

The Lightning Bolt of Systems Thinking: In Conversation with Dame Polly Courtice

By Wayne Visser

This is a summary of a conversation from my podcast Thriving: The Breakthrough Movement. You can listen to the full episode [here](#).

Speaking with Polly Courtice is always a joy, not least because we've shared so much of the journey toward sustainability. Our paths first crossed during the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002—Rio+10—where we were brought together by a mutual friend, Peter Willis. I remember giving Polly my first book, *Beyond Reasonable Greed*, and diving into conversation. For Polly, that summit was “an amazing and exhilarating experience,” not only for its global significance but because it was hosted in South Africa. She recalled marching with her daughter during the Landless People's protest: “Streets were lined with military police... I cast my mind back only 10 or 15 years before that... Landless People's marches in those days would have been, frankly, simply not tolerated.”

We both have deep roots in Africa—especially Cape Town—and I asked how that shaped her views. Her answer was unequivocal: “You can't grow up in a country which is, in my view, one of the most beautiful countries on Earth, through such incredibly troubled times, without needing some way of framing that as you grow up.” Sustainable development, she said, became a kind of “framing device” that helped make sense of the disturbing times she had witnessed, and the urgent need to find solutions.

I shared a similar experience: discovering sustainability while studying business at the University of Cape Town, and how adding the social justice lens made global issues suddenly click. Polly and I have both been in this field for over three decades now. I asked her what's changed. “Those early years were spent... trying to sell the problem to people,” she said. “It was very hard work.” Now, she said, we're in a different place.

“Most leading organisations are under no illusion that where we are heading... is unsustainable... Business as usual isn't an option.”

What's also shifted, I suggested, is that sustainability has moved from being a “salad on the side” to the main event. Polly agreed: “For me, it was corporate social responsibility that was the salad on the side... when you oblige people to talk about what we mean by sustainability – it becomes clear that it is much more than the salad.” But she also acknowledged the challenge ahead: “The full enormity of what we have to change – how much we have to innovate and how fast we have to innovate – is only really becoming truly apparent.”

Reflecting on her leadership of the Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL), I asked whether its systemic, partnership-driven approach had been a key to its

influence. She explained that it started with a focus on business, but “very quickly became clear that there were three really big actors... business, government and the finance sector... no part of that system could really make enough progress in isolation.” One of CISL’s great advantages, she noted, was “the sheer breadth of knowledge... in Cambridge in particular, but all around the globe.” And of course, there was the support of the Prince of Wales: “That enabled us to convene people at the very, very highest levels.”

CISL’s alumni network is now global, and growing by around 10,000 a year thanks to new online programmes. But for Polly, it’s not just the content that matters.

“Connectivity... is such an important part of this movement for change... people feeling connected around the world.”

At one of her most challenging personal moments, Polly found herself with early access to my book *Thriving*. Her daughter had just given birth prematurely while on holiday in Spain. “In the middle of what was a very traumatic time, your book popped up in my inbox,” she told me. “I read your book. And it completely gripped me.” At a moment when despair could easily have taken over, “it gave me this amazing sense of being able to process the possibility for hope and optimism.”

She spoke warmly about the book’s systems thinking approach. “This book provides a framework which is systematic... What does it really mean to talk about system thinking? What does the science tell us?” She particularly appreciated the six forces I describe—complexity, circularity, convergence, creativity, coherence, and continuity—saying they reflect “those natural system forces that underlie regeneration.”

We agreed on how important it is to make systems thinking practical. Polly has seen how many senior leaders—“very well educated, thoughtful people”—are struck by it like a “lightning bolt” when finally exposed to it. “We create these astonishing silos,” she said, referring to our education systems. “And so, it’s not surprising that people haven’t learned to think about systems as a natural way of making decisions.”

Yet she also acknowledged that many leaders already act as systems thinkers—“instinctively.” The goal, she said, is to “help people structure it more... bring other people into that way of thinking and behaving.” We both agreed on the need to democratise leadership. As Polly put it:

“This notion that somehow you have to have a heroic leader before an organization can be successful... is quite old fashioned.”

Still, she recognised that progress accelerates when someone can articulate “a uniting narrative... a direction of travel.”

That led us naturally to the concept of thriving. “Sustainability... just means the capacity to continue,” Polly said. “That’s not much of an objective in my life, just to be able to carry on.” For many people, she noted, “just being able to carry on is absolutely dire.” Thriving, by contrast, “sets a higher ambition... it’s not just about stopping doing harm, it’s about really creating a better place to be.”

As our conversation drew to a close, I asked Polly what gives her hope, and what witness she wants to leave.

“What gives me hope is the fact that we can change, as evidenced by the fact that we have changed.”

“I derive additional hope from... the younger generation... They’re not standing by saying, ‘Oh, isn’t this terrible’; they’re saying, ‘No, we’re not actually going to accept your version of the future.’” And as for her legacy? “Once you know this stuff, there’s not really any going back. You can’t unknow it.”

I couldn’t agree more. Polly’s wisdom, humility, and long view are a vital reminder that transformation is not only possible—it’s already underway. And as she so eloquently put it, “We can do something amazing, together, collectively, but also individually.”

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