas of routine care and public service. Do we adequately reward those on whom we most depend?

Equally are we adequately rewarding those who bear most personal cost? Or those placing themselves – via their employment - into the most vulnerable circumstances both physically and psychologically?

Internationally connected: Better international coordination when tackling public health issues could result in better, more flexible and fluid collaboration around the distribution of personal protective equipment or sharing research. At times such challenges have emerged as a more 'competitive game', which is not helpful when we face a global problem that crosses many boundaries.

Intelligent reform: Our penal system is in many ways clumsy, cumbersome and inflexible. As a result, serious issues such as outbreaks of pandemic disease in prison are very hard to manage. Our current system is seriously overcrowded, underfunded and incarceration is not always the most appropriate way forward for some who commit crime. This is just one area where the illogicality of our historic thinking needs to change.

Similarly, with other public services such as NHS and the care system more broadly, we need both change and more intelligent funding.

Digital enablement: Investment in digital development that enables flexible and more environmentally friendly working should emerge from the experiences of COVID-19. An environmental audit of our working practices to enable us look at green solutions including but not exclusively more digital flexibility, more digital literacy and provision to dovetail this with the broader issues around sustainability could be very positive.

Similarly, exploration of synergies and cooperation where some institutions can help others to develop digitally with the identification of shared goals and interests would be a desirable direction of travel.

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Contact us

Timothy Copnell
Board Leadership Centre
T: +44 (0)20 7694 8082
E: tim.copnell@kpmg.co.uk



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