

# A Good Crisis

*And how not to waste it*

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“Crisis? What Crisis?” is the memorable phrase attributed to former British Prime Minister Jim Callaghan, or Sunny Jim as he was nicknamed for his optimism. He supposedly said it in 1979 when he got off the plane, somewhat tanned, on his return from an economic conference in Guadeloupe. He was allegedly commenting on the state of public services in the UK but in fact, he never said these words. What he actually said to journalists was: “I don’t think other people in the world would share the view there is mounting chaos.” But *The Sun* headlined the story ‘Crisis? What Crisis?’ and the phrase became the stuff of legend.

‘PM plays down problems’ might have been a more accurate headline, however ‘Crisis? What crisis?’ suited *The Sun*’s editorial position and probably the mood of the nation. At the time, there were images in the news of rubbish in the streets, and reports of bodies lying unburied in mortuaries. Callaghan’s sanguine attitude, as portrayed by the media, was a disaster for him. Britain was approaching a general election, which Callaghan and the Labour Party duly lost to Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party.

This story illustrates the severe consequences for leaders of failing to understand what is happening around them during a crisis. It is no good defining the situation to suit your preferred style of leadership, although leaders do this again and again. You need to choose your leadership style on the basis of a correct analysis of the situation. The first step is deciphering accurately whether or not it really is a crisis, and this is where Callaghan fell by the wayside. But this is only the first step, and only the first thing that can go wrong.

What is more, handle a crisis well and there can be dividends. Rahm Emanuel was Barack Obama’s chief of staff when he famously said: “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. What I mean by that is it’s an opportunity to do things you couldn’t do before.” No-one is suggesting that a crisis is a happy thing – but it can lead to great good by prompting a radical re-evaluation of what went before.

## Varieties of crisis

One way into this is to consider the difference between a physical crisis, such as a heart attack, and a socially-constructed crisis, such as the global financial crisis. You may be surprised to hear the global financial crisis described in such a way, but in fact authority figures did use language to convince followers they were facing a particular type of crisis which required them to lead in a particular manner to solve it.

In 2007 the phrase 'sub-prime mortgages' began to make its way into the collective consciousness. It did not grab everyone's active attention, and many of us were not sure what it really meant. But then we entered a full-blown global financial crisis, which no-one could have missed. Depending on your preferred comparison it was the biggest since the Great Depression or 'since records began'. Perhaps we should have paid more attention to sub-prime mortgage defaults in the US a bit sooner.

Even when, in the UK, Northern Rock was nationalized in 2008, a consequence of its involvement in sub-prime loans, there was still great deal of rationalization and reassurance from government, and many of us thought it would pass. But eventually we all agreed that we are in a major crisis. And it was a particularly troubling one, since we did not have a collective sense of how to solve the problem, or even what the problem may be.

Moreover, in the UK (and indeed most of the developed world) we had become accustomed to having our governments solve such problems without much help from us. This dependency was reinforced by government itself. When discussing the emerging financial crisis in December 2008 in the House of Commons, the then prime-minister Gordon Brown had a famous slip of the tongue. He said: "We not only saved the world..." to jeering laughter on the opposition benches. He had meant to say "banks". A slip of the tongue, sure, but a useful insight into the deeply dysfunctional relationship that can develop between political elites, or indeed any leadership elite, and their followers.

Sometimes, however, we recognize a crisis very quickly, so quickly we are not conscious of any active observation or analysis before reaching the obvious conclusion. If someone has a heart attack, there is seldom if ever any argument, debate, or even discussion about the nature of the crisis or the need to take action. It is immediately self-evident that something must be done and the only question is what. But even this question is quickly dispensed with when someone with relevant medical expertise arrives on the scene. This expert will immediately be allowed to help the person who has suffered the heart attack. The job in the early stages of responding to such a crisis is all about survival and those of us without any relevant expertise will happily defer to experts.

Similarly, in less immediate and compelling crises, like those that happen in financial systems, we cede authority to elites in return for an assurance that they will solve all our problems for us. If we have no personal connection to the crisis, our period of involvement will have a definite start and finish. And it will probably be for a relatively short period of time. We are unlikely to give much thought to the circumstances that led to the crisis or to how it might be avoided in the future. We will just get on with our lives after the crisis in the same way that we did pre-crisis.

If, however, we have a personal involvement with the crisis, such as savings in Northern Rock, then our lives may have changed in a moment and we may have to spend the rest of them dealing with the aftermath of the crisis. The impact of a crisis depends on our (felt) proximity to it. If the heart attack happens to you, its impact will be very different from what it would be if you simply happen to be present when a stranger has a heart attack.

