



Self Meets Society: A Personal Perspective on Street Activism in and beyond the Age of Covid

Richard House in interview-conversation with Catherine Llewellyn

Catherine Llewellyn (CL): Richard, thank you for agreeing to be interviewed by me on this matter. Ever since I heard about your ‘Info-Hug’ Freedom Stall in Stroud I’ve been fascinated by it. At the time, you’d been arrested for standing on the street wearing a sandwich-board. This seemed extraordinary to me, and horribly unreasonable. I felt drawn to try to understand more about what you and your friends were up to, why, and what was exactly occurring.

By its very nature, any kind of what we might call ‘activist’ behaviour is likely to draw attention of the opinionated kind. It can act like a lightning-rod for pent-up emotions and frustrations. The discussion can tend towards a battle of opinions, ostensibly seeking to establish who is ‘right’ and who is ‘wrong’. I recognise a value in this, especially when there’s the opportunity for robust and revealing dialogue.

I’m interested in delving a bit deeper than that, into the phenomenology of the thing. I’d love to understand more about your journey with this, your experiences along the way, and perhaps the learnings and developmental outcomes. I’m fascinated by the group dynamic of a Freedom group, made up of a variety of different kinds of people, and yet following a common purpose. Of course, some of this is very personal and entirely private. I respect that, and invite you to hold

your own boundaries in response to my questions.

So without further ado – here we go with my first question, sort of in two parts. First, how do you feel about being interviewed on this subject? The idea of capturing the human story of the Info-Hug has come up several times in conversations between us, with me keen on the idea, and you perhaps not so much at the time. It feels to me as if this idea has ripened gently over time, and that now ‘its time has come’. How do you feel about sharing the human story outside of your immediate circle, and making it available for the consideration of others – others who may or may not be currently sympathetic to what you’re doing? And why did you decide at this point to say ‘Yes’?

And the second part of my question, which might be a second question actually but for some reason I feel moved to ask it now, is about how this all started for you. If you cast your mind back, can you remember the first time you engaged with the idea of standing up for truth and freedom? I’d love to hear about how this all started for you, with any anecdotal memories or stories from much earlier in your life.

I look forward with eager anticipation to your reply!

Richard House (RH): Thank you for suggesting we have this conversation, Catherine! I think it's exceptionally important to accurately record the history of events, and certainly of phenomena like our freedom street-stall in Stroud (colloquially called 'the Info-Hug'). Heaven knows there are myriad forces afoot that have a vested interest in distorting, misrepresenting and/or 'cancelling' the action(s) that people are taking in what is sometimes called the 'truth and freedom movement' (or 'truther' for short) – and particularly in the covid era when anyone daring to challenge mainstream narratives, however well informed and cogent, is commonly condemned, shamed and silenced as a 'far-right', so-called 'conspiracy theorist'. Perhaps we can discuss the cynical deployment of these cancel-culture descriptors later. So, now I've got that off my chest, eagerly to your initial questions!

In part for the aforementioned reasons, I'm very happy to be having this conversation with you, as it affords us the opportunity to contribute to the historical record of these momentous times we're in. Assuming it will be freely available on the web once completed, this conversation will be available in perpetuity for anyone who wants to read an honest, and hopefully accurate, factual account of one local push-back against the concerted attack on civil liberties we've arguably been witnessing in recent years – under the cover of, first, covid, and now 'climate crisis'. This also answers your question about being ready to share this story beyond my immediate circle.

For me, conversations are always great – not least because in the conversational process one often succeeds in clarifying perspectives, motivations and so on that had formerly been pre-conscious and/or by no means fully thought-through, and therefore by no means fully articulated, either. To slightly misquote the great philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, I don't know what I think until I find myself writing it!

As to your other questions, I guess saying 'yes' to this invitation at this time has something to do with being far enough through the process and the experience of what we're doing here in Stroud to have sufficient perspective on it so that it's possible to say something intelligent and

useful about it. And I know from experience that great things always seem to happen when you and me dialogue together – so that alone would be enough for a resounding 'Yes!'.

