

Bridges in conversation



Political creativity in challenging times – An interview with Stephen Boucher on his upcoming book "Petit manuel de créativité politique - Comment libérer l'audace collective"



The Bridges team spoke to Stephen Boucher, former program director at the European Climate Foundation and a longstanding member of our Bridges network. Stephen is about to publish a new book on creativity and politics and we were keen to find out more about this.

Stephen, as a former program director for EU climate policies at the European Climate Foundation, and a decision-maker with in-depth political experience, you are about to publish a book on creativity and politics in February. What brought you to this topic and what are you exploring?

A few years back, I was studying at the Harvard Kennedy School, and comparing the courses on offer, also at the Business School, I was struck by how we were invited on one side of the Charles River to develop our leadership, persuasion and organizational skills, as well as our economic skills, while on the other side our fellow business students had a wealth of courses on innovation, creativity and how generally to be more competitive. That struck me because in my view politics is even more than business about adaptation and finding solutions. Over the course of the past few years, the field of creativity and innovation in politics has moved on from an academic interest, for me and others, to one that is rich with a variety of actors and experiments. We have moved on from the 'what' to the 'how'. Creativity in politics to me is about a very positive take on politics, as well as a set of tools, that can help counter the populist discourse.

Creativity is a term with a long-standing tradition. What does creativity mean to you?

It is, and yet it can be boiled down to a simple notion: creativity in politics is the ability to produce nimbly original, efficient and effective policy solutions.

Creativity and innovation are concepts that are particularly present in the private sector. What, in your perspective, are the elements that the political field might borrow and learn from?

The answer to this question could be quite long. Let me first qualify the notion that some have that the private sector is necessarily more creative: the public sector can also be very creative. But creativity in the private sector is much more visible while creativity in the public sector is more difficult to identify. This explains why you and I can easily name a creative inventor of vacuum cleaners, but will find it more difficult to name a creative political leader currently in power. The world of entrepreneurs and designers is less complex: inventing a radically new vacuum cleaner is certainly not easy, but it is less complex than solving the problem of immigration in the UK - for which Mr. Dyson's only response was to be in favor of the Brexit... That is probably why they have already developed a number of processes and tools that foster creativity, like include the "user" in your research, set up teams geared towards innovation, clearly identify the problem and formulate your goals with precision and honesty, generate lots of ideas, prototype the best ones, test them, do this several times, evaluate again, allow mistakes to be made, acknowledge and reward creativity, and make it a priority for your organisation.

We could reproduce all of this, including at society-wide level. What we will learn when we do this more conscientiously and systematically is that creativity has a transformative power for the people involved. It doesn't just produce better solutions, it produces better teams.

You have been involved in our Bridges Project and have first-hand experience of the project - how does Bridges link with creativity in politics?

Well, it links perfectly, in the sense that today we have loads of creativity at all levels of society, including at the grassroots level, but also among social entrepreneurs, the corporate sector, civil society, the "4th sector", and many public service departments. But there is often a bottleneck at the highest levels of government. Often there is also a lack of sharing, replication, evaluation between experiments. For all those reasons, we need bridges, with people facilitating the monitoring, analysis, encouragement and sharing of cutting-edge initiatives among relevant actors, which is something the Bridges Project does extremely well. We need more Bridges Projects, in fact, across the world!