Confessions of a True-Blue Tory

Patricia Finney

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I was born anti-Communist. My mother was a refugee from Stalin and Communist Hungary and very Conservative. Her bed-time stories were full of real-life hair-raising escapes and the villains were always the Germans or the Communists.

Her father had been a Hungarian Liberal politician and one of his sayings was: "First the Fascists wanted to kill me; then the Nazis wanted to kill me; then the Communists wanted to kill me. I must be doing something right."

So family tradition ensured that I was deaf to the blandishments of socialism. There were other reasons.

Comprehensive

For the whole time I was at the excellent local grammar school, it was under threat of being turned into a comprehensive by the Labour government and the wicked witch of the east, Barbara Castle MP. Or that Communist cow, according to my mother.

The students there were nearly 50% Jewish and I had no idea why anybody would want to be anti-Semitic, was enthusiastically pro-Israel as well. Although I was a Catholic, I admired the Jewish girls who, unlike me, were both bright and hard-working. (I didn't do working, I was too busy writing stories.) Unfortunately quite a lot of them became enthusiastic supporters of the Socialist Workers Party, or were Trotskyites or Marxists and it never occurred to me that they might have their reasons. After all, some had parents or grandparents with concentration camp tattoos on their arm. Anyway, I thought they were silly to believe in fairytales like workers' paradises and the like.

Young Conservatives

So off I trotted to Young Conservatives in Finchley where I hoped for interesting political discussions, which I've always enjoyed. I got pompous young men who called girls "totty." I remember trying to convert some of them to the Libertarianism of the science fiction writers I loved, like Robert Heinlein, which troubled and shocked them because political argument was coming out of a region above my rivetingly huge bust.

I persisted for a while, then gave it up as a bad job. The one bright spot was that we had gone into Europe at the beginning of 1973, so I could get a Eurorail card to travel in Europe with no visas. In 1975 I campaigned in the original referendum on whether to stay in — for Remain, of course, which was Conservative policy. I wasn't even eligible to vote, but we won with 67%.

Oxbridge

And then I went to Oxbridge, laughed at urgent invitations from the Trots and the Marxists, declined Labour and Liberals and joined the University Conservative Association.

At the time Labour were still in power — with the Callaghan government. The big issue in the student union of my lefty college was whether the college should accept any more money from the Shah of Iran. In the middle of much self-righteousness and many motions condemning the college for accepting the loot, the Iranian Revolution broke out.

The Trots and Marxists were ecstatic. Iran would soon be a worker's paradise!

Then the Ayatollah Khomeini flew to Tehran in February 1979 and their lovely revolution turned all horrid and religious and puritanical and extremely anti-feminist. The sheer cognitive dissonance nearly caused the heads of many of the female Trots and Marxists to explode.

I laughed at them. "When you start a revolution, you don't know where it will end up," I told them, being a History student. "Look at the French Revolution and Robespierre." I wasn't very popular.

This confirmed me in my Conservatism. You don't want revolution, I thought, you want gradual evolution, because revolutions destroy so much more than just a political party.

Problems

There were some problems with the Conservatives though: I discovered that some of the other members were very anti-Semitic. One favourite drunken ditty went to the tune of Jingle Bells: "Riding through the Reich, in a big Mercedes Benz, killing lots of Kikes, making lots of friends…" I had to ask someone what a "Kike" was, but they thought that was quite cute and continued to ogle my breasts.

To my shame, I did nothing about this — I just thought they'd grow out of it.

Thatcher

Then Margaret Thatcher swept to power by a landslide on the 4th May 1979. The Conservative Association victory party on the night of the election was riotous and I don't remember much about it. I was genuinely ecstatic: she was a woman, that was all that mattered.

Fast forward a few years. The financial Big Bang happened in the City of London and many of the rackety young men I knew became very wealthy working for merchant banks, stock trading firms and being forex dealers. I couldn't persuade any financial corporate entity to hire me — probably rightly. Yes, I did some cocaine. I found it a disappointment: it made my nose hurt and it made everybody else gabble tediously. I got much more of a hit from chocolate.

Some of those rackety young men became Tory bigwigs and grandees thirty years on. It's very strange to see them now.

Poll tax riot

The first crack appeared with the Poll Tax riots in 1990. I had instantly understood the logic behind the Poll Tax — poor people wouldn't want to pay it and would thus disenfranchise themselves. I thought this was a stupid idea. Thanks to my grammar school — which you had to pass an exam to get into — I had met plenty of very smart people who were working class or poor. Why on earth did Mrs Thatcher think she could get away with something so blatantly anti-democratic.

It turned out she couldn't. The Poll Tax riots proved that the despised poor could work out what she was up to and didn't like it.

Intelligence

She had ignored the important fact that intelligence is "normally distributed." This means that if, say, 20% of a population are intelligent, that does not mean that just the upper 20% of the population, or the middle classes, are intelligent. It means that in every class 20% of them will be intelligent: given that there are a lot more people in the working/lower classes than in the upper/middle classes, numerically more people in the working/lower class will be intelligent.

Certainly, you can do a lot to blunt the intelligence of

working/lower class people. You can make sure they don't get a decent education, that their nutrition and living standards are lower, that their families aren't stable. You can also arrange for there to be plenty of illegal drugs around for the bolder adolescents to get addicted to. But you must never ever mistake lack of education or opportunity for lack of intelligence and you should always arrange society so that there are ladders up out of the gutter.

If you don't do this, if you make it so that intelligent working/lower class people can see no way to better themselves, to climb out of the gutter, they will eventually revolt, and you will be looking at a revolution. Since the invention of gunpowder, the outcome is no longer an inevitable victory for the ruling class.

Didn't she understand that? Oh well, I thought, she's been in power for more than eight years which history shows is the maximum a sane human can stay at the top without going crazy. She's just gone bonkers.

New Labour

Yet by 1997 I'd realised that the New Labour party, having got rid of their Trots and Marxists and tamed the trade unions, was a lot closer to what I thought of as Conservatism than the Tories. To me and probably a lot of other unhappy Tories, Tony Blair's social democracy was much closer to what I wanted. So for the first time, I voted Labour, and I enjoyed the election broadcast with my husband. He stayed up for Portillo, I didn't because somebody had to take the kids to school in the morning.

Expectations

Fast forward to 2010 and the hung parliament, and the tripling of university fees. Everybody except Clegg himself knew he'd made a massive mistake in allowing this: sure enough, the LibDems lost 49 of their 57 seats in the next election in May 2015 and Nick Clegg lost his seat. Every student who got clobbered by the increase in fees will forever remember NOT that it was the Tories wot dunnit, but that the LibDems had allowed it.