Finally, my first engagement with standing up for truth and freedom. Phew – that's a biggie. I have to say that I'm a strong believer in people being born with a soul, rather than the 'tabula rasa', blank-slate idea of John Locke and others. Renegade Jungian iconoclast James Hillman wrote brilliantly about this in his 1997 book *The Soul's Code*: that is, that we're born with a 'daimon', or an acorn of who are destined to become as our life unfurls – that is, Hillman's so called 'acorn theory' that posits that each human life is formed by a particular image, an image that is the essence of that life and calls it to a particular destiny. This view fundamentally challenges the deterministic, quasi-Freudian notion of conventional developmental psychology that we are essentially determined by, or 'caused' by, our childhood experiences. Rather, the acorn theory proposes that we unconsciously *seek out* and create the life circumstances that will contribute to the fulfilment of a destiny that has *already* been established. Poet David Whyte gives a great example of this – whereby the little Spanish boy's playing around in his mother's huge skirt didn't *cause* him to become Spain's greatest bull-fighter; rather, the little boy was *already* practising for what he, in his being, knew his future destiny to be! I love that story. So I'm wanting to say that I was born with a deep soul-commitment to truth and freedom – and that's been a guiding star all through my life, and will be till my dying breath.

CL: Thank you, Richard. I too recognise the prevalence of attempts to 'cancel' those who express views not in accordance with the latest mainstream narratives. That said, I also recognise that for many people, the very arguments are either of little interest, or seem to be a simple matter of juvenile bickering. Knowing you as I do, and having informed myself to some extent about some of the core arguments, I believe the expression of differing viewpoints is important, and that this includes

what you've been doing. I'd like to come back to the cancel-culture discussion a bit later on.

First, though, I'm inclined to follow this thread about soul-commitment. This is fascinating to me, and I believe it's a vital component of understanding what you're doing. I love your 'acorn/daemon' reference to the idea of coming into life with a destiny. You speak as if this is a genuine felt experience for you, rather than a theoretical rationalisation, and this lends your words a compelling potency. In my experience, people vary widely in relationship to this notion, at least at the conscious level – some feeling connected with a mission, path or purpose from very early on, others never even thinking about it – and everything else in between. My guess is the sense of 'born with a destiny' is quite rare.

For those of us who have no idea about such a thing, or who only conceive of it theoretically, I wonder if you might be able to colour in the picture a bit and give us more of a sense of standing in your shoes. What was it like being a boy with a soul-commitment to truth and freedom? For example, did this make life easier for you, more difficult, more interesting? – and so on. Please feel free to allow your answer to roll forward into adulthood as well. I emphasise the childhood experience because there we may find the innocent self, in its first pure relationship with these vital matters; and these stories can be significantly and helpfully accessible to those of us looking on and trying to understand what could perhaps be seen as an unusual mission!

I'll leave it there for now, and eagerly look forward to your answer.

RH: Yes, we're at one with 'the expression of differing viewpoints' being important, Catherine – indeed, I would even say *essential*. That is, in a diverse, open society, it's arguably essential that we 'defend to the death' the right and the space for people to express, and publicly canvas for, ideas and allegiances that we ourselves might find morally objectionable or even repugnant, and/or profoundly believe to be factually wrong. Perhaps we'll return to this later.

You ask what it was like being a boy with a soul-commitment to truth and freedom. I think my answer may perhaps disappoint you. The point for me about being a child is that one's experience is essentially un-selfconscious for most, if not virtually all of the time. I don't remember thinking about, or being aware of, truth and freedom as a boy. Rather, I just *lived* these virtues (if that's the right term) in and through my *being-in-the-world* when I was a child.

So, certainly for me, it's really only retrospectively that I'm able to look back on my behaviour and reconstruct and deduce the core life principles that were guiding the way I was in the world when much younger. And personally, I like it that way! For me, un-selfconsciousness and the unconscious-cum-mysterious play a vital role in our humanity, and I celebrate the fact that as children, we're for the most part not burdened with being consciously aware of, and thinking about, such deep existential questions and themes in relation to how we're leading our lives. All that comes much later in our development – if we choose to embrace such issues.

CL: Thank you, Richard. I find your description of your un-selfconsciousness as a child fascinating. I suppose if I look at myself, I also see that certain virtues of mine were there all along, and as a child I didn't really think about them. Perhaps this is true for most of us, at least to some extent. Hence the way we commonly undervalue some of our greatest virtues. The perception being that they've always been there, we didn't have to work at them, so surely they're of little value.

