

"SCREW BUSINESS AS USUAL"

BY RICHARD BRANSON

Book review of "Screw Business As Usual" by Richard Branson (Portfolio/Penguin, New York, 2011) by M. B. Beck

Screwing Business as Usual (BaU) obliges us to know first against what we are striking. In short (very short, in fact), BaU is financial profit as the sole motivation of business. Given which — to paraphrase Branson's words — *Screwing* BaU (SBaU) is the "business of caring for people, community, and planet", which is to say "doing good by them all is good for business". What is there not to like about this?

This book is for iconoclasts, contrarians, and doubtless rebels, in the nicest of fun-loving, yet earnest, ways. It is brim full of hard empirical evidence of how, as Branson urges us, BaU is to be utterly screwed. But it is heavy on *people* and *community*, light on *planet*. So let me dispense with this imbalance first, before focusing on the *people* side of Branson: *people* in business as a force for good; and *people* in *Cities as Forces for Good in the Environment*.

DOING GOOD FOR THE PLANET: HOLDING OUR BREATH ...

For those of us who may come upon SBaU from the perspective of the planet — Environment and Sustainability, that is (as opposed to Corporate Social Responsibility) — the book will perhaps disappoint. [William McDonough](#), [Ray Anderson](#), and [Paul Hawken](#), are all mentioned. And each has contributed to the way in which I see the essential spirit of the work of Cities as Forces for Good (CFG): 'the sheer *joie de vivre* of up-ending a "bad" and opening it out into an ever-expanding "good"' (p 74; [Sustainability Concepts Paper](#)).

A sense of anticipation is created in Branson's book:

[A] few years ago Virgin Unite set about looking at how we could bring together a group of entrepreneurs to turn the issues we faced with our rapidly depleting natural assets into the biggest opportunity of our lifetime.

We are left holding our breath. SBaU is not there yet — at least, not in the book.

For example, if the reader knows of the work of McDonough — as in his 2002 book “[Remaking the Way We Make Things](#)”, written with co-author Michael Braungart — Branson’s book conveys occasional tantalizing whiffs of its nearness. Yet this reader will have to be persistent and pedantic: to push through the entire book, cover to cover, beyond its closure, to an Appendix of brief SBaU case-study reports; to find there McDonough’s and Braungart’s ideas being brought to fruition in the start-up business of Pavegen. It manufactures (recycled) rubber pavement slabs, which generate electricity when walked upon.

It *is* OK to make money while doing good for the planet. We have known this for some time. Hawken’s book “[Natural Capitalism: The Next Industrial Revolution](#)”, with co-authors [Amory and Hunter Lovins](#), was published in 1999. I am a believer. To wit, I have my own hypothesis:

“The fastest route out of unsustainability is through inspired corporate leadership.”

Its purpose is to provoke the search for corroborations and refutations — preferably, to find many more of the former.

Such leadership, or rather the lack of global leadership for “The Global Village”, is what Branson addresses in Chapter 6 of his book. Greatly disappointed by the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Conference, he recalls:

As I watched the scores of committed people in Copenhagen who were all desperate to figure out how we could build an agreement in time to stop continuing on the disastrous path the world is currently heading down, it became clearer than ever that one of the missing pieces was someone to steer the ship.

Everywhere I turned, I saw good intentioned people, almost blinkered by one specific part of the issue or by their own national agenda.

[W]here is the coordinating body to fight the war against this new enemy — carbon?

Too much has been left to governments, and I fear we could be waiting for a long time for clear direction. Rather, we need better collaboration between business, governments and not-for-profits to make sure we can move at the pace we need to.

I realised the unique role we could play in bringing together unlikely marriages between business, governments and social sectors to create business-oriented approaches to new leadership models.

We set up the Carbon War Room precisely for this reason; to coordinate our attack on carbon.

Much, then, is to be expected. Much less is delivered, although it would be churlish not to acknowledge that when Branson completed SBaU in August, 2011, the Carbon War Room would have been in existence for no more than 18 months at most. Judgement today would be premature.