There's an important point about expectations here: the Tories get away with doing dastardly things because they are understood to be bastards who are only in it for the power and the money. Old Etonian chaps, like Boris, especially get away with it because their chappishness makes them appear rather rumpled and sweet, whereas in fact some of them, like Boris, are more ruthlessly ambitious than a shoal of piranha.

The Liberals and Labour are expected to have more lofty aims in mind and suffer terribly in the right-wing media if they are found not to be totally lily-white innocents (and also if they are). Labour suffer again if any of them are found to have more than tuppence and a handkerchief in their patched trousers.

Austerity

By the 2015 election, it was clear that something strange had happened to the Tory party. It wasn't just the swivel-eyed Brexit tendency taking over, it was the addiction to Austerity.

Economic orthodoxy in the shape of John Maynard Keynes says that after a crash or during a depression, you should stimulate demand by pumping money into the economy, particularly the lower levels.

After the 2007–8 Crash, the US and UK governments used quantitative easing to pump money into the banks. No bankers stood trial nor went to jail for their outrageous frauds. They got truckloads of money — which they naturally kept — and basically an invitation to repeat the whole process, which they have accepted.

Instead the Tories put the squeeze on the working/lower classes — or as chaps tend to refer to them, the Plebs. (Latin you know.)

Wages were held down, trades unions were crippled, with the help of the right-wing media. And the Tories began the deliberate hollowing out and starving of the NHS as part of Austerity because the NHS is, in itself, a mighty redistributor of money. All the doctors, nurses, radiographers, care assistants, cleaners get paid by the government and then spend their salaries on living. It acts almost like a money irrigation system.

Poverty

By this time, I had experienced poverty (when my husband was dying of cancer) and knew many people who were poor — though they staunchly regarded themselves as middle class. I was no longer the same libertarian right wing idiot I had been.

I had realised (duh!) that Libertarianism only works if you're young and strong and have no dependents. I'd seen the stupidification of the Rich Bubble working on people I knew. I saw David Cameron's astonishment and hurt when ambulance drivers struck over £5 a week — you could see him thinking, but why would they do that, it's small change? This is a man who has never ever in his life had to add up his purchases in the trolley as he went around the supermarket so he could afford to pay for it all at the check-out.

Further, I was hearing from less fortunate friends about sanctions on benefit — basically the staff at the benefits office now had the power to take away peoples' benefits, with no hope of getting any money for at least 5 weeks, more likely several months. Already poor people faced destitution, homelessness and starvation at the benefit office's whim.

The Tories had weaponised benefits against the people they were supposed to help.

That sheer Victorian cruelty and meanness, turned me against the whole Tory party.

Trickle-down economics — where you reward the rich and the money eventually gets to the poor — turned out not to happen in practice. The rich don't spend the extra money; they keep it in offshore accounts and don't even pay taxes on it.

Grey pall

Meanwhile the grey pall of poverty steadily trickled up from the 'feckless' poor to nurses and other people working in once-good jobs who found they had to go to food banks in order not to starve.

Wages were held but inflation continued at its normal low levels — money is a terrible store of value, you know? For many ordinary middle-class people, the Austerity years meant a slowly tightening screw as inflation bit into the value of their money, but wages remained stagnant.

So why did the Tories do it? Why did they deliberately do the opposite of what any economist would have told them to do — instead of stimulating the economy they starved it. Why?

Because they were scared of inflation. They believed that the truckloads of money they'd given to the banks would eventually "trickle down" and cause inflation. Inflation drops the value of things like mortgages so they cost much less in value to pay back, unless the interest rates are high enough. Inflation is probably the only thing Rich Bubble people are really terrified of because it eats the value of their stashes of cash. If wages can rise along with inflation, working people can often survive perfectly well so

long as inflation doesn't go too high. People with savings, capital and fixed incomes get clobbered like the banks. That had happened in the 80s and the late Boomers didn't fancy going through it again.

So the Tory government kept the caps on wages, they treated everyone on benefits as if they were one of the mythical scroungers that the Daily Mail loves to bellow about. They even managed to sell the idea of "We're all in it together," as if Austerity was some kind of natural disaster instead of government policy.

You really can't fault Cameron on his marketing savvy.

And the right-wing media also managed to convince many of the people slowly being squeezed to death in the Austerity clamp, that it was all the fault of those naughty migrants and the EU.

Come 2016 and Cameron kept his election promise to hold a referendum to decide on Leaving the EU or Remaining. Cameron's idea was for Leave to lose which would get the increasingly ideological Eurosceptic wing of his party off his neck. He was so convinced he would win — living as he did in his Rich Bubble in the Cotswolds and in France — that he incompetently didn't make sure the referendum required a supermajority of, say, 70% to decide for such a massive constitutional change as leaving the EU.

Presumably he hadn't seen the Wasteland slowly encroach on High Streets all over the country, the shops shutting until only cafes, charity shops, hairdressers, pound shops, betting shops and pawnbrokers were left. Part of that was the effect of internet shopping, yes, but it was also the effect of the terrible drought of money called Austerity. Nobody could afford to shop on the High Street any more. People hunkered down in their houses or flats and didn't go out so they wouldn't spend. And blamed it on migrants and the EU as they'd been taught.

I will never forget the faces of Michael Gove and Boris Johnson as they came to the podium to receive the cheers of the Eurosceptics because they had won the referendum by 3.1%. They looked exactly like boys who had been playing with fireworks and accidentally burned down the school. They were shocked and bashful.

Not lunatics

That soon changed of course. The Eurosceptic wing took over the party and turned out to be the swivel-eyed Brexiters I mentioned earlier.

I'd like to say they were lunatics, but they weren't. Some of them had a plan. If Britain crashes out of the EU with no deal, the pound and British stocks and shares will take a hammering. If you had happened to have the foresight to bet against the pound and British shares, Brexit would mean big bucks for you. The hit will be taken by the economy as a whole, of course, but some people stand to make billions. Or of course to lose billions if Britain doesn't crash out. You can understand why they're so hectic about it.

If you are an MP and you short the pound and British shares and then do your best by your parliamentary activities to cause Britain to crash out of the EU — is that insider dealing? Or something worse? If you get together with fellow MPs to do it as a consortium, is that worse?

I must point out here that a financially-literate friend of mine keeps telling me that it's perfectly normal for hedge funds to do this sort of thing. And I keep thinking, yes, but not while they're a sitting MP.

Uglier than Marxism

The Tory party, which had always been run by people in it for the money and the power, which made them predictable, suddenly went as ideological as the most enthusiastic Socialist Workers' Party member of my youth. The ideologies were even uglier than Marxism. Social Darwinism is a nasty creed — basically the rich get richer and the poor get dead, and thus improve the gene pool by taking their genes out of it. Neoliberalism — which has nothing to do with liberals by the way — basically means that the markets are God and can do no wrong and Capitalism means just a money free-for-all for massive corporations and the financial classes. Small people and small companies can get out of the way or die. There's a pattern emerging here.