Given your 'being-in-the-world' way of living the virtues of truth and freedom, did there come a noticeable point when you began to actively do things in service to those virtues, to take a stand as it were? (No pun intended!) I ask this because I suspect that there are many people who feel as you do about some of what is occurring today, but most of those people are not running public street stalls about it. And I'm guessing this isn't your first visible and explicit activity in service to truth and freedom. From my personal

observations, your street stall in Stroud is not a thrown-together fad. It's well thought through and well constructed. Knowing how to do this surely doesn't come out of nowhere. I'm curious about how you, from a boy un-selfconsciously infused with the virtues of truth and freedom and living life in the innocent way of young people everywhere, began to transition into someone who is now a local public figure and known for standing for something he believes in.

I am especially interested in this transition of yours because I would like readers to have a fuller appreciation of the human side of the street stall and you as a key figure there. My feeling is that when we 'other' people or groups of people, we are forgetting that these are three-dimensional human beings with nuanced experiences, motivations, virtues and insights. When we are reminded of our common humanity, it seems there is a better chance of our opening our minds to considering what they're saying and doing with greater curiosity and consideration.

I appreciate that for all of us there are parts of our journey to where we are now that are too personal to share publicly, or simply a bit of a blur! Whatever you can recall, that you feel comfortable to share, about the story of your journey from principled boyhood to active adult campaigner and some of the significant events along the way, will be very helpful. I leave that with you to cogitate over! Thank you again – I am really enjoying this conversation.

RH: You ask such penetrating questions, Catherine! – ones I really have to think about (and I'm not complaining... – honest!).

I've been a somewhat compulsive writer of press letters for nearly half a century, and I think this activity is related to truth, and its pursuit and expression. I do remember that I had my first press letter published in the *Western Gazette* around 1975 (when I would have been 20); so by that age I was certainly feeling very strongly about telling the truth – or perhaps I should say *my* truth – as I saw it. I'm not sure that that impulse comes altogether from a good place, however. What I perceive as ignorance, or

immorality, tends to annoy me and arouse indignation, and I then have the urge to dispute and counter what I see as these iniquities wherever I see them! So I suppose the drive to tell the truth did start manifesting when I was a young adult; and in my university years it then quite soon became transposed on to politics – and particularly left-wing, 'anti-establishment' politics.

My own politics have always been informed and underpinned by a commitment to social justice (common for people from a working-class background, I think), and equally importantly, by a repulsion towards materialism – both philosophical materialism and consumerist materialism. And I saw capitalism as the epitome of materialism. It's taken me a long time not only to realise that the political left *also* has strong materialist tendencies (Marx, after all, sometimes called his work 'historical materialism'), and that if anything, atheistic socialism/communism is actually more antithetical to my trans-materialist cosmology (to coin a term) than is capitalism!

There's also the question of the cost of social justice – by which I mean, what might be the negative unintended consequences of imposing a strong form of social justice on to a society?; and do the net benefits that arise from a socially just society more than outweigh the costs incurred in getting there? So along with many people, it's a time of political flux for me at the moment, in my late 60s. Always learning... – and, I hope, open to change.

A difficulty for many people – including me – is that the old norms of the political 'left' and 'right' have in many ways been scrambled, and even inverted, in recent years. Until recently I assumed that the commitment to truth and freedom lay on the political left, and that lies and immorality resided on the political right. It's very painful for folk who self-identify as left-wing that in the covid era, most of the lies and propaganda were/are coming from what is conventionally defined as the political left; and it was often people typically identified as 'right wing' who were more likely to be telling the (scientific) truth about the so-called pandemic,

effective alternative covid treatments, the experimental jab etc. These are very destabilising, confusing and, for some of us, distressing times indeed.

Discovering Rudolf Steiner's extraordinary corpus of work in the mid-1990s (in my early 40s) was also very formative for me in terms of really seeing more clearly than ever before how central *freedom* is to human experience. And how interesting that Steiner strove for a post-materialist approach to social reform and societal organisation that transcended the worst excesses of both capitalism *and* socialism (viz. his sadly little-known 'threefold social order').

You write that 'when we "other" people or groups of people, we are forgetting that these are three-dimensional human beings with nuanced experiences, motivations, virtues and insights'. Never a truer word spoken! I'm very interested in the psychological dynamics that are in play when people move from disagreeing to othering – one for another conversation, perhaps! (And I'm certainly not claiming that I never do it! – I just hope I can spot it early enough when I have the impulse to do that.)