The nature of a 'global financial crisis' differs from a heart attack crisis and not just with regard to our felt proximity to it. The speed with which the former came to our notice was very different - over many months as opposed to over a minute or two. It also depends on whether or not we have the existing technical knowledge to deal with the crisis. If the heart attack victim gets the correct paramedic assistance within eight minutes, then the likelihood of survival will be high and success will be apparent within hours. We similarly hoped that the relevant financial experts could apply existing known technical knowledge to the 'global financial crisis'. And indeed, there were many politicians, like Gordon Brown, (the UK Prime Minister) telling us that this was the case.

However, it will be some time yet before we will know if the expert actions have worked. Increasingly it is looking less likely that there are any experts - in the sense of having seen the problem before and knowing what to do about it - who can solve the 'global financial crisis' for us. It is also starting to look more and more as if the actions that led to the 'global financial crisis' were actions for which many of us were individually and collectively responsible. Actions such as spending much more money than we had, and borrowing much more that we could afford to pay back.

We were all very happy to avoid any responsibility by blaming bankers. Almost nobody has talked about this evasion and it was never going to be a fashionable point of view. But the more we begin to understand the 'global financial crisis' the more we start to discover that the causes are more complex than we had first thought and that we are more responsible for the circumstances that created the crisis than we had hoped.

The parallels with a heart attack crisis are striking. If I were to survive a heart attack, it would be natural for me to hope that the experts can provide a technical fix which will allow me to return to living my life as usual. In the developed world,

there will almost certainly be technical work that can be done - up to and including giving me a new heart. But once this technical work has been completed, I then discover that my life expectancy depends more on the work I am prepared to do than on any further work the experts can do for me. I will need to change my lifestyle – stop smoking, cut back on alcohol, start exercising and eat more healthily. If I do not – if I avoid taking responsibility for my own behavior – then I am likely to suffer another heart attack. In other words, it is the person *with* the problem who will have to do most of the work on the problem.

And so it might also be with the ‘global financial crisis’. We are all going to have to do a lot of work on the problem. This will be work that none of us can be sure will succeed. It will be a series of experiments, a matter of trial and error, as we try to navigate our collective way forward to a new set of financial behaviors that do not result in another ‘global financial crisis’.

But dependency on experts to solve problems is extremely persistent. This persistence can be attributed to a mechanical world view often ascribed to Henry Ford and Frederick W. Taylor. Such a mechanical world view recognizes the role of people but tries to reduce or subjugate the human to the machine. Pre-eminent for the majority of the twentieth century, this has led to us acting as if all collective human activity can be understood as a unilinear process that converts inputs into outputs, for example steel into motor vehicles. The counterpoint to this mechanical view is the organic view, which is often associated with “systems thinking” and based in the science of ecology. This also often seeks to reduce or subjugate the human to the system, albeit an organic system.

But both the mechanical and organic world views ignore the role of language, the unique attribute of social systems. Both world views assume things are what they seem, and gloss over how we use language to construct reality, interpret the situation we face, and legitimize the way we decide to deal with it. This is why I described the global financial crisis as socially constructed. This is at the heart of the academic ideas that I will now sketch out. I want to bring in this human element of language, and suggest it is essential in making sure your crisis is a ‘good’ crisis.

### **Dealing with a crisis – the alternative**

The work of Keith Grint provides a great framework for thinking about problems. I should declare that I am not neutral about this. I was introduced to Grint's ideas in 2001, when I was a student on the Warwick MPA, and I am now a colleague of his at Warwick Business School, where I also now teach. I also found his ideas extremely useful in my work in Northern Ireland where I was assistant chief constable and had to work out a solution to the extremely sensitive and volatile problem of the Drumcree Parade.

Returning to the examples of the 'global financial crisis' and the 'heart attack' it is apparent that quite what constitutes a crisis seems to vary considerably. Grint invites us to consider the idea that the act of naming a situation 'a crisis' may not depend on what the situation is. It may depend more on how that situation can be handled most advantageously - or least disadvantageously - by authority figures.

Conventional contingency leadership theory suggests that accurate accounts of the context are a fundamental element of the decision-making approach required for success. But such accounts appear incapable of explaining the decisions of those engaged. For example, the invasion of Iraq was premised upon accounts of the situation that have proved unsustainable, but that did not generate a change in the strategy of the coalition forces. What interests Grint is not strictly the question of ethical – or unethical – leadership but the processes through which authority figures persuade their followers, and perhaps themselves, that a certain kind of action is required.