Attractive

Yet I still find many of the old-fashioned Conservative values attractive. The idea of independence, of working hard and earning your own money, the idea of properly functioning capitalism — not predatory capitalism — where competition (and anti-trust laws) keep the companies honest.

Most of the people who voted Leave are patriotic and love England; they didn't vote for the chaos of the last three years and they didn't vote for crippling the economy by crashing out of Europe. They voted for the England of their childhood and teens, for a greener, less confusing country with no petty rules. Those romantic images of cricket on the village green, bicycles home to tea, the Royal Navy in command, Agatha Christie, the Few… They pull on heartstrings, make us nostalgic. They're longed for by people too young to have actually seen them. They are symbols of a time when England was at its best, which is why we harp on about it so much. But we're right for the wrong reasons.

Kind and generous

My mother and her parents came to England in 1949, political refugees from Stalinist Hungary. It wasn't easy but they were allowed in as refugees, which they wouldn't be today. The country was almost broke after spending the entire Empire to stop the Nazis; there was still rationing, living conditions were poor. But the Labour Attlee government had set up the new National Health Service and it had started building council housing to replace the housing stock which had been demolished by the Luftwaffe. The Welfare State started there. Attlee's Austerity was a very different thing from Cameron's. It was actually a magnificent, hopeful thing to do.

English people were kind and generous to my mother and her parents — she never forgot that. They were kind and generous to the refugees after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution as well. That kindness and generosity is the foundation of the NHS and what used to be our social safety net.

We're right to mourn its loss and we're right to feel nostalgic for a time when England was on its uppers but put together the Welfare state.

Massive change

So now it's time for one of those massive changes that the British electorate specialises in: 1979, 1997, 2019. We urgently need to put the stoppers on Cameron's Austerity — and if you believe Boris's scared waffle about ending it, you're a lot more trusting than I am. We need to stop toying with selling off the NHS and deliberately starving it of funds.

In my view we also need to stay in the EU and continue to

trade with the largest trading bloc in the world, and the second largest economy. The largest economy in the world does not like the way the EU keeps snapping at its heels, which is why the Americans will do their best to get us to leave. Did they help the Russians to use Facebook as a propaganda machine against us in 2016?

However, if we have to leave, let's at least leave with a halfway sensible deal and accept that it will take at least ten years to sort out the details. Let's have no more of this infantile "get Brexit done" as if it was homework.

Corbyn has been a Eurosceptic for years and is more naturally a Brexiteer than either Michael Gove or the havering Boris. I like his offer: negotiate a sensible deal and then put it to a referendum versus Remain. I think that will give us a final acceptable answer on the most divisive argument in our history, possibly since the Popish Plot.

Conservative

Why have I gone on at this length? Because I feel that although many of my values have changed, I am still basically conservative. I want to conserve things, not destroy them. In fact, I feel that Conservatism has left me, not the other way around. Even Corbyn's manifesto is full of things that have been done in Europe and found to work well. It's fully costed. He's the economic conservative now.

At the moment I'm living in Hungary which has problems of its own. Some Brexiters I know seem to feel uncomfortable that I'm an immigrant in another country, as if I should just stay put in England.

No. Living in a foreign country gives you a good perspective on what's going on in the UK and I've done my best to keep up. (I've already voted, by the way.) As Rudyard Kipling said, "What do they know of England, who only England know?"

Are English people still kind and generous? I'm not sure. I think so, and try to ignore the incidents of racism and bullying I see on social media — which is a very poor guide to the temperament of a nation.

As far as my Hungarian friend are concerned, the Brits have collectively taken leave of their senses. No one is even slightly envious of our situation. I'm often asked what I think of Brexit and I always warn them that they're going to get a rant and are they sure they want to know?

Appalled

I'm writing this on the 3 December 2019, nine days away from the most important election in a generation, which the Tories could well win. I am appalled at the prospect.

We urgently need a Green Revolution to start to cope with global heating; we desperately need to kill the ugly policy of Austerity; we must rescue our NHS from the people who want to sell it to the Yanks, first tripling the cost of medication, at least. After Brexit we won't be able to say no.

I'm not a Corbyn worshipper — he has plenty of faults but when you compare him with Boris and his chums, you know which is the grown up in the room and it's not the Yellow-crested Waffler.

So if you've voted Tory all your life; if you feel despair at being asked to give your precious vote to Boris, a chap who despises you; if you're even considering voting Green or the Brexit party, because you rightly feel that not voting is simply wrong; stop. Take a deep breath. Hold your nose.

Vote Labour.

Toys 'R' Us Is Open for Business Again, But There's a Bizarre Catch [Updated]

Toys "R" Us has re-opened its doors, launching the first of two new stores planned for the holiday season after closing 800 of them last year. You might think, great, it's time to become a Toys "R" Us…

Toys "R" Us has re-opened its doors, launching the first of two new stores planned for the holiday season after closing 800 of them last year. You might think, great, it's time to become a Toys "R" Us kid again, but I'd keep thinking like a grownup for a bit longer. Something's different about these new stores.

The first new Toys "R" Us store opened on November 30 at the Garden State Plaza mall in Paramus, New Jersey. The 6,000-square foot space is designed for experience play, with rooms dedicated to popular toys and brands, like Lego, Nerf, Paw Patrol, and LOL Surprise. Kids can test out toys before buying them—if they're not available in the store's limited stock, there are several interactive screens scattered throughout the store to make online purchases on the Toys "R" Us website.

But here's where things get strange: Toys "R" Us doesn't seem to actually own what it's selling. Instead, the former toy giant has become a marketplace leasing out space to different brands where they can promote and sell their own goods. That's not all: The Toys "R" Us website is powered through Target. Every single toy and product we clicked on at the website featured a link to buy the toy through Target. As far as we can tell, Toys "R" Us isn't technically selling anything on its own.

Don't count Geoffrey the Giraffe out just yet.

There's also the little detail in an NBC report that b8ta, the company who partnered with Tru Kids to create the new Toys "R" Us store, has installed dozens of sensors in the ceiling of the store to "monitor traffic patterns and shopper cadence" to see where kids and parents are going and what brands they're more attracted to. That's right: Toys "R" Us is monitoring where kids go to produce data for brands.

This all comes after Toys "R" Us closed 800 stores across the country last year, after private equity firms had saddled the company with millions in debt after a buyout. The company filed for bankruptcy and auctioned off most of its assets. About 30,000 former employees were laid off in summer 2018 without any severance or benefits—they ultimately received a $20 million severance fund after filing a lawsuit. The new store in New Jersey did hold hiring events for former Toys "R" Us employees before opening jobs to the general public.