I'm not sure I've answered your question, but hopefully there's something here for you to get your teeth into, and get me thinking further. As Sam Beckett might easily have said: 'Think. Think again. Think *better!*'

CL: Richard, your answer is multi-layered and fascinating! I get the sense that your journey has not been a simple straight-line one. And, whose ever is, I wonder?

I love your naming of some of your inner-world inquiry, and awareness of how personal biases can unconsciously influence us. You recognise that an impulse, while perhaps a good and generous one, may not come 'altogether from a good place'. Wise words, indicating a lifetime of valuable inquiry for any of us!

Your comment about one's background tending to influence our political leanings is well taken. I suspect this is something that affects all of us to some degree, whether or not we are consciously

aware of it. I myself came from a mixed background, and subsequently didn't look for or identify with a particular political leaning. Perhaps that's no coincidence.

So you found yourself writing press letters at a young age, and then at university segued into politics. I'm interested in the fact that your commitment to truth and freedom took you towards politics, rather than one of other many possible paths. I wonder, was this something to do with your perception of power and its relationship with justice and inequity? I do recall how back then 'The Left' did seem to represent proper consideration for everyone.

I'm wondering when you first 'took to the streets', as it were, coming out from behind the pen and showing up in person. You told me once that you know how to make sign boards, I assume as a result of standing holding them up in demonstrations and marches. Would you care to give us an idea of how these sorts of activities showed up in your adult life, and perhaps what this was like for you, experientially? It would be great, as well, to include references to some of the truth-led significant projects you've been involved with along the way – in as much or as little detail as you like.

Your thoughts about the various aspects of materialism, social justice and the pros and cons of attempting to impose such, and the shifts and transformations in the left/right orientations, could each form the core of a complex investigation! What I read between the lines here is that you have been, and remain, highly inquiring about what's going on in the world, what it means, what your truth may be in regard to that, and how you feel moved to respond. I can only imagine that, if this is so, this is not the easiest way to go. Is it your experience that such considerations take a good deal of your attention and energy? And does it feel worthwhile, or/and meaningful?

Again, thank you for trawling back through your life and generously sharing your insights and experiences. You are one of a kind, and it's a rare treat to get a look into some of the rich and

subtle aspects of what it is to be you, doing what you do!

RH: Re whether my ‘commitment to truth and freedom took [me] towards politics, rather than one of other many possible paths... – to do with [my] perception of power and its relationship with justice and inequity’. Very much so. I was very naive about politics in those days, and really believed (like most people) that voting in elections matters, and can really make a difference in wider society. One of the few deeply ingrained memories I have is when playing cricket for Horsington CC as a young man in the early 1970s (it could have been either 1970 or 1974, as there were general elections in both years – most likely 1974, I think). I was idealistically banging on in the dressing-room about politics (no doubt anti-Tory!), and one of the wise elders in the team quietly (and with great sensitivity) said to me words to the effect that ‘It really doesn’t matter who you vote for – they’re all essentially the same’. It’s taken me decades to really take in the wisdom of this man’s words (whose name I’ve alas forgotten). He was effectively (and prophetically) talking about what today is called ‘uni-party politics’, half a century ago!

In those days I think the other motivation underpinning activism and protest for me was when decisions were being made in society that adversely affected the populace and yet in which the people had no democratic say or participation whatsoever. That remains a core concern for me today – as I think it does for many if not most people (I hope!).

I certainly wouldn’t want to give my own ‘truth-led significant projects’ any special privilege – because I assume that the vast majority of campaigners and activists do genuinely believe that the cause they’re promoting is truthful and right. It’s an empirical question as to the extent to which they’re correct in their judgements! I think perhaps the first demonstration I can remember being part of was the Blackwells Bookshop staff strike in Oxford in (I think) 1974 or 1975. With a group of other long-haired lefties, of course I joined the picket-line outside the shop just across the road from my college!

(Exeter College) – trying to persuade shoppers to boycott the shop.