Grint adapts the typology developed by academics Rittel and Webber, plus that of Etzioni on compliance. Without going into detail, this suggests an alternative method of analysis that is rooted in social constructivist approaches. A vital element of this is that what counts as 'true', as 'objective' and as 'fact' is the result of contending accounts of 'reality'.

We are back with the notion that 'reality' is constructed through language. And, in turn, since language is a social phenomenon, the account of reality which prevails is often both a temporary and a collective phenomenon.

When it comes to heart attacks, there is not much to be gained by analyzing the way we use language to construct reality. Our best understanding of the reality of a heart attack has been tested and refined over many decades, as heart attacks are common and have certain consistent features. A heart attack is a crisis - but it is clear what kind of crisis.

So what about the 'global financial crisis'? Recent developments in contingency theory have attempted to analyse such situations in a more sophisticated way. However, these developments still assume that the situation can be analysed and understood scientifically. Grint challenges this. He says we underestimate the extent to which the context or situation is actively constructed by elites or authority figures. If you follow this logic, it is not so much a question of the actual situation, but how this situation defined through language by the authorities.

This way of looking at crises puts leadership centre stage. Grint is not talking about Carlyle's Great Man theory, where individual leaders are independent agents, able to manipulate the world at will. He is talking about the way the context depends on human social relationships, and cannot be objectively assessed in a scientific form.

## Tame problems, wicked problems and crises

Grint does not stop at theory, however, his practical suggestion is that problem situations can be analysed by considering whether they are *tame*, *wicked* or *critical*. He then relates different types of executive activity - *management*, *leadership* and *command* - to each of these problem types.

Much of the writing in the field of leadership research is grounded in a typology that distinguishes between leadership and management as different forms of authority. From that standpoint, leadership tends to be seen as being more about strategic issues and the requirement to resolve novel problems, often over an extended time period. Management, by contrast is usually associated with short-term operational matters that can be solved using best-practice processes. The third type of authority, command, has lost popularity, theoretically, in the UK, where it is usually associated with military - or paramilitary - activity. But for Grint this has blinded many to its usefulness in dealing with a crisis.

These three forms of authority are also associated with three different key activities for executive authorities responsible for decision-making. Authorities can provide followers with:

- a good *answer* in a *crisis*
- an effective *process* for solving a *tame* problem
- or the ability to ask powerful *questions* that enable learning about a *wicked* problem.

## Heifetz

A set of related ideas I encountered on the Warwick MPA are those of Ron Heifetz of the Harvard Kennedy School.

Heifetz sets out two key distinctions when thinking about leadership. First he separates *leadership* from *authority*. He points out that the former, as he and Grint define it, is often exercised beyond or even without formal authority. Second, Heifetz distinguishes between technical work and adaptive work. Again, he is distinguishing between the work done rather than the position held. So a person may be appointed to be a leader – be this President, Prime Minister, CEO Manager, or Team leader – but may then exercise *command* as their default rather than exercising *leadership*.

Both Grint and Heifetz distinguish the person, and the process they use to make progress on problems, from their hierarchical position.

The framework below links these two sets of ideas – leadership style and type of problem – in a way that is extremely helpful for analyzing situations.

## Problems, Problems, Problems.

• PROBLEM	• RESPONSE	☐☐☐ METHOD
• Wicked	• Leadership	☐☐☐ Trial & Error ☐☐ To make Progress -asking good questions
• Tame	• Management	☐☐☐ Research & Development ☐☐ To identify and design a Fix - Managing the best process
• Crisis	• Command	☐☐☐ Command & Control ☐☐ To restore normality (order) - Providing an answer



The framework is flexible - you can start either with the person or the problem. The earlier examples of a heart attack and the 'global financial crisis started with my descriptions of the problems; a common approach. But when starting with the person in authority you may encounter the problem in a completely different way.

You may, for example, observe someone who prefers to manage rather than to command. You might then notice that, in spite of increasing consensus that there is a crisis to be faced, the authority figure is favouring an account of the problem that suggests a *technical* solution to a *tame* problem. This then legitimates *management* as the most appropriate behaviour. Equally, where an authority figure has a preference for *command* and is faced with a limited number of *crisis* situations, there may be a temptation, or desire, to again use their authority to frame a *tame* situation as a crisis in order to legitimize *command*. Such a social construction is difficult - if not impossible - with a heart attack. But it is quite possible, indeed inevitable, with a 'global financial crisis'.