The second Toys "R" Us is scheduled to open December 7 at the Galleria in Houston, Texas. It will also feature sensors that monitor kids' behavior inside the store. According to NBC, the plan is to have at least 10 stores by the end of 2020, including a New York flagship store.

Clarification: b8ta CEO Vibhu Norby shared a statement to io9 about the definition of "shopper cadence" in store monitoring:

"Shopper cadence doesn't mean cadence as in voice. It means as in rhythm/frequency, as the word is used in a business context. We in no way monitor, track, or record what people say in the stores."

Correction 12/5/2019, 9:00 a.m.: A previous version of this

article asserted the sensors were monitoring and tracking voices when in fact they are monitoring the flow of where people are in the stores at any given time to see which items they are attracted to. Our post has been updated and we regret the error.

Update 12/5/2019, 10:30 a.m.: After making our correction we asked b8ta to further clarify how the data is being collected, how long it's stored for, and whether shoppers are notified the technology is in use in the stores. They declined to comment.

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The Collapse of Civilization May Have Already Begun

"It is now too late to stop a future collapse of our societies because of climate change." These are not the words of a tinfoil hat-donning survivalist. This is from a paper delivered by a senior…

"It is now too late to stop a future collapse of our societies because of climate change."

These are not the words of a tinfoil hat-donning survivalist. This is from a paper delivered by a senior sustainability academic at a leading business school to the European Commission in Brussels, earlier this year. Before that, he delivered a similar message to a UN conference: "Climate change is now a planetary emergency posing an existential threat to humanity."

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In the age of climate chaos, the collapse of civilization has moved from being a fringe, taboo issue to a more mainstream concern.

As the world reels under each new outbreak of crisis—record heatwaves across the Western hemisphere, devastating fires across the Amazon rainforest, the slow-moving Hurricane Dorian, severe ice melting at the poles—the question of how bad things might get, and how soon, has become increasingly urgent.

The fear of collapse is evident in the framing of movements such as 'Extinction Rebellion' and in resounding warnings that business-as-usual means heading toward an uninhabitable planet.

But a growing number of experts not only point at the looming possibility that human civilization itself is at risk; some believe that the science shows it is already too late to prevent collapse. The outcome of the debate on this is obviously critical: it throws light on whether and how societies should adjust to this uncertain landscape.

Yet this is not just a scientific debate. It also raises difficult moral questions about what kind of action is warranted to prepare for, or attempt to avoid, the worst. Scientists may disagree about the timeline of collapse, but many argue that this is entirely beside the point. While scientists and politicians quibble over timelines and half measures, or how bad it'll all be, we are losing precious time. With the stakes being total collapse, some scientists are increasingly arguing that we should fundamentally change the structure of society just to be safe.

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Jem Bendell, a former consultant to the United Nations and longtime Professor of Sustainability Leadership at the University of Cumbria's Department of Business, delivered a paper in May 2019 explaining how people and communities might "adapt to climate-induced disruption."

Bendell's thesis is not only that societal collapse due to climate change is on its way, but that it is, in effect, already here. "Climate change will disrupt your way of life in your lifetimes," he told the audience at a climate change conference organized by the European Commission.

Devastating consequences, like "the cascading effects of widespread and repeated harvest failures" are now unavoidable, Bendell's paper says.

He argues this is not so much a doom-and-gloom scenario as a case of waking up to reality, so that we can do as much as we can to save as many lives as possible. His recommended response is what he calls "Deep Adaptation," which requires going beyond "mere adjustments to our existing economic system and infrastructure, in order to prepare us for the breakdown or collapse of normal societal functions."

Bendell's message has since gained a mass following and high-level attention. It is partly responsible for inspiring the new wave of climate protests reverberating around the world.

In March, he launched the Deep Adaptation Forum to connect and support people who, in the face of "inevitable" societal collapse, want to explore how they can "reduce suffering, while saving more of society and the natural world." Over the last six months, the Forum has gathered more than 10,000 participants. More than 600,000 people have downloaded Bendell's paper, called Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating our Climate Tragedy, published by the University of Cumbria's Institute of Leadership and Sustainability (IFALS). And many of the key organizers behind the Extinction Rebellion (XR) campaign joined the protest movement after reading it.

"There will be a near-term collapse in society with serious ramifications for the lives of readers," concludes that paper, released in 2017.

Catastrophe is "probable," it adds, and extinction "is possible." Over coming decades, we will see the escalating impacts of the fossil fuel pollution we have already pumped into the atmosphere and oceans. Even if we ceased emissions tomorrow, Bendell argues, the latest climate science shows that "we are now in a climate emergency, which will increasingly disrupt our way of life… a societal collapse is now inevitable within the lifetimes of readers of this paper."

Bendell puts a rough timeline on this. Collapse will happen within 10 years and inflict disruptions across nations, involving "increased levels of malnutrition, starvation, disease, civil conflict, and war."

Yet this diagnosis opens up far more questions than it answers. I was left wondering: Which societies are at risk of collapsing due to climate change, and when? Some societies or all societies? Simultaneously or sequentially? Why some rather than others? And how long will the collapse process take? Where will it start, and in what sector? How will that impact others sectors? Or will it take down all sectors of societies in one fell swoop? And what does any of this imply for whether, or how, we might prepare for collapse?

In attempting to answer these questions, I spoke to a wide-range of scientists and experts, and took a deep dive into the obscure but emerging science of how societies and civilizations collapse. I wanted to understand not just whether Bendell's forecast was right, but to find out what a range experts from climate scientists to risk analysts were unearthing about the

possibility of our societies collapsing in coming years and decades.

The emerging science of collapse is still, unfortunately, a nascent field. That's because it's an interdisciplinary science that encompasses not only the incredibly complex, interconnected natural systems that comprise the Earth System, but also has to make sense of how those systems interact with the complex, interconnected social, political, economic, and cultural systems of the Human System.

What I discovered provoked a wide range of emotions. I was at times surprised and shocked, often frightened, sometimes relieved. Mostly, I was unsettled. Many scientists exposed flaws in Bendell's argument. Most rejected the idea of inevitable near-term collapse outright. But to figure out whether a near-term collapse scenario of some kind was likely led me far beyond Bendell. A number of world leading experts told me that such a scenario might, in fact, be far more plausible than conventionally presumed.

According to Penn State professor Michael Mann, one of the world's most renowned climate scientists, Bendell's grasp of the climate science is deeply flawed.

"To me, this paper is a perfect storm of misguidedness and wrongheadedness," he told me.