Until quite recently, the activism in my mind that stands out most was my involvement in the Great Miners’ Strike in 1984/5, when we sent a van-load of food up to Ollerton pit community from Norwich, every week for well over a year. I also organised a gig of local bands at the Norwich Arts Centre that raised over £1,000 for the strike fund (that was a lot of money in those days!). But again, from a political viewpoint this was more about social justice and the abuse of political power than it was about ‘truth; per se. In fact, in my old ‘political’ days, I don’t think I distinguished particularly clearly, if at all, between ‘justice’ and ‘truth’; in practice they essentially just merged into one another.

You ask whether it’s my experience that such considerations ‘take a good deal of your attention and energy? And does it feel worthwhile, or/and meaningful?’. In order: yes; no; to some extent; and yes! That is: yes, it takes attention to be an activist – to care about the state of the world and do one’s best to do something about it, as one sees things at the time. I don’t think in terms of energy, however – I’ve always had a surfeit of energy for whatever I’ve committed to in my life, so I never feel that my energy use is a zero-sum game! (Whether that’s good for me and my health, or not, is another question altogether!)

As regards *worthwhile* – I’m much less clear about this than I would have been if I’d answered this question ten or fifteen years ago. I think the 2003 London demo against the disgraceful Bush–Blair invasion of Iraq changed a lot for a lot of people. Many if not most of us previously naively believed that if the scale of public opinion about a given issue were of overwhelming size, the politicians would necessarily fall in line with that opinion. With up to 3 million people marching in London’s largest-ever demonstration being completely ignored by Blair, the scales certainly fell from my eyes, and I now see that the powers-that-be / establishment / elites (whatever we want to call them) will be determined to drive through whatever they want, irrespective of the scale of

countervailing public opinion. So today, I'm much less clear than I used to be about the worthwhile-ness of mass demonstration.

Finally, *meaningful*? – definitely. It can't but be meaningful to take a public stand and stance either against, or for, something one feels really strongly about. It might not be ideal – but the alternative is to take a passive, 'victimhood' position where one haplessly just accepts that the powerful will do what they will, and we have absolutely no way to do anything impactful about it. I really can't imagine the 'soul-death' that would accompany living in such a no-hope world.

Again I don't know whether I've really answered your questions well enough, but that's the best I can do right now.

CL: Thank you, Richard, for another fascinating reply! I think it's all too easy to see someone standing on the street campaigning for something, and to imagine we know all about them. Clearly we don't. I very much appreciate your showing us 'the man behind the activist', and sharing a few anecdotes from across the years – of which I've no doubt there are many more.

If we come forward now to your current 'project', if I may call it that – the Stroud Info-Hug. It was this activity that caught my attention, and stimulated my curiosity about 'why do people do this?' and 'what kind of people do this?' and, even, 'what does it all mean?'. I'm also interested in the ground the street stall grew in, as it were. I gather from our chats that you'd already been active in Stroud as a campaigner, and with a number of group explorations and actions, prior to setting up the stall.

Would you set the scene for us, describing what you were doing before the advent of the stall, and perhaps the 'scene' around that? What was the atmosphere, and mood, in your group or groups prior to the stall coming into being?

And then, how did the idea of the stall emerge, and how did it come into physical reality? I'm

especially interested in some of the 'behind the scenes' discussions, how the atmosphere and mood may have been shifting and evolving at that time, and perhaps the dynamics in your group. Of course, I'm not asking for overly personal revelations. I would like to offer listeners a sense of the human side of the initiation of the stall.

At this point, I invite you to be as explicit as you like about what was going on in the UK, and perhaps globally, at the time, and how this played into what you were doing.

Thank you in advance for your next answer, which I already await with breath fully bated!

RH: I'm afraid this will necessarily be a long answer, if I'm to do proper justice to your questions, Catherine. In terms of the precursors to the Info-Hug street stall (which was three years old in August 2023), there are three quite distinct local campaign stalls in which I was engaged that preceded the Info-Hug.

First, back in 2015 my dear friend Skeena Rathor had the inspiration to found what we were to call 'The Politics Kitchen' – a street stall which aspired to create a space for *non-partisan* conversations about politics and ordinary people's political concerns. The four of us who ran the weekly stall were all strong Jeremy Corbyn supporters and, like hundreds of thousands of others, we'd joined the Labour Party because of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the party (see <https://tinyurl.com/4s6t6vve>). We ran the Politics Kitchen stall. normally twice-weekly, for over two years, and we became quite the talk-of-the-town, because of our unique approach – which strove not to include any explicit campaigning, but rather, which offered open conversations in which we each aimed to listen far more than we spoke. We did make no secret of the 'different kind of politics' that Corbyn represented, however – and so there was some tension in holding all that; and we did from time to time have long discussions about whether we should cease to showcase our explicit allegiance to Jeremy Corbyn – especially during election campaigns.

