

What types of people will lead our great energy transition?

May 15 2017, by Marc Hudson

We sit transfixed, watching the Great Barrier Reef [bleach](#), while our leaders brandish [lacquered lumps of coal](#) and energy policy is [shaped by tweets](#).

Each day reminds us of the line credited to the US poet [Dorothy Parker](#): "what fresh hell is this?"

Her contemporary [Antonio Gramsci](#), got it about right when he wrote:

"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

We are (we hope) in the middle of a "[socio-technical transition](#)". "What's that?" I hear you ask.

A transition has been [defined](#) as a "radical transformation towards a [sustainable society](#) as a response to a number of persistent problems confronting contemporary modern societies".

It's "socio-technical" because there are going to have to be some rather dramatic and rapid changes in how we do things, both in our societies and our technologies (the two are intertwined).

How does a transition happen?

One recent strand of work that hits the sweet spot (in that it keeps academics in grant funding and lattes while also being of actual use to civil society) is the study of who does what in a transition – the so-called "structure/agency/power issue".

Classically, overarching theories of long-term change overlook the power of individuals and small groups to shape history, focusing instead on whole social classes or new technologies. But the reality is that we are not (usually) dupes, victims of impersonal social forces. As academics Frank Geels and Johan Schot [wrote in 2007](#):

"...actors try to make sense, change perceptions as they go along, engage in power struggles, lobby for favourable regulations, and compete in markets."

Academics who study social power have endless chicken-and-egg debates about structure and agency – how much wiggle room do "entrepreneurs" have to change the system from within?

The typical answers to these questions can leave even the geekiest academic punch-drunk. But to [misquote Steve Winwood](#), we have to "role with it", by which I mean think about the *roles* that individuals and groups perform in any social transition. Let's have a look at some of them.

The [controversial author Malcolm Gladwell](#) has [argued](#) that three types of people can speed an idea through society: connectors, mavens, and salesmen.

- **Connectors** are people with lots of friends and acquaintances who spend time maintaining these connections, leveraging the [strength of weak ties](#).
- **Mavens** gather information, evaluating the messages that come

through the network and amplifying those they like.

- **Salespeople** are persuaders who are capable of propagating messages using the force of their character.

Recently, two researchers at Melbourne University's [Sustainable Society Institute](#) produced a very readable (and freely available!) [report](#) called "They make the change: roles of actors in transitions".

In it they suggest four particular social roles (they have others in mind too – stay tuned):

- **Frontrunners** are "geared towards making alternative solutions known and available early on" and "act upon their own personal values". In other words, these people are the pioneers, the dreamers who want to build something better.
- **Connectors** (in agreement with Gladwell above) do two forms of connective work. They connect solutions to systems, and also try to embed them (finding ongoing budget streams, creating constituencies) and secondly connect actors with other actors, creating alliances and coalitions (for [[advocacy of policies](#), [technologies](#) and so on.]
- **Topplers** introduce change and "phase out institutions to make way for alternative solutions". They "articulate the values that connect allies and coalitions", or in layman's terms, they have the gift of the gab.
- **Supporters** are not transformative themselves but when they start using (buying, sharing) solutions proposed by frontrunners, this "provides the legitimisation, and expresses the societal need for the new solutions and changed systems". Think baby-boomers buying solar panels in their millions.

Nice and neat, isn't it? But as these authors would tell you, there are many caveats. Three will do for now, all fairly obvious.

First, [academics](#) warn that there is never merely one actor (or one type of person) driving a transition.

Second, things change. As [two academics](#) recently wrote:

"Agents are not "just there" with a stable, uncontested identity, instead they constantly need to (re)define who they are and why they are a relevant voice in a policy discourse. "

[Other academics](#) concur:

"...instead of being predefined and static, roles such as policymaker or citizen seem to always be in the process of being constructed, deconstructed, reconstructed, contested, as well as enacted, made and used."

Third, what of hybrid identities like "[prosumers](#)"? And what about those who are just trying to maintain the status quo?

Academics, always hedging, will tell you that everything is in flux, so there are no hard and fast rules. That's true, but only up to a point – don't expect Malcolm Roberts and Adam Bandt to be teaming up any time soon.

So far, so abstract. But how does all this play out in Australia's great energy transition?

Well, you have pugnacious entrepreneurs - "topplers" - trying to undermine the traditional norms (hello [Richard Denniss](#) and the Australia Institute).

Some "frontrunners" switch from advocacy to opposition (hello, Prime Minister) or, conversely, from digging up coal to [powerful climate](#)

[evangelism](#). Some outlive their funding, if not their usefulness - the soon-to-be defunct Climate Institute was a "connector" *par excellence*.

Of course, this is a problem we should to be solving quicker than we are causing, and we need to be more "[transruptive](#)". Therefore, I have two questions for you, gentle reader.

First, what kinds of people - besides those trying to throw sand in the gears - are missing from the above typology? And second, how can those pushing for change - the frontrunners, the connectors, the social movers – sustain and escalate their pressure, and meet not just the scale of the challenge, but also its speed?

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