Bendell's original paper had been rejected for publication by the peer-reviewed Sustainability Accounting, Management and Policy Journal. According to Bendell, the changes that editorial reviewers said were necessary to make the article fit for publication made no sense. But among them, one referee questioned whether Bendell's presentation of climate data actually supported his conclusion: "I am not sure that the extensive presentation of climate data supports the core argument of the paper in a meaningful way."

In his response, sent in the form of a letter to the journal's chief editor, Bendell wrote: "Yet the summary of science is the core of the paper as everything then flows from the conclusion of that analysis. Note that the science I summarise is about what is happening right now, rather than models or theories of complex adaptive systems which the reviewer would have preferred."

But in Mann's view, the paper's failure to pass peer review was not simply because it didn't fit outmoded academic etiquette, but for the far more serious reason that it lacks scientific rigor. Bendell, he said, is simply "wrong on the science and impacts: There is no credible evidence that we face 'inevitable near-term collapse.'"

Dr. Gavin Schmidt, head of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, who is also world-famous, was even more scathing.

"There are both valid points and unjustified statements throughout," he told me about Bendell's paper. "Model projections have not underestimated temperature changes, not everything that is non-linear is therefore 'out of control.' Blaming 'increased volatility from more energy in the atmosphere' for anything is silly. The evidence for 'inevitable societal collapse' is very weak to non-existent."

Schmidt did not rule out that we are likely to see more instances of local collapse events. "Obviously we have seen such collapses in specific locations associated with extreme storm impacts," he said. He listed off a number of examples—Puerto Rico, Barbuda, Haiti, and New Orleans—explaining that while local collapses in certain regions could be possible, it's a "much harder case to make" at a global level. "And this paper doesn't make it. I'm not particularly sanguine about what is going to happen, but this is not based on anything real."

Jeremy Lent, systems theorist and author of The Patterning Instinct: A Cultural History of Humanity's Search for Meaning, argues that throughout Bendell's paper he frequently slips between the terms "inevitable," "probably," and "likely."

"If he chooses to go with his gut instinct and conclude collapse is inevitable, he has every right to do so," Lent said, "but I believe it's irresponsible to package this as a scientifically valid conclusion, and thereby criticize those who interpret the data otherwise as being in denial."

When I pressed Bendell on this issue, he pushed back against the idea that he was putting forward a hard, scientifically-valid forecast, describing it as a "guess": "I say in the original paper that I am only guessing at when social collapse will occur. I have said or written that every time I mention that time horizon."

But why offer this guess at all? "The problem I have with the argument that I should not give a time horizon like 10 years is that not deciding on a time horizon acts as a psychological escape from facing our predicament. If we can push this problem out into 2040 or 2050, it somehow feels less pressing. Yet, look around. Already harvests are failing because of weather made worse by climate change."

Bendell points out that such impacts are already damaging more vulnerable, poorer societies than our own. He says it is only a matter of time before they damage the normal functioning of "most countries in the world."

According to Dr. Wolfgang Knorr, Principal Investigator at Lund University's Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services in a Changing Climate Program, the risk of near-term collapse should be taken far more seriously by climate scientists, given the fact that so much is unknown about climate tipping points: "I am not saying that Bendell is right or wrong. But the criticism of Bendell's points focuses too much on the detail and in that way studiously tries to avoid the bigger picture. The available data points to the fact that some catastrophic climate change is inevitable."

Bendell argues that the main trigger for some sort of collapse—which he defines as "an uneven ending of our normal modes of sustenance, security, pleasure, identity, meaning, and hope"—will come from accelerating failures in the global food system.

We know that it is a distinct possibility that so-called multi-breadbasket failures (when major yield reductions take place simultaneously across agricultural areas producing staple crops like rice, wheat, or maize) can be triggered by climate change—and have already happened.

As shown by American physicist Dr. Yaneer Ban Yam and his team at the New England Complex Systems Institute, in the years preceding 2011, global food price spikes linked to climate breakdown played a role in triggering the 'Arab Spring' uprisings. And according to hydroclimatologist Dr. Peter Gleick, climate-induced drought amplified the impact of socio-political and economic mismanagement, inflicting agricultural failures in Syria. These drove mass migrations within the country, in turn laying the groundwork for sectarian tensions that spilled over into a protracted conflict.

In my own work, I found that the Syrian conflict was not just triggered by climate change, but a range of intersecting factors—Syria's domestic crude oil production had peaked in the mid-90s, leading state revenues to hemorrhage as oil production and exports declined. When global climate chaos triggered food price spikes, the state had begun slashing domestic fuel and food subsidies, already reeling from the impact of economic mismanagement and corruption resulting in massive debt levels. And so, a large young population overwhelmed with unemployment and emboldened by decades of political repression took to the streets when they could not afford basic bread. Syria has since collapsed into ceaseless civil war.

This is a case of what Professor Thomas-Homer Dixon, University Research Chair in the University of Waterloo's Faculty of Environment, describes as "synchronous failure"—when multiple, interconnected stressors amplify over time before triggering self-reinforcing feedback loops which result in them all failing at the same time. In his book, The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity and the Renewal of Civilization, he explains how the resulting convergence of crises overwhelms disparate political, economic and administrative functions, which are not designed for such complex events.

From this lens, climate-induced collapse has already happened, though it is exacerbated by and amplifies the failure of myriad human systems. Is Syria a case-study of what is in store for the world? And is it inevitable within the next decade?

In a major report released in August, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned that hunger has already been rising worldwide due to climate impacts. A senior NASA scientist, Cynthia Rosenzweig, was a lead author of the study, which warned that the continued rise in carbon emissions would drive a rise in global average temperatures of 2°C in turn triggering a "very high" risk to food supplies toward mid-century. Food shortages would hit vulnerable, poorer regions, but affluent nations may also be in the firing line. As a new study from the UK Parliamentary Environment Audit Committee concludes, fruit and vegetable imports to countries like Britain might be cut short if a crisis breaks out.

When exactly such a crisis might happen is not clear. Neither reports suggest it would result in the collapse of civilization, or even most countries, within 10 years. And the UN also emphasizes that it is not too late to avert these risks through a shift to organic and agro-ecological methods.

NASA's Gavin Schmidt acknowledged "increasing impacts from climate change on global food production," but said that a collapse "is not predicted and certainly not inevitable."

A few years ago, though, I discovered first-hand that a catastrophic collapse of the global food system is possible in coming decades if we don't change course. At the time I was a visiting research fellow at Anglia Ruskin University's Global Sustainability Institute, and I had been invited to a steering committee meeting for the Institute's Global Research Observatory (GRO), a research program developing new models of global crisis.

One particular model, the Dawe Global Security Model, was focused on the risk of another global food crisis, similar to what triggered the Arab Spring.