Branson's creation of "The Elders" — impressively of the great and the good of the world — has a somewhat longer track record, dating back to its launch in July 2007. Consider this. We have the Global Village because of business, as in the IT and communication businesses. It is a good thing, argues Branson. It has shifted the center of gravity in decision-making towards the bottom of the hierarchy — power to the people, to individuals, to that which is local. We lack global leadership commensurate with the global problems we face. The Elders, designed to fill that vacuum, is a leadership vehicle born expressly and deliberately of business thinking and business models (of SBaU, of course). Their battles are with the likes of war itself: the "war on drugs"; to terminate that unwinnable cause; to stand things on their head.

This, then, epitomizes BaU for Branson:

The Copenhagen climate change conference in 2009 and the world's slow response to the worsening environmental crisis is one of the best examples of the silo effect, leaving no one in

charge of what's best for people and the planet. Sadly, because of the way we've built our political systems, driven as they are by the power of the vote, politicians' hands are tied as they attempt to do what's right in the short term for their constituencies rather than for the planet. Similarly, corporate hands are often tied because of the shareholder focus on profits, with the wider stakeholders not having a voice. Charities are struggling as they compete with the recession and other organizations for funding, with little or no incentive to collaborate in order to make a greater impact. Large multilateral organisations like the United Nations are often held hostage by the less than united interests of their own members. So what ends up happening is what we got at Copenhagen — not much.

Screw all that. But how exactly?

WHAT'S THE FORMULA; WHAT'S THE RECIPE?

In spite of my better instincts — my strong aversion to any simple formula for everything (witness the 160+ pages of the [Sustainability Concepts Paper](#)) — what is the formula to be distilled from all the empirical evidence of SBaU in Branson's book? I am reverting to type, of course: to the academic who wants to fit a regression model to all the field data; better still, to be told by Sir Richard the simple, universal set of rules — the formal fuzzy calculus, if you like — allowing me to funnel all the evidence into shaping my actionable steps. I want to do this thing too.

It remains a mystery to me. I suspect I have failed to extract the recipe, by which to put together the following ingredients. But this is how it seems.

First, take the stuff of the business model and season it with a good dose of “looking, listening, and learning”:

[F]or us it was important to look at the establishment of this new initiative [The Elders, as in global leadership] the same way we would look at any business. We wanted to ensure we went out and listened and learned from as many relevant people as possible, mapped out who was already working in similar areas to identify partners and avoid duplication, defined clearly what the “brand” values and principles would be, identified what would make them different, clearly outlined their areas of focus and expected impact, created a five year budget and very importantly looked at bringing in the best possible management structure and leadership team.

Second, repeat the same again:

As we did with The Elders, we wanted to approach the start of the Carbon War Room with the same rigorous business approach. So we spent a good year better understanding the landscape, finding the gaps, mapping out potential areas of focus, road testing them with the right people and finding the right partners and management team to ensure the success of this new venture.

Add a dash of impulse:

[B]eing overly cautious does not make for a good businessman or woman. You have to be bold, while not being foolish. Quickly weigh up the odds, but don't gamble is the best advice I can give to a new entrepreneur.

Place on a tray and bake in the oven for a life-time!

But where, I wonder, does one find “the best possible management structure and leadership team”, “the right people”, or “the right partners”? These, I suspect (and being able to sniff them out instinctively), are the vital and missing ingredients for most of us.

A PIECE OF CAKE?

A PIECE OF THE BAKED CAKE: ALLIANCES FOR CHANGE — THE GRAND, THE UNUSUAL, AND THE UNHOLY (SBAU)

Show me thus the man, show me the boy. Here is Branson recalling his leaving school at the age of sixteen:

[D]iscuss your plans, talk them through with a mentor, achieve ‘something fairly substantial in the way of preparation’ — then ignore the naysayers if you really feel you have something good to offer and have the financials worked out — and just do it! I did.

Thus were the [Virgin Group](#), [VirginUnite](#), [The Elders](#), and the [Carbon War Room](#) all brought into life. And once launched, how shall they deliver on their promise of leadership — for profit,

people, and planet? Through grand alliances, according to SBaU. And of these three actor types: the public sector of government; the private sector of business; and the civil-society sector of variously the people, social entrepreneurs, activists, non-governmental organizations, not-for-profit organizations, charities, and so on.

