



# Progressing towards a sustainable future

by Jaco Marais.

Having been fortunate enough to be born and raised in one of the last truly wild environments on earth, it was always baffling to me why people deemed it necessary to rescue a child from playing alone outdoors when it was the one place I could remember feeling completely at ease with myself and everything that surrounded me.

Of course, this was before I learned that I was white or that I was a man or that I was a South African of Afrikaner decent or that I was gay, middle-class and that only some combinations of the above meant that it was safe there. Until then it seemed natural for me to continue living in the bushveld and to become a protector of this ever-shrinking wilderness.

I found a home in London, where I made it my business to campaign for a better, fairer world for all, regardless of age, race, gender or sexuality. Collaboration is key and a oneness in society is the progress I strive towards. But at what cost?

The Joint Stock Companies Act of 1844, the Limited Liability Act of 1855 and the Companies Act of 1862 allowed joint stock shareholders to share limited consequences if their industries either failed or negatively impacted on the public or their environment.

This allowed for much progress as the burden of responsibility removed a barrier to investment in new endeavours and created jobs and rights for many more people than were previously available.

Limited responsibility led the likes of Blake and Dickens to write of England's 'dark satanic mills' as the health, welfare, education and social security of the populace suffered under the relentless competitive demands of the industrial revolution.

It wasn't until the Liberal Party's two terms of office between 1905 and 1916 that Britain was introduced to the concept of a minimum wage, family allowance and the beginnings of the welfare state.

And it was only after two global wars that Britain founded the National Health Service and other related public services to help cure the nation of the ills that industry bestowed upon its people.

The harm done to nature was also addressed, but not until 1974 with the Control of Pollution Act, which marked the beginning of the end for many industries, in particular those reliant on coal production. Britain went into an economic recession as jobs were moved to countries with less developed employment and environmental laws.

The Competition Acts of 1980 and 1998 further globalised the economy and divorced the richer nations from their responsibility toward the natural environment. Financial institutions were now allowed to liberally rob from Peter to pay Paul, transforming capitalism, restoring the UK economy and progressing the fortunes of many of us, until in 2008 this model became wholly unsustainable.

Professor Judge Mervyn King provided the world with an example of how sustainability, good governance and prosperity do not necessarily need to be at odds with each other, when in 1992 he was asked by the late President Nelson Mandela to lead the King Commission into better corporate governance. The aim was to build international confidence in the New South African

rainbow nation while rejecting the old, white imperialist ideals of capitalism that existed purely for profit.

The King Reports provided a blueprint for organisations to report on their activities, profits and impacts with a code of corporate governance that uses integrated reporting to demonstrate the value that organisation creates for society.

I was heartened to receive an encouraging message from Judge Mervyn King ahead of my speech at COP26. I spun one of his examples of how an organisation creates value rather than profit in one of GGI's tweets: "Dear Pension Holders and investors, in 20 years, when we have our first Gen Z PM, who's to say they won't cancel Big Polluter or Ethnicity Pay Gap PLC?"

In 2006, the then United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan, thanked Prof. Mervyn King for chairing the steering committee that enabled progress the work of the UN and for giving him a copy of his book, *The Corporate Citizen*. The UN is a pretty big deal. It is a place where the world can cooperate on the most contentious issues of the day – and I had a place to speak at the COP26 United Nations climate summit, 2021.

The panel included Sophie Howe, Wales' Future Generations Commissioner, the guardian of the Welsh Well-Being of Future Generations Act of 2015. Other panellists included City of Swansea councillor Andrea Lewis and representatives of the One Planet Standard – a new way of measuring and accounting for the impact an organisation and individuals' activities have on their natural environment – as well as an assessor and a small business owner.

It was 11 November, Remembrance Day, and the synchronicity of being wished well by the godfather of good governance was punctuated by the passing of former President of South Africa F.W de Klerk that morning.

Arriving at the venue, we passed the heavily protected Blue Zone where world leaders were finalising the text on the COP26 agreement. The police presence reminded me of the sight of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, accompanied by about a 100 police officers, boarding the train we had just disembarked from at Glasgow Central Station the day before.

What was I going to say, and how could I calm the situation? I had to make it personal, practical and progressive. I collaborated with the audience to work with me on flipping the script on global warming to instead bring about global chilling. People change, events happen, and when a system no longer works, people will want to change it.

But no crisis was ever effectively managed while panicking. The dynamics of governance kick off when people trust their leaders sufficiently to cooperate with the plan they map out. I explained how people could manage their climate anxiety by successfully completing small manageable tasks, without starting a war over capitalism or the recycling. And that by doing less, not more, we could all cooperate on creating a better, fairer future for all.

Good governance because we only have one planet, one decade and one generation to ensure a future that is habitable. Let's work calmly together to establish our own wellbeing of future generations act – as well as global UN directives to develop a sustainable future that begins now.