"We ran the model forward to the year 2040, along a business-as-usual trajectory based on 'do-nothing' trends—that is, without any feedback loops that would change the underlying trend," said institute director Aled Jones to the group of stakeholders in the room, which included UK government officials. "The results show that based on plausible climate trends, and a total failure to change course, the global food supply system would face catastrophic losses, and an unprecedented epidemic of food riots. In this scenario, global society essentially collapses as food production falls permanently short of consumption."

Jones was at pains to clarify that this model-run could not be taken as a forecast, particularly as mitigation policies are already emerging in response to concern about such an outcome: "This scenario is based on simply running the model forward," he said. "The model is a short-term model. It's not designed to run this long, as in the real world trends are always likely to change, whether for better or worse."

Someone asked, "Okay, but what you're saying is that if there is no change in current trends, then this is the outcome?"

"Yes," Jones replied quietly.

The Dawe Global Security Model put this potential crisis two decades from now. Is it implausible that the scenario might happen much earlier? And if so why aren't we preparing for this risk?

When I asked UN disaster risk advisor Scott Williams about a near-term global food crisis scenario, he pointed out that this year's UN flagship global disaster risk assessment was very much aware of the danger of another global "multiple breadbasket failure."

"A projected increase in extreme climate events and an increasingly interdependent food supply system pose a threat to global food security," warned the UN Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction released in May. "For instance, local shocks can have far-reaching effects on global agricultural markets."

Climate models we've been using are not too alarmist; they are consistently too conservative, and we have only recently understood how bad the situation really is.

Current agricultural modelling, the UN report said, does not sufficiently account for these complex interconnections. The report warns that "climate shocks and consequent crop failure in one of the global cereal breadbaskets might have knock-on effects on the global agricultural market. The turbulences are exacerbated if more than one of the main crop-producing regions suffers from losses simultaneously."

Williams, who was a coordinating lead author of the UN global disaster risk assessment, put it more bluntly: "In a nutshell, Bendell is closer to the mark than his critics."

He pointed me to the second chapter of the UN report which, he said, expressed the imminent risk to global civilization in a "necessarily politically desensitized" form. The chapter is "close to stating that 'collapse is inevitable' and that the methods that we—scientists, modellers, researchers, etc—are using are wholly inadequate to understand that nature of complex, uncertain 'transitions,' in other words, collapses."

Williams fell short of saying that such a collapse scenario was definitely unavoidable, and the UN report—while setting out an alarming level of risk—did not do so either. What they did make clear is that a major global food crisis could erupt unexpectedly, with climate change as a key trigger.

A new study by a team of scientists at Oxford, Bristol, and

Austria concludes that our current carbon emissions trajectory hugely increases this risk. Published in October in the journal Agricultural Systems, the study warns that the rise in global average temperatures is increasing the likelihood of "production shocks" affecting an increasingly interconnected global food system.

Surpassing the 1.5 °C threshold could potentially trigger major "production losses" of millions of tonnes of maize, wheat and soybean.

Right now, carbon dioxide emissions are on track to dramatically increase this risk of multi-breadbasket failures. Last year, the IPCC found that unless we reduce our emissions levels by five times their current amount, we could hit 1.5°C as early as 2030, and no later than mid-century. This would dramatically increase the risk of simultaneous crop failures, food production shocks and other devastating climate impacts.

In April this year, the European Commission's European Strategy and Policy Analysis System published its second major report to EU policymakers, Global Trends to 2030: Challenges and Choices for Europe. The report, which explores incoming national security, geopolitical and socio-economic risks, concluded: "An increase of 1.5 degrees is the maximum the planet can tolerate; should temperatures increase further beyond 2030, we will face even more droughts, floods, extreme heat and poverty for hundreds of millions of people; the likely demise of the most vulnerable populations—and at worst, the extinction of humankind altogether."

But the IPCC's newer models suggest that the situation is even worse than previously thought. Based on increased supercomputing power and sharper representations of weather systems, those new climate models—presented at a press conference in Paris in late September—reveal the latest findings of the IPCC's sixth assessment report now underway.

The models now show that we are heading for 7°C by the end of the century if carbon emissions continue unabated, two degrees higher than last year's models. This means the earth is far more sensitive to atmospheric carbon than previously believed.

This suggests that the climate models we've been using are not too alarmist; they are consistently too conservative, and we have only recently understood how bad the situation really is.

I spoke to Dr. Joelle Gergis, a lead author on the IPCC's sixth assessment report, about the new climate models. Gergis admitted that at least eight of the new models being produced for the IPCC by scientists in the US, UK, Canada and France suggest a much higher climate sensitivity than older models of 5°C or warmer. But she pushed back against the idea that these findings prove the inevitability of collapse, which she criticized as outside the domain of climate science. Rather, the potential implications of the new evidence are not yet known.

"Yes, we are facing alarming rates of change and this raises the likelihood of abrupt, non-linear changes in the climate system that may cause tipping points in the Earth's safe operating space," she said. "But we honestly don't know how far away we are from that just yet. It may also be the case that we can only detect that we've crossed such a threshold after the fact."

In an article published in August in the Australian magazine The Monthly, Dr. Gergis wrote: "When these results were first released at a climate modelling workshop in March this year, a flurry of panicked emails from my IPCC colleagues flooded my inbox. What if the models are right? Has the Earth already crossed some kind of tipping point? Are we experiencing abrupt climate change right now?"

Half the Great Barrier Reef's coral system has been wiped out at current global average temperatures which are now hovering around 1°C higher than pre-industrial levels. Gergis describes this as "catastrophic ecosystem collapse of the largest living organism on the planet." At 1.5°C, between 70 and 90 percent of reef-building corals are projected to be destroyed, and at 2°C, some 99 percent may disappear: "An entire component of the Earth's biosphere—our planetary life support system—would be eliminated. The knock-on effects on the 25 percent of all marine life that depends on coral reefs would be profound and immeasurable… The very foundation of human civilization is at stake."

But Gergis told me that despite the gravity of the new models, they do not prove conclusively that past emissions will definitely induce collapse within the next decade.

"While we are undeniably observing rapid and widespread climate change across the planet, there is no concrete evidence that suggests we are facing 'an inevitable, near term society collapse due to climate change,'" she said. "Yes, we are absolutely hurtling towards conditions that will create major instabilities in the climate system, and time is running out, but I don't believe it is a done deal just yet."

Yet it is precisely the ongoing absence of strong global policy that poses the fatal threat. According to Lund University climate scientist Wolfgang Knorr, the new climate models mean that practically implementing the Paris Accords target of keeping temperatures at 1.5 degrees is now extremely difficult. He referred me to his new analysis of the challenge published on the University of Cumbria's ILFAS blog, suggesting that the remaining emissions budget given by the IPCC "will be exhausted at the beginning of 2025." He also noted that past investment in fossil-fuel and energy infrastructure alone will put us well over that budget.