Time and again reference to such grand alliances amongst these three types is made in Branson's book. Here are some of them:

I realised the unique role we could play [in respect of The Elders and the Carbon War Room] in bringing together unlikely marriages between business, governments and social sectors to create business-based approaches to new leadership models.

Using the best bits of governments, business and the social sector with new entrepreneurial approaches is a really exciting area of opportunity. Sadly, as yet there are very few foundations out there creating these new hybrid business-based models which leverage everything they have to drive change ...

[T]he issues are not going away and we all need to work together — businesses, governments and not-for-profit organisations — must align to tackle these challenges together.

AGRA [Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa] is another great example of a marriage between government, business and the social sector.

“Three in a marriage” might trouble some of us!

In the 1960s and 1970s, hierarchical “government” plans to rejuvenate London’s housing stock (by doing away with much that had survived two World Wars and the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries before them) were stoutly, artfully, and successfully opposed by an alliance between egalitarian-minded “people” and individualistic “businesses” (see Michael Thompson’s CFG *Insight* “[Material Flows and Moral Positions](#)”). As we might now view it with all the benefits of hindsight, this was *constructively* “two against one” as the engine of change (not that the planning and controlling instincts of the hierarchical institutions were vanquished, since “government”, with its expert-crafted plans, was eventually able to reassure itself it had regained “control” of the changed outcome).

PROCESS: DISPUTATIOUS, REFURBISHED PLURALIST DEMOCRACY

The trouble with “three in a marriage” might paradoxically be that it is troubling if there is no trouble within it — no healthy and endlessly disputatious argument within it, with the apple-cart of agreed “policy-for-now” well and truly upset from time to time. For that is how managing bitter, entrenched conflict over water resources in Nepal appears to be succeeding ([2011 J Engineering Sustainability paper](#); Box 4 (pp 98-101) and pp 134-135 [Sustainability Concepts Paper](#)).

Political theorist Robert Dahl held that governance — which is what Branson’s innovations of The Elders and the Carbon War Room are all about — came down to a binary split between what Dahl called closed hegemony and his (much preferred) pluralist democracy (now refurbished by Stephen Ney and Michael Thompson; [2011 J Engineering Sustainability paper](#)). While the heights of deliberative quality in Dahl’s pluralist democracy might barely ever be attained, the world seems replete with institutional arrangements of governance that plumb the depths of closed hegemony. One actor, say “government”, frames the problem; frames it, in particular, in ways so very well attuned to its way of solving the problem — and “its” alone; having done so, it grants no meaningful access to the debate to the voices of the other actors (here “business” and the “civil sector”). Or, if it does, it is not responsive to them, or it seeks to ignore them, or shout them down, or ridicule them, so that it may “go it alone”, just as it always wanted to do. Roger Pielke Jr maintains the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) behaves just so, as a closed hegemony.¹

Branson seems to have been intuitively prescient about the sterility of closed hegemony. Here he is recalling something from his teenage years:

In spring 1969, I wrote an editorial in an issue of Student: ‘The views of any person must be tolerated, not only because some of them may, for all we know, be on the right track, but because it is only through conflict of opinion that such words as knowledge or wisdom can have

¹ Pielke Jr, R (2010), “More on IPCC and The Glacier Flap”, 19 January 2010 (<http://rogerpielkejr.blogspot.com>; accessed 14 July, 2010).

any meaning. For however depressing are the setbacks suffered in conflict, they are infinitely better than the sterile silence of death that follows when people are stifled and silenced.’

Today, “Forty Years On” (a song Branson might well have sung at his school), we can find a hint of the same sentiments, of tolerance of constructive disputatious argument in the Carbon War Room:

This was one of the most interesting ‘screw business as usual’ moments in my career as I watched how antagonistic many of the environmental groups were towards getting businesses involved.

All of the initial awkward moments were worth it as I saw the great unlikely partnerships that were formed across the business and environmental sectors, basically reinventing how business and the world worked.

Corroboration of a sort, I submit, of my hypothesis.