A *crisis* permits authorities to behave in ways that would not be acceptable in any other circumstance, for example the use of coercion. Let us look at what the former presidential advisor David Gergen wrote about George W. Bush in a 2003 article entitled *Stubborn kind of Fellow*. He notes that in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, a self-evident crisis, Dubya's "very top down command and control approach" to being president was hugely popular.

However, once the *physical* crisis of the planes crashing into the twin towers in New York had passed, the crisis then relocated to the social system. The political power elites used language to shape the public perception of the situation and to persuade us that there was a "war on terror" to be won. This was a social

construction, and a very useful one to Bush. In war, we recognise the need to follow a commander. Bush presented himself as just such a commander and saw his approval ratings soar to over 90%. These remained abnormally high for the next 16 months, according to Gergen. Quite a contrast with “Sunny Jim” Callaghan in 1979.

But as the increasingly *wicked* nature of the ‘war on terror’ became apparent, even in America, Bush’s ratings began to tumble. In doing so they became some of the most polarised in US history. His approval remaining about 80% among Republicans but bottomed out at 20% among Democrats. If we apply Grint’s ideas, this suggests that Republicans continued to see the problem as *critical* and in need of a *commander*. Democrats, on the other hand, saw it as *wicked* and therefore requiring the exercise of *leadership*. Such polarized interpretations are unlikely to be found in bystanders of a heart attack.

Bush was, of course, the first MBA President. As a *commander*, he was practicing the sort of leadership taught at Harvard Business School when he was a student there. This is a style that is easily recognisable in many of his contemporaries, for example Jack Welch, who is considered one of the leading businessmen of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was the chairman and CEO of General Electric between 1981 and 2001 when its value soared by 4000% and for a time it was the most valuable company in the world. This sort of leadership begins with a clear but narrow vision and then focuses ruthlessly on achieving it. But this is not the process of exercising leadership that Heifetz sets out for working on *wicked* problems.

In establishing a persuasive account of any problem, the role of authority figures such as a US president is significant and often, at least in the short term, decisive. The account they establish is often, in turn, shaped by their preference for particular forms of power. Recognising this, the challenge of exercising *leadership* becomes apparent. Because exercising *leadership*, according to Heifetz (1994), implies that:

- The leader does not have the answer
- The leader’s role is to make the followers face up to their responsibilities (often an unpopular task).
- The ‘answer’ to the problem is going to take a long time to construct and that it will only ever be ‘more appropriate’ rather than ‘the best’.
- It will require constant effort to maintain.

### **Challenges of adaptive leadership**

This type of leadership remains the most difficult of approaches and one that many authority figures will try to avoid at all costs. Usually, they would prefer either a *management* solution engaging a tried and trusted process, or a *command* solution - enforcing the answer upon followers, some of whom may actually prefer to be passive. This is much easier than engaging followers in a



process that requires them to face the disappointing fact that they have to do much of the work themselves.

Most authority figures owe their position to a record of success in using *technical* knowledge to solve *tame* problems and/or being successful *commanders* providing *answers* to followers in the midst of *crisis*. With increasing seniority often comes the challenge of problems that are not subject to the existing repertoire of knowledge and experience. These *wicked* problems leave successful authorities feeling incompetent and vulnerable. It is when faced with such challenges that Heifetz's *adaptive leadership* becomes useful.

Heifetz wrote about these ideas in his 1994 book *Leadership without Easy Answers*. In the book he describes his concept of 'adaptive leadership':

Adaptive work is required when our deeply held beliefs are challenged, when the values that made us successful become less relevant, and when competing perspectives emerge.

With wicked problems there is usually, as discussed earlier above, a lack of agreement about the nature of the situation and the nature of the solution. But there is also a gap between the expressed values, beliefs and attitudes of a community or organisation and their behaviours in practice. Working adaptively requires this to be addressed. So frequently, in wicked situations, the people with the problem are also *part* of the problem *as well as* a fundamental to the work that needs to be done on the problem.

Dealing with this gap will disappoint people, let down their expectations, and create *distress*. This distress is unavoidable, indeed it is a sign of progress – but it is essential not to let it get out of hand. A vital element of adaptive leadership according to Heifetz is the ability to “maintain people within their productive zone of distress”. Marty Linsky, a colleague of Heifetz, has a striking way of describing this high wire act, “disappointing people at a rate they can absorb”.

