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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

**HARNESSING SOCIAL PROCESSES FOR THE COMMON GOOD
IN TURBULENT TIMES**

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The paper is a contribution to the quest for ways of tackling the serious ecological, economic, and social problems facing our society. There are endless good ideas for ways of dealing with these problems, but it is almost impossible to get our leaders and governments to take the necessary actions and, especially, to act in concert on a worldwide basis (Ekins). This suggests that the problems we face are not economic but arise from the way society is run. They have to do with deficiencies in the arrangements made to collect information, sift it for good ideas, use it to initiate innovative action which will be in the long-term public interest, monitor the effects, and take corrective action when necessary. The need is for a better monitoring, learning, and management *system*.

Governments and other leaders lack to understand the *systems* processes of which acute problems are often but symptoms. Moreover, even current levels of public management has grossly overloaded our governmental apparatus. The result is poor decision-making on the one hand and feelings of powerlessness on the other.

The *solution* we propose is not a tidy and centrally controlled process. We rather propose a learning and management system which is decentralised, dynamic, and characterised by a ferment of innovation and evaluation, as it was originally proposed by Adam Smith. It will not appeal to those who are preoccupied with centralised planning, control, orderliness, and narrowly defined types of efficiency.

One of the most important changes in perception required by this solution is the recognition of the key creative, managerial, contribution which public servants make in the creation of wealth. It is on finding ways of getting them to perform this role more effectively that we must focus.

The first requirement for any radical transformation in society is the creation of a pervasive climate of innovation. This has to go along with much better arrangements for monitoring the innovative experiments that are initiated, in order to learn from their effects.

The process of innovation needs to be supported by new arrangements which will enable everyone concerned to get credit for having contributed in very different ways to the difficult, demanding, and frustrating activities involved.

The second, overlapping, requirement involves the evolution of much better arrangements for initiating the collection of information in the first place, bringing it together, sifting it for good ideas, initiating action based upon it, monitoring the results of that action, learning from the monitoring process, and restarting the cycle. Clearly, this is again primarily a responsibility for public servants. It may be substantially supported by technology like the Internet, but technology alone is by no means a solution.

The third set of necessary developments involves the introduction of new ways of thinking about management, bureaucracy, democracy, and citizenship. The most important development in our ways of thinking about *management* involves recognition that it has centrally to do with *releasing the energy, creativity, and initiative of others in a hive of innovation*.

Such innovation processes require the evolution of new forms of participative democracy grounded in network-based supervision of the public service. It cannot not be determined by central decree. Rather the invisible hand of the marketplace will be replaced by visible monitoring and learning arrangements aimed at understanding *systems* processes. This will allow the consideration, assessment, and control of *multiple* determinants of events and the identification of a wide range of desired and desirable outcomes.

The main aim of this paper is to help to operationalise a concept of the “information society” as “a society in which information is collected, sifted, and used in an innovative way in the long-term interests of the planet”.

The first vital step in such an operationalization is to better utilise, and to refine, the *public management* structures and processes we already have. The second is to acknowledge that what happens in a society is primarily determined by widely shared values and not by such

things as the arrangements made to administer financial rewards for “appropriate” behaviour.

Further key issues are *Equality, Equity, Diversity, and Participation*.

In addition to promoting network-based structures of participative democracy, the media-based public debate needs to be encouraged and informed.

At present we have little understanding of what the main characteristics of a sustainable society would look like. There is still less understanding of how to achieve *systemic* change in a way to overcome mechanisms by which attempts at system-wide change are doomed because our understanding of the operation of the overall system is inadequate.

However, the core insight required is acceptance that the key problem to be tackled is that of finding ways of redeploying the labour available to us to undertake activities which will improve the chances of our society’s survival and the quality of life of all. Since it has not been necessary to use the word *money* to make this statement, it follows that the task is primarily a *managerial* not an economic one. One of the key facts we have to hang onto in the tide of confused thinking around this area is that activities which enhance the quality of life contribute *directly* to wealth creation. A society with a high quality of life *is* a wealthy society. One does not have to have wealth *before* one can do the things that are necessary. Fundamental among the inventions we need is, therefore, new, politico-economic theory which recognises this fact and provides us with an appropriate framework for thinking about the issues.

An important question, which will not be discussed in the paper but asked to the audience from which input is expected in a hopefully lively discussion, is methodology. What is the appropriate methodology to understand and analyze the systems processes? Is it systemograms? Computer simulation? And if so, which kind of simulation?