The scale of the needed decarbonization is so great and so rapid, according to Tim Garrett, professor of atmospheric sciences at the University of Utah, that civilization would need to effectively "collapse" its energy consumption to avoid collapsing due to climate catastrophe. In a 2012 paper in Earth System Dynamics, he concluded therefore that "civilization may be in a double-bind."

"We still have time to try and avert the scale of the disaster, but we must respond as we would in an emergency"

In a previous paper in Climatic Change, Garrett calculated that the world would need to switch to non-carbon renewable energy sources at a rate of about 2.1 percent a year just to stabilize emissions. "That comes out [equivalent] to almost one new nuclear power plant per day," Garrett said. Although he sees this as fundamentally unrealistic, he concedes that a crash transition programme might help: "If society invests sufficient resources into alternative and new, non-carbon energy supplies, then perhaps it can continue growing without increasing global warming."

Gergis goes further, insisting that it is not yet too late: "We still have time to try and avert the scale of the disaster, but we must respond as we would in an emergency. The question is, can we muster the best of our humanity in time?"

There is no straightforward answer to this question. To get there, we need to understand not just climate science, but the nature, dynamics, and causes of civilizational collapse.

One of the most famous scientific forecasts of collapse was conducted nearly 50 years ago by a team of scientists at MIT. Their "Limits to Growth" (LTG) model, known as "World3," captured the interplay between exponential population and economic growth, and the consumption of raw materials and natural resources. Climate change is an implicit feature of the model.

LTG implied that business-as-usual would lead to civilizational breakdown, sometime between the second decade and middle of the 21st century, due to overconsumption of natural resources far beyond their rate of renewal. This would escalate costs, diminish returns, and accelerate environmental waste, ecosystem damage, and global heating. With more capital diverted to the cost of extracting resources, less is left to invest in industry and other social goods, driving long-term economic decline and political unrest.

The forecast was widely derided when first published, and its core predictions were often wildly misrepresented by commentators who claimed it had incorrectly forecast the end of the world by the year 2000 (it didn't).

Systems scientist Dennis Meadows had headed up the MIT team which developed the 'World3' model. Seven years ago, he updated the original model in light of new data with co-author Jorgen Randers, another original World3 team-member.

"For those who respect numbers, we can report that the highly aggregated scenarios of World3 still appear… to be surprisingly accurate," they wrote in Limits to Growth: the 30 year update. "The world is evolving along a path that is consistent with the main features of the scenarios in LTG."

One might be forgiven for suspecting that the old MIT team were just blowing their own horn. But a range of independent scientific reviews, some with the backing of various governments, have repeatedly confirmed that the LTG 'base scenario' of overshoot and collapse has continued to fit new data. This includes studies by Professor Tim Jackson of the University of Surrey, an economics advisor to the British government and Ministry of Defense; Australia's federal government scientific research agency CSIRO; Melbourne University's Sustainable Society Institute; and the Institute and Faculty of Actuaries in London.

"Collapse is not a very precise term. It is possible that there would be a general, drastic, uncontrolled decline in population, material use, and energy consumption by 2030 from climate change," Meadows told me when I asked him whether the LTG model shines any light on the risk of imminent collapse. "But I do not consider it to be a high probability event," he said. Climate change would, however, "certainly suffice to alter our industrial society drastically by 2100." It could take centuries or millennia for ecosystems to recover.

But there is a crucial implication of the LTG model that is often overlooked: what happens during collapse. During an actual breakdown, new and unexpected social dynamics might come into play which either worsen or even lessen collapse.

Those dynamics all depend on human choices. They could involve positive changes through reform in political leadership or negative changes such as regional or global wars.

That's why modelling what happens during the onset of collapse is especially tricky, because the very process of collapse alters the dynamics of change.

What if, then, collapse is not necessarily the end? That's the view of Ugo Bardi, of the University of Florence, who has developed perhaps the most intriguing new scientific framework for understanding collapse.

Earlier this year, Bardi and his team co-wrote a paper in the journal BioPhysical Economics and Resource Quality, drawing on the work of anthropologist Joseph Tainter at Utah State University's Department of Environment and Society. Tainter's seminal book, The Collapse of Complex Societies, concluded that societies collapse when their investments in social complexity reach a point of diminishing marginal returns.

Tainter studied the fall of the Western Roman empire, Mayan civilization, and Chaco civilization. As societies develop more complex and specialized bureaucracies to solve emerging problems, these new layers of problem-solving infrastructure generate new orders of problems. Further infrastructure is then developed to solve those problems, and the spiral of growth escalates.

As each new layer also requires a new 'energy' subsidy (greater consumption of resources), it eventually cannot produce enough resources to both sustain itself and resolve the problems generated. The result is that society collapses to a new equilibrium by shedding layers of complex infrastructure amassed in previous centuries. This descent takes between decades and centuries.

In his recent paper, Bardi used computer models to test how Tainter's framework stood-up. He found that diminishing returns from complexity were not the main driver of a system's decline; rather the decline in complexity of the system is due to diminishing returns from exploiting natural resources.

In other words, collapse is a result of a form of endless growth premised on the unsustainable consumption of resources, and the new order of increasingly unresolvable crises this generates.

In my view, we are already entering a perfect storm feedback loop of complex problems that existing systems are too brittle to solve. The collapse of Syria, triggered and amplified partly by climate crisis, did not end in Syria. Its reverberations have not only helped destabilize the wider Middle East, but contributed to the destabilization of Western democracies.

In January, a study in Global Environment Change found that the impact of "climatic conditions" on "drought severity" across the Middle East and North Africa amplified the "likelihood of armed conflict." The study concluded that climate change therefore played a pivotal role in driving the mass asylum seeking between 2011 and 2015—including the million or so refugees who arrived in Europe in 2015 alone, nearly 50 percent of whom were Syrian. The upsurge of people fleeing the devastation of their homes was a gift to the far-right, exploited by British, French and other nationalists campaigning for the break-up of the European Union, as well as playing a role in Donald Trump's political campaigning around The Wall.

To use my own terminology, Earth System Disruption (ESD) is driving Human System Destabilization (HSD). Preoccupied with the resulting political chaos, the Human System becomes even more vulnerable and incapable of ameliorating ESD. As ESD thus accelerates, it generates more HSD. The self-reinforcing cycle

continues, and we find ourselves in an amplifying feedback loop of disruption and destabilization.

Is there a way out of this self-destructive amplifying feedback loop? Bardi's work suggests there might be—that collapse can pave the way for a new, more viable form of civilization, whether or not countries and regions experience collapses, crises, droughts, famine, violence, and war as a result of ongoing climate chaos.