At the heart of the adaptive process is a leader influencing a community to face up to its problems. This contrasts vividly with the more common view of a leader as someone who influences the community to follow his or her vision. In *tame* and *crisis* situations, authority figures are expected to, and should, provide *answers*. But the work of exercising *adaptive leadership* requires the asking of good *questions*.

As we have discussed, the nature of the relationship between leaders and followers means followers often feel distressed and disappointed. In an attempt to avoid owning that distress and disappointment themselves, followers will try to place it on their authority figure. They then refer to the leader's refusal to provide *answers* as a failure of leadership or weak leadership.

In fact, quite the opposite is the case. It is much weaker and easier for a leader to

pander to followers by providing *answers*, even when these are unlikely to enable the collective work required in a *wicked* situation. The very type of *technical* work that is so successful in *tame* problem situations is decidedly unhelpful in working *adaptively* in *wicked* situations. The table below (Heifetz and Linsky 2002) illustrates this:

<b>Adaptive Work Calls for Leadership</b>		
<b>Responsibilities</b>	<b>Situation</b>	
<b>LEADERS</b>	<b>Technical or Tame</b>	<b>Adaptive or Wicked</b>
Direction	Define problems and provide solutions	Identify the adaptive challenge and frame key questions and issues
Protection	Shield the organization from external threats	Let the organization feel external pressures within a range it can stand
Orientation	Clarify roles and responsibilities	Challenge current roles and resist pressure to define new roles quickly
Managing Conflict	Restore order	Expose conflict or let it emerge
Shaping Norms	Maintain norms	Challenge unproductive norms



In order to do this *adaptive* work a ‘space’ must be created. Heifetz calls this a ‘holding environment’. This holding environment may be a physical space, but it is really about the relationships between participants or the wider social system that provides the protected, yet challenging, space in which adaptive work can be accomplished.

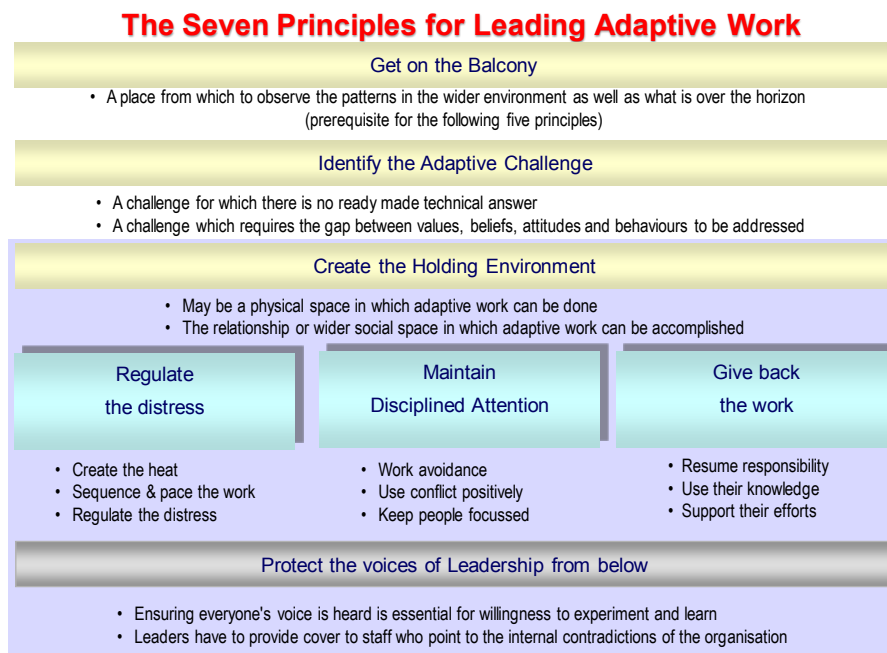
It may be useful to think of this holding environment as the ‘cooking pot’ or ‘pressure cooker’ within which the transformative work of turning ingredients into dinner takes place. You will not get dinner simply by putting the ingredients into the pot. The pot needs to be placed on the stove and heated up – long enough and hot enough to cook the meal. No heat, no dinner and left uncooked the ingredients will rot and their potential will be wasted. Too much heat, no dinner either - as the food will burn and the pot may even explode. The right temperature is equivalent to the right relationship, which holds participants in that necessary “productive zone of distress”.

What is more, given the idea that it is the people with the problem that are best placed to work on the problem, it is important to give the work back to those people. Also, in view of the often contested nature of these situations and the high degree of distress that they cause in both the political and social communities, the use of state authority and the delivery of obligations is

frequently an important part of how the work is given back. While doing this, it is important to listen to what Heifetz calls “the voices of leadership from below”. Since there is no existing guide to progress in *wicked* problem situations, experimentation is required; and ensuring that everyone's voice is heard is an essential part of creating willingness to experiment and learn.