We had huge numbers of incredible conversations over those 2+ years, and the former (Labour) MP, David Drew, spoke very highly of our stall and what it was seeking to achieve in seeding non-partisan political conversations in the town. Indeed, when the then prime minister Theresa May sprang a surprise general election in 2017, David Drew was persuaded out of retirement to stand again as the Labour candidate for Stroud – and he proceeded to win the seat by just 687 votes! David himself conceded that The Politics Kitchen had played a significant role in his surprising victory. As a footnote, the four of us also famously glued ourselves to Jeremy Corbyn’s garden fence in the summer of 2019 to highlight environmental issues – and much to our amazement, our picture ended up on the front page of *The Times* and the *Washington Post*, amongst many other newspapers and newsfeeds across the globe! (see, for example, <https://tinyurl.com/rcefdja5>; <https://tinyurl.com/2v6n5957>; and <https://tinyurl.com/3ajp576s>).

My second local street-stall campaigning example is the campaign that a small group of us ran for several months in late 2017 to save Stroud’s iconic Subscription (Sub) Rooms from being sold off by Stroud District Council – or in other words, from a public asset being privatised (see <https://tinyurl.com/muv7b67a>). This was a very intense street campaign that my friends John and Terry helped to run five or six days a week on Stroud High Street with many hundreds of badges, stickers and leaflets being handed out; and it included a 1,500 paper petition presented to the council, urging them not to sell off the Sub Rooms. We had a major victory in early December 2017 when the District Council narrowly voted not to sell off the Sub Rooms, when several months earlier it had seemed inevitable and unstoppable (based on what many ‘insiders’ were telling us at the start of our campaign; see <https://tinyurl.com/4buf9ux3>).

The third street-stall campaigning example is our local ‘anti-5G’ campaign, which ran a weekly or twice-weekly street stall on Stroud High Street for several years from 2017 to early 2020. This group was already forming a strong position on technocracy and the urgent need to challenge its

uncritical imposition across society, and many of the group involved in this campaign went on to be key players and participants in the Info-Hug stall that started in August 2020. Again, the 5G campaign had a number of notable victories in managing to stop 5G masts coming to Stroud and environs (e.g. see <https://tinyurl.com/ypc29csa>; <https://tinyurl.com/ys27cv8u>; and <https://tinyurl.com/mthjhbbb>); and as I write, there are still no 5G masts existing in Stroud and its immediate surroundings.

In terms of the more immediate process that led up to the founding of the Stroud Info-Hug stall in August 2020, our freedom group had been meeting weekly (and sometimes more frequently) starting from March/April 2020. None of us believed that the so-called ‘pandemic’ was anything like as serious as the fear-mongering mainstream media was wanting people to believe (we were all-too-aware aware of research expert Professor John Ioannidis’s early peer-reviewed estimate of the survival rate from covid-19 being 99.76 per cent); and collectively we shared a huge concern about the attacks upon fundamental civil liberties that were unfolding across the globe at breakneck speed – including in our own local community.

So all in all, I already had quite a reputation as a local street-stall activist (as described earlier), and I can clearly remember in one Wednesday evening freedom-group meeting when one of our group, Janet, casually but pointedly said to me, ‘...so when are we starting a street-stall, then?!’. That was it!... – I’d been goaded into action, and within a few weeks we had a twice-weekly street stall on Stroud High Street, with a stand, a banner / banners, and a pasting table covered with leaflets and published books on the covid / pandemic con (as we ‘covid deniers’ often call it). As the covid injection started to be rolled out, of course we shifted to handing out copious information about the injection, hoping to help as many people as possible to decline to take the jab, or at least to ‘wait and see’.