Bardi's analysis of Tainter's work extends the argument he first explored in his 2017 peer-reviewed study, The Seneca Effect: When Growth is Slow but Collapse is Rapid. The book is named after the Roman philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca, who once said that "fortune is of sluggish growth, but ruin is rapid."

Bardi examines a wide-range of collapse cases across human societies (from the fall of past empires, to financial crises and large-scale famines), in nature (avalanches) and through artificial structures (cracks in metal objects). His verdict is that collapse is not a "bug," but a "varied and ubiquitous phenomena" with multiple causes, unfolding differently, sometimes dangerously, sometimes not. Collapse also often paves the way for the emergence of new, evolutionary structures.

In an unpublished manuscript titled Before the Collapse: A Guide to the Other Side of Growth, due to be published by science publisher Springer-Nature next year, Bardi's examination of the collapse and growth of human civilizations reveals that after collapse, a "Seneca Rebound" often takes place in which new societies grow, often at a rate faster than preceding growth rates.

This is because collapse eliminates outmoded, obsolete structures, paving the way for new structures to emerge which often thrive from the remnants of the old and in the new spaces that emerge.

He thus explains the Seneca Rebound as "as an engine that propels civilizations forward in bursts. If this is the case, can we expect a rebound if the world's civilization goes through a new Seneca Collapse in the coming decades?"

Bardi recognizes that the odds are on a knife-edge. A Seneca Rebound after a coming collapse would probably have different features to what we have seen after past civilizational collapses and might still involve considerable violence, as past new civilizations often did—or may not happen at all.

"Very little if anything is being done to stop emissions and the general destruction of the ecosystem"

On our current trajectory, he said, "the effects of the destruction we are wreaking on the ecosystem could cause humans to go extinct, the ultimate Seneca Collapse." But if we change course, even if we do not avoid serious crises, we might lessen the blow of a potential collapse. In this scenario, "the coming collapse will be just one more of the series of previous collapses that affected human civilizations: it might lead to a new rebound."

It is in this possibility that Bardi sees the seeds of a new, different kind of civilization within the collapse of civilization-as-we-know-it.

I asked Bardi how soon he thought this collapse would happen. Although emphasizing that collapse is not yet inevitable, he said that a collapse of some kind within the next decade could be "very likely" if business-as-usual continues.

"Very little if anything is being done to stop emissions and the general destruction of the ecosystem," Bardi said. "So, an ecosystemic collapse is not impossible within 10 years."

Yet he was also careful to point out that the worst might be avoided: "On the other hand, there are many elements interacting that may change things a little, a lot, or drastically. We don't know how the system may react… maybe the system would react in a way that could postpone the worst."

The lesson is that even if collapse is imminent, all may not be lost. Systems theorist Jeremy Lent, author of The Patterning Instinct, draws on the work of the late University of Florida ecologist C. S. Holling, whose detailed study of natural ecosystems led him to formulate a general theory of social change known as the adaptive cycle.

Complex systems, whether in nature or in human societies, pass through four phases in their life cycle, writes Lent. First is a rapid growth phase of innovation and opportunity for new structures; second is a phase of stability and consolidation, during which these structures become brittle and resistant to change; third is a release phase consisting of breakdown, generating chaos and uncertainty; the fourth is reorganization, opening up the possibility that small, seemingly insignificant forces might drastically change the future of the forthcoming new cycle.

It is here, in the last two phases, that the possibility of triggering and shaping a Seneca Rebound becomes apparent. The increasing chaos of global politics, Lent suggests, is evidence that we are "entering the chaotic release phase," where the old order begins to unravel. At this point, the system could either regress, or it could reorganize in a way that enables a new civilizational rebound. "This is a crucially important moment in the system's life cycle for those who wish to change the predominant order."

So as alarming as the mounting evidence of the risk of collapse is, it also indicates that we are moving into a genuinely new and indeterminate phase in the life cycle of our current civilization, during which we have a radical opportunity to mobilize the spread of new ideas that can transform societies.

I have been tracking the risks of collapse throughout my career as a journalist and systems theorist. I could not find any decisive confirmation that climate change will inevitably produce near-term societal collapse.

But the science does not rule this out as a possibility. Therefore, dismissing the risk of some sort of collapse—whether by end of century, mid-century, or within the next 10 years—contravenes the implications of the most robust scientific models we have.

All the scientific data available suggests that if we continue on our current course of resource exploitation, human civilization could begin experiencing collapse within coming decades. Exactly where and how such a collapse process might take off is not certain; and whether it is already locked in is as yet unknown. And as NASA's Gavin Schmidt told me, local collapses are already underway.

From Syria to Brexit, the destabilizing socio-political impacts of ecosystemic collapse are becoming increasingly profound, far-reaching and intractable. In that sense, debating whether or not near-term collapse is inevitable overlooks the stark reality that we are already witnessing climate collapse.

And yet, there remains an almost total absence of meaningful conversation and action around this predicament, despite it being perhaps the most important issue of our times.

The upshot is that we don't know for sure what is round the

corner, and we need better conversations about how to respond to the range of possibilities. Preparation for worst-case scenarios does not require us to believe them inevitable, but vindicates the adoption of a rational, risk-based approach designed to proactively pursue the admirable goal for Deep Adaptation: safeguarding as much of society as possible.

Jem Bendell's Deep Adaptation approach, he told me, is not meant to provide decisive answers about collapse, but to catalyze conversation and action.

"For the Deep Adaptation groups that I am involved with, we ask people to agree that societal collapse is either likely, inevitable or already unfolding, so that we can have meaningful engagement upon that premise," he said. "Deep Adaptation has become an international movement now, with people mobilizing to share their grief, discuss what to commit to going forward, become activists, start growing food, all kinds of things."

Confronting the specter of collapse, he insisted is not grounds to give-up, but to do more. Not later, but right now, because we are already out of time in terms of the harm already inflicted on the planet: "My active and radical hope is that we will do all kinds of amazing things to reduce harm, buy time and save what we can," he said. "Adaptation and mitigation are part of that agenda. I also know that many people will act in ways that create more suffering."

Most of all, the emerging science of collapse suggests that civilization in its current form, premised on endless growth and massive inequalities, is unlikely to survive this century. It will either evolve into or be succeeded by a new configuration, perhaps an "ecological civilization", premised on a fundamentally new relationship with the Earth and all its inhabitants—or it will, whether slowly or more abruptly, regress and contract.

What happens next is still up to us. Our choices today will not merely write our own futures, they determine who we are, and what our descendants will be capable of becoming. As we look ahead, this strange new science hints to us at a momentous opportunity to become agents of change for an emerging paradigm of life and society that embraces, not exploits, the Earth. Because doing so is now a matter of survival.