LOCAL VOICES, GLOBAL AUDIENCE ... AND A REPRIMAND FOR EXPERTS (AND ACADEMICS?)

At its core, Branson’s book is about individuals, the poor, the disadvantaged, and things local. The village, and now the Global Village, come to mind. Its essential message is about *doing* something: raising these people up and out of their drudgery and misery, amassing thereby the collective might of the many smalls and locals, eventually to do good for the big and the global, hence the planet. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) — businesses doing good for the people — *precedes* doing good for the Environment:

I have come to realise that, while we must have a sense of urgency about this message [James Lovelock’s “Gaia hypothesis”], we can’t be too zealous. People who are just trying to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table — or trying to keep their jobs — with the best will in the world really don’t have much time or energy to think too much about climate change and the demise of biodiversity, tigers, whales or lemurs.

Without first CSR, Branson seems to argue, one cannot do the broader good for the planet, i.e., move away from UnSustainability. These sentiments and motivations have been baked into the fiber of Branson's being since his teenage years, when he left school early — a bold action, if ever there was one, and by no means foolish (as we all can see)!

SBaU is first and foremost about empowering (that clichéd word!) people, granting a voice — an electronic megaphone and a global audience in today's world — to the humble and local experience of climate change:

Environmentalists. Space scientists. Geologists. These people are important. Without their brilliance, their precision, their intellectual honesty, their courage and their passion, we wouldn't have a clue about the crisis we're hurtling towards. But these are not the people to wake up a busy and self-involved world.

I think Mary Robinson, the former President of Ireland and former UN Commissioner for Human Rights, summed it up very neatly after the climate conference I attended at Copenhagen, when she said that the trouble with all these climate conferences is that too many experts present complicated and jargonistic data. 'They're all specialists,' she said as we chatted later. 'Copenhagen's keynote speeches should have been given by farmers who'd lost their living by drought or flood. They should have been given by fishermen who no longer have any fish to catch.'

The power of the plain voice of experience — not the 160+ pages of text of some [Sustainability Concepts Paper](#). I am duly chided.

FROM “THINKING GLOBALLY, ACTING LOCALLY” TO ENGINEERS “ACTING VERY LOCALLY” TO ENGENDER “THINKING GLOBALLY”

Yet I shall stand up for the import of “Thinking Globally, Acting Locally”. It is *not* a trite utterance, as some have argued (["Triumph of the City" by Edward Glaeser](#)).

If we, as professionals and experts seeking to realize Cities as Forces for Good in the Environment, are so convinced of the universal “good” of our all being less unsustainable, what devices, technologies, and styles of urban water-nutrient-energy infrastructure should be

invented and installed, deliberately to create a yearning within the community for a sense of the bigger picture, hence for disputing and debating that universal good itself?

What if, as engineers — yet motivated by the small and personal things in life (of our personal health and well-being) — we were to adopt the person-centric view of the world of Figure 1? If we understood how people reason outwards, from themselves, in their own strictly personal, local circumstances, to grasp the big issues; and if we could associate specific engineering and technological interventions with each element of such reasoning; could we then prioritize those interventions nudging the community faster — rather than more slowly — towards the desired apprehension of those big issues?