You ask about ‘the atmosphere, and mood, in your group or groups prior to the stall coming into being’. Our local freedom group was

meeting regularly in clandestine conditions – we had a taste of what it must have been like to be in the French Resistance! (and I’m only slightly exaggerating). We were determined – and not a little outraged – at the quite unwarranted attacks on people’s rights under what we saw as the flimsy pretext of covid; and perhaps even more appalled that only a small minority of the population seemed able to see through the propaganda and gas-lighting that the mainstream media were deploying in lockstep in order to terrorise the population (as brilliantly outlined in Laura Dodsworth’s seminal work, *State of Fear*). With the very well researched information we had individually and collectively amassed, it felt like a moral duty – an ethical imperative, even – to take a high-profile public stand on covid and the jab, and to offer the information and the insights we had gleaned to anyone who was open to receiving and thinking open-mindedly about them.

Regarding how the idea of the stall emerged, how it came into physical reality, the ‘behind the scenes’ discussions, and the dynamics in our group: in addition to the foregoing, I can add that there was a quite urgent feeling in our group that we really *had* to do something... – to step up and walk our talk; as for most of us, an enormous and unprecedented ‘crime against humanity’ was being committed; and to bystand what was happening like hapless victims was just unthinkable. To set up a street stall seemed the obvious thing to do – high profile, comparatively cheap to do, and privileging meeting people on the street and having real one-on-one conversations. We’d had lots of practice at this with our 5G campaign stall, so the Info-Hug felt like a very natural outgrowth of and progression from that.

CL: Richard, thank you once again for a fascinating answer. I suspect that the vast majority of us have absolutely no idea about what’s involved in carrying out actions such as the Info-Hug. It’s clear that you have a significant track record of standing up for what feels ethically important to you, and actually doing something about it on a practical level, and with remarkable consistency. For most of us, consistency can be a challenge – even when

everyone else agrees with what we’re doing! For you and your group to conceive, arrange, set up and follow through on all of these projects is really quite extraordinary. It also seems clear that your vast experience has equipped you with a suite of capabilities and capacities that most of us have no idea about.

I mentioned consistency. You mentioned determination. These are surely the tip of the iceberg when it comes to listing the developmental strengthenings I can only imagine you and your group must have experienced. Especially notable, in light of the counter-mainstream positions taken, and the potential or actual weight of disapproval from certain portions of the populous. Hats off to you.

So we’re in mid 2020, and you’ve started a stall, which will continue for at least three years up to date. I would love to hear how you and your group managed the various practical aspects of making this happen – what was your process, how did you do it? And did this change and evolve as time went on?

I’d also love to hear about what it was like. I imagine many of us would not have the ‘stones’ to do a stall, and others might have the wherewithal but not enjoy the experience. How was it for you and your group? Was it fun, interesting, an adventure?; boring, heavy, stressful? I ask because this is something very few people will have experienced, or are likely to experience.

In your answer, please go into some detail about the early stages of the Info-Hug. If the flow takes you forwards in time then please go with it. The topic is so rich and full of depth, range, complexity that I wish to give you free rein as much as possible. I’m well aware that, as you might put it: ‘There’s enough material here for a conference here!’.

Over to you! I eagerly await the next instalment.

RH: Thanks for those kind words. It’s over three years since we started the stall, so I’m afraid that my memory of the early days is somewhat hazy. I don’t think there’s anything especially

memorable to report – so perhaps it’s just as well that these comments will be quite impressionistic and broad-brush.

Of course operating an effective street stall needs a certain minimum level of organisation and discipline – but one thing we emphatically *aren’t* is rigidly disciplined, controlled and ‘over-planned’. Our stall group meets once a week, and we talk through the issues that folk bring to the meeting, and reach a view on policy (usually consensually, occasionally by majority). In the early days it was simply a matter of finding enough people to run the stall, getting hold of the necessary hardware (a B&Q pasting-table, table cloth, a banner stand inherited from The Politics Kitchen (see earlier) and some shopping trolleys to hold leaflets, books, string, elastic bands, tape, stones to stop leaflets blowing away etc.); and then deciding as a group what to have on the stall in terms of banners, books and leaflets (see accompanying photos of the stall). We all put our hands in our pockets and came up with the necessary money needed to buy the hardware and get leaflets printed; and for my sins I have literally thousands of books, including many of direct relevance to our campaigning themes – so the more relevant ones found their way on to our stall table!