## Get on the Balcony

In working with Heifetz’s ideas in practice, I have developed the aide memoir below. It is not sufficient to fully understand how to lead adaptively, but I hope it is helpful in making you more aware of the distinct nature of *leading adaptively* in *wicked* situations, as opposed to *managing tame* situations or *commanding* in a *crisis*.



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This aide memoir clearly shows the essential first principle of engaging in adaptive work, which is ‘balcony work’. This ‘balcony’ is a place from which the practitioner can observe the patterns in the wider environment in which he or she operates; as well as seeing what is over the horizon and making interpretations about those observations that will enable more successful interventions.

The first essential of balcony work is to be introduced to the idea; which I was by John Benington, while one of his students on the Warwick MPA. So, in an important sense, reading this article is itself balcony work. It will hopefully help you to be better able to observe, interpret and intervene successfully in your own situation, in a way that creates value.

‘Getting onto the balcony’ is primarily a mental activity; but it is helped, of course,

by having some physical distance from the 'dance floor' or 'battlefield'. So balcony work is as much about reflection-in-action - day by day, meeting by meeting, action by action - as it is about taking time out. Both are useful and, in my experience, very helpful.

For example, consider how Barrack Obama is currently behaving with regard to his own work on Bush's 'war on terror' using the frameworks in this article. I can see a different type of work and, importantly, different use of political rhetoric in addressing the 'war on terror' and I suggest that you use the ideas set out here to carry out your own analysis.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the worst place to be during a crisis is in denial. The productive energy in the social system which could be used to find solutions is likely to be consumed with debating the nature and extent of that crisis. A consensus allows us to move towards Rahm Emmanuel's formula – the need not to 'waste' a 'good crisis'. This is much more desirable than simply using the *crisis* to justify, as George W. Bush did, the deployment of your default preference for *command*. Of course, those who are unable to exercise *command* will be unable to make any productive use of a *crisis* and will instead devote their energy to the redefinition of the problem to suit their preferred approach.

Often, once the immediate crisis passes, a more detailed analysis of the situation 'from the balcony' can lead to a judgement that the underlying problems are *wicked* rather than *tame* and that the work most likely to be productive will be adaptive work.

Such has been my own experience of using the ideas outlined in this article, which I first learned about on my Warwick MPA. I have since found that, in spite of being hard, challenging work, it is work worth doing. For example, in 2002 I decided to approach the policing of the Drumcree March as a wicked problem, rather than a crisis provoked by tame problems, which required better technical work to be accomplished to solve it.

The approach I took did not solve the problems associated with Drumcree, but there has been no violence now for over 10 years. Compared to the previous 20 years, this is a significant improvement that created an equally significant amount of public value. To find out more, read the article I wrote with John Benington about my time tackling the Drumcree March. I was completing my Warwick MPA part time during the period that I was working at Drumcree. So for two weeks, three times a year I had dedicated 'balcony time' at Warwick. I think that this helped me to develop the ability both to practise and see the value of balcony work. Similarly, whilst working in the Home Office, I used these ideas to run a project that reduced violent crime nationally by 14%. In that case, 'balcony time' was created by my having a spell at Harvard during the project. Currently, I

am using this approach to develop a method, with the Kafka Brigade, to make progress on the services provided to victims of domestic violence in Wales (South Wales News, 2007).

Often what forces us to pay attention to an issue is the appearance of a crisis. This may be sudden and obvious, as in the case of a heart attack; or it might appear out of the mist much more slowly, like the 'global financial crisis'. Both types of crisis contain elements that are scientifically observable; but the latter is much more socially constructed than the former.

The challenge is to be able to use the 'balcony' to enable us to choose which type of work will create the most value. To be aware of the nature, shape and patterns of behaviour (individual or group) within a crisis. Being able, for example, to observe how people discuss a particular situation offers much, rich data about the extent to which they may be trying to get this to fit their preference for action; rather than recognising the need to engage on a learning journey, involving both the authorities and the followers. Balcony workers are also better placed to see what lies behind the crisis. There will be *tame*, but possibly very complicated, problems to be solved using existing knowledge and processes. But there will probably also be many more complex, *wicked* elements that will require the exercise of *adaptive leadership*.

So, rather than "Crisis? What Crisis?" I say, "Crisis? What a *Great* Crisis – let's get some important work done."

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