

Rob Hopkins – Transition Town Pioneer



Interview by Phil England

Rob Hopkins is fast emerging as one of the most influential people of the green movement. His positive vision of a low-energy future has captured the imagination of hundreds of people who are now putting his ideas into action. The seed for the Transition Town movement germinated when he was teaching a full time Permaculture course in Kinsale Ireland, and took root in Totnes when he moved there in 2005. Now there are nearly 40 formal transition projects in the UK and Ireland and over 600 “mullers” all around the world who are starting out on the process.

What are the key challenges facing us now?

Peak oil and climate change. Peak oil is not about whether or not we are running out of oil but about the moment when global oil production peaks and starts to decline. That implies a major transition for a society which has become completely dependent on cheap liquid fuels. In 2000 when the lorry drivers went on strike* we went from being a very affluent, well-fed Western economy to being about two days away from major food shortages. So although our economies have become very diverse and efficient at many things, their Achilles heel is the distances we have to transport everything. We need to increase our resilience by putting in place more localised systems for food and medicine. (*note from Jeff...actually, the terminals were blockaded)

What's the essence of the Transition Town model?

The basic idea is that the future with less oil could be

preferable to the present. Transition initiatives don't appear in a community with all the answers, rather they catalyse people to think and set a process in motion. What's extraordinary is the rapidity with which the idea has been taken up and the things that people are doing.

It is very much a bottom-up model; do you think we also need national and international frameworks to deal with these challenges?

Our model is just one part of a whole jigsaw that will get us through this. We need Contraction and Convergence and an Oil Depletion Protocol at an international level, we need a concerted effort from national government and a carbon rationing system. But all of these things will struggle unless there is a real movement from the grassroots with people seeing the change not as something imposed or an infringement of liberties, but as an incredible opportunity to rethink how we function.

Is there a particular reason that you're launching the book in Bristol?

It's the 21st birthday of Green Books and it was their choice to do it here. Also I was at school in Bristol and many of my formative years were spent here. I grew up reading Venue magazine and used to have piles of them in my bedroom. Bristol is now the first Transition City and they've been pioneering urban scale work by breaking the City into its constituent villages. Last autumn they held "The Big Event" at the Council House – this was the biggest Transition event run anywhere so far. Their Virtual Orchard project is also very exciting.

Is peak oil something made up by the oil companies to justify a high price and bigger profits?

While oil companies are profiting from the situation they're also starting to plan for their own contraction. Companies

like Exxon and Chevron are involved in an enormous buy back of their own shares and more and more people within the industry are starting to come forward and acknowledge that the peak is closer than was previously thought.

How have you structured the book?

It's in three sections. The Head is about the thinking behind the model and the need for change. The Heart looks at the psychology of change – using insights from the world of addiction – and the power of creating a dynamic vision of where we want to be. The Hands is about the practical tools and how you set it up. For anyone used to reading doom and gloom articles about the environment this will be a very refreshing change. It's very positive and quite humorous but also has a very serious message. The challenges of peak oil and climate change present the most extraordinary opportunity to create an economic, cultural and social renaissance. But that will only come about if we start talking to and working with each other again and we harness optimism.

Rob Hopkins book "The Transition Handbook – from oil dependency to local resilience" is out now published by Green Books.

For more information see: www.transitiontowns.org and www.transitionculture.org