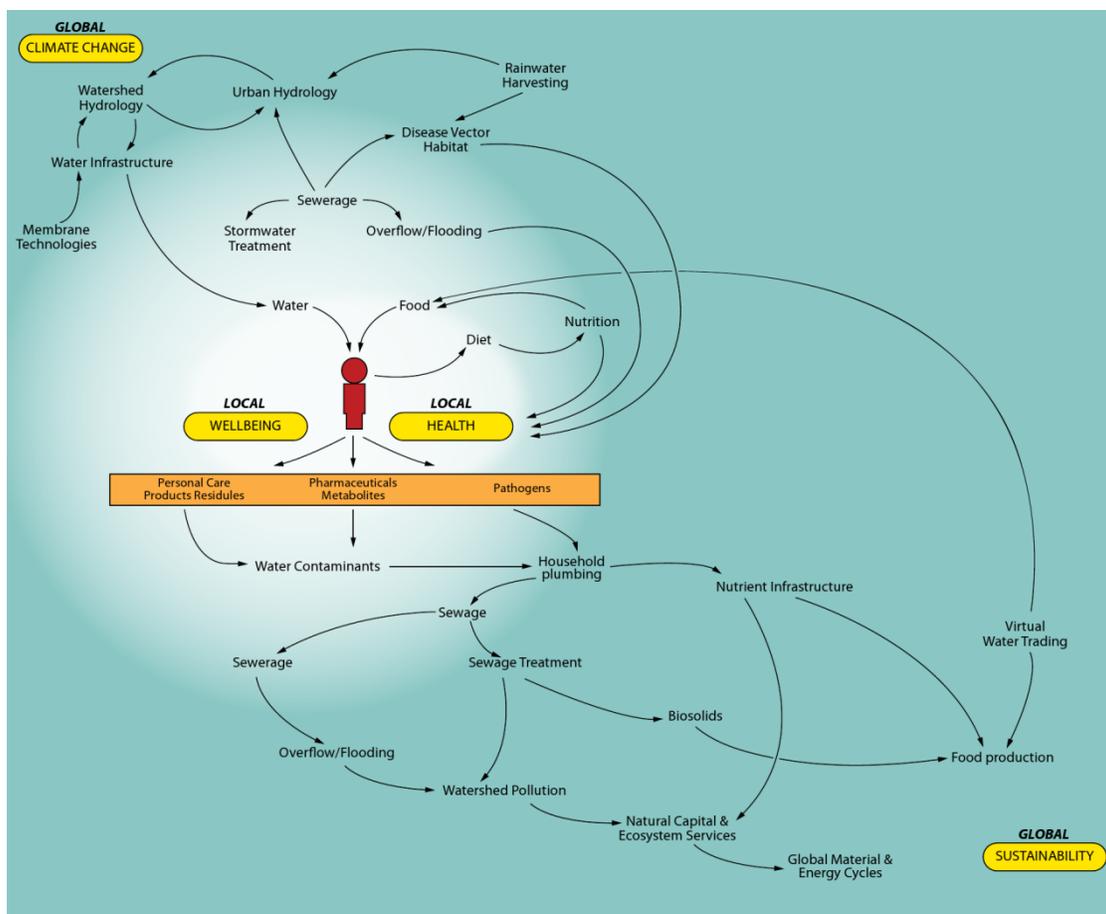


Figure 1

A person-centric network of conceptual associations among entities in the ever-widening perception of the individual citizen (urban dweller). In other words, scale ranges from the local and most intimate of personal choices outwards to the global, whole perspective of Earth Systems Analysis, including thoughts of Sustainability and Global Change. “Think (ever more) globally, while continuing to act (very) locally”.

Might engineers have an ethical role in this? For this would be a case of:

“[Engineers] Acting Locally,
[as deliberate stimulus to community yearning for] Thinking Globally”!

Now the goal would be to promote posterior debate through prior action. In turn, of course, further (posterior) action should emanate from what would by then have become that prior debate.

ALWAYS LEARNING, NEVER GETTING IT RIGHT SYSTEMS THINKING: BAKED INTO SBAU

I am conscious of having combed through Branson’s book to extract that of his empirical experience which validates my own prior conjectures (my own interpretation of Sustainability). In the [Sustainability Concepts Paper](#), I have placed the doing of “leading to learn” — under the rubric of “Always Learning, Never Getting It Right” — as something topping even the Triple Bottom Line of doing for people, profit, and planet. Here is much the same from Victoria Hale, founder of One World Health and Medicines360, as quoted by Branson (who sings her praises):

‘I’ve been told, “Victoria, you’re evolving your strategic plan all the time! Do you ever freeze it?”
And I [Victoria Hale] say, “No! We’re always learning.”’

And here we are too, back where we began, with the [Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership](#), whose Executive Seminars for “business leadership” make a decided virtue (in my one experience) of Systems Thinking, *sensu* Branson:

The most able people I know can do both, drilling down [to the details] while not losing sight of the big picture. It would be good if strategic thinking — entrepreneurial thinking — were to be taught in schools.

M Bruce Beck