



Reindustrialising the throwaway society



Caroline has been an MP since 1997. In opposition she has held a number of posts including shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, International Development and Spokesperson for Health. She was also Chairman of the Conservative Party. From 2010 to 2012 she was Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Since leaving the Cabinet she has become Vice-President of Tearfund and Chairman of the Parliament Choir as well as speaking widely on the issue of sustainability.

In her constituency, Caroline has consistently campaigned to protect the greenbelt, introducing a private members' bill to prevent garden grabbing in 2008.

The world's natural resources are under tremendous pressure from a population projected to reach nine billion by 2050. We already consume these resources at an unsustainable rate equivalent to consuming one and a half times what the planet has. This requires a major rethink about the way we do things.

Essentially we need to reengineer the way industry produces the things we need. This would amount to a re-industrialisation. We need to get away from the current approach of the throwaway society to one where we make a product in such a way that it can be repaired, recycled and reused. I am sure I am not the only one who doesn't like

chucking away an appliance because it is too costly or practically impossible to repair. So if the customer is right, shouldn't shops be stocking products whose selling point is a longer life? Increasingly business is looking at this model in the knowledge they won't be stocking the shelves if we run out of the raw materials or they become so costly few can afford them.

I have been impressed to learn of companies like Caterpillar who developed what is known as remanufacture, basically repairing their earth moving equipment to extend its life. Maybe that is understandable for expensive large bits of kit but this idea needs to filter down to fast moving consumer goods and other day-to-day products.

Tesco is a company starting to grapple with the sustainability of its huge supply chain. It already sends none of its waste to landfill. All plastic and cardboard is recycled, waste bakery products are sent for animal feed and inedible food used to generate energy.

Kingfisher are going even further with a net positive approach where they strive to do more than minimise a negative impact and actually have a net positive impact on the world. These approaches all require innovation and new ways of reducing waste turning it to a new resource.

When you think how we have complex assembly lines for products like cars we will need to think of disassembly lines to recover the valuable resources at the end of the products' life. Better still is to design in the ability to recoil from the beginning. This is what Ellen McArthur calls design for disassembly and she has long been a champion of a circular economy where we make, use and return resources to the earth, decoupling growth from the consumption of finite resources. If we look around our homes we can see countless ways to re-engineer the way we live: from the simple replacement of light bulbs to those which save more energy to the overhaul of the entire heating system to renewable sources and the recycling of water for non-potable use.

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The combination of the impact of climate change and the rising price of commodities will drive innovation as never before. Sustainability goes beyond low carbon to the fundamental question of how to sustain life on our planet for future generations. I have real concerns about people being able to afford to live in their own homes unless we radically rethink the present way we do things. My generation has lived unsustainably so we owe it to the next to put the world on a more sustainable footing.