We fairly soon decided to have a ‘rule’ (rare for us!) that there should never be less than two people on the street stall at any one time. This was because we started the stall quite early in covid times, and in handing out leaflets and information about the experimental gene therapy injection against covid, we came in for a considerable amount of hate and aggression, sometimes with violence not far away, and we would be screamed at as (for example) ‘Murderers who should be strung up!’ (and other choice lines of attack) – these weren’t rare occurrences. So as you can imagine, folk weren’t exactly queuing up to be on the stall in these circumstances – and a number of our strong supporters and members said to me privately that they were 100 per cent supportive of the stall – but they just couldn’t themselves stand on the street and deal with the levels of hate being directed at us. So people effectively self-selected to be on the stall, and then I took it on to plan

each day’s ‘manning’ schedule (Friday from 10.30 till 3, and Saturday from 9.30 till 3), and make sure that there were enough of us to always have at least two people on the stall at any one time.

And yes, I’m sure there’s been an evolution – partly because the environment *itself* is dynamically changing (for example, today we’re not in the middle of terrorised jab hysteria as we were two-plus years ago), and partly because of personnel changes from time to time – some folk leave, new blood joins us. But there’s also been a learning curve in relation to how we aspire to behave on the stall. We’re now much closer to the view that *whatever* the provocation and abuse we receive, we should try to stay calm and not rise to any bait and be abusive back – which, as you might imagine, is not always easy, given some of the abuse hurled at us. We’re fortunate that the local community police officers are very supportive of us and our right to free speech and the dissemination of lawful literature; and we do have an open incident-file at the local police station to which we report particularly nasty events or attacks. Also, knowing that we’re under security services surveillance also concentrates our minds in behaving as meticulously as we can – as there are many people in Stroud who would love to see our stall closed down, including the local MP and some councillors.

So early on, we had an awful lot of verbal abuse – and I’m perhaps a bit ashamed now, in the light of our subsequent learning, that I often gave as good as I got – and often more so, in return. I happen to have the ‘gift of the gab’ in these situations, and was often able to come up with withering *bons mots* ‘in the moment’ that silenced our verbal abusers, who would often go off in a blustering huff. But that’s not the approach we’re trying to follow now. Hopefully we are maturing on this most fascinating and, perhaps, unusual of journeys.

Regarding what it was like experientially / emotionally, I’m sure that will vary for different folk on the stall. We have a division of labour, and stall folk are very much left to be how they want to be when on the stall. I’ve always seen

my key role as getting our various information leaflets ‘out there’; and for at least the past 18 months, it’s also been about handing out the counter-narrative *Light* newspaper. Whereas for others, they just want to stand by the stall and offer a welcoming space to which people come for a chat or a discussion.

I do find it exciting and very fulfilling working on the street, and so many of the people we meet are just wonderful people – wise, intelligent, kind, free-thinking, wide ‘awake’ to the duplicities going in society – and many of these people have become our friends who regularly come to chat to us and give us their support. I can honestly say that having run over 250 stalls since we started in July 2020, including right through three winters without a break, never have I once woken up on ‘a stall-day’ and felt, ‘I really don’t want to be doing this today!’. I can’t think of anything I’ve campaigned on in my life to date that gets anywhere near the importance and urgency of the freedom movement and the messages we’re putting out into the world. As you know, one of our main banners says: ‘Free Thinking for the Good of All’; and another says ‘Love and Truth for Peace and Freedom’. I see these as being core values of the kind of Humanistic Psychology I’ve championed throughout my professional life.

Responding specifically to the descriptors you used: fun, interesting, an adventure, boring, heavy, stressful.... Each of us would answer this differently, I’m sure; but for me: **fun?**: occasionally so – I certainly try to be as light and friendly as I can manage in the circumstances on the street – and we’re a group of friends who certainly enjoy a bit of banter!; **interesting?**: it’s ALWAYS interesting meeting people, including the people who hate us for challenging mainstream narratives; **an adventure?** – I don’t really do ‘adventure’ – for me this is work and, indeed, *a calling*; **boring?**: never, ever!; **heavy?** – occasionally so, when there’s abuse and latent violence in the air, but certainly not on a routine, ongoing basis; and **stressful?** – again, when there’s abuse around and ill-disguised hate directed at us, that can be stressful – as can being the stall co-ordinator sometimes, when a helper drops out at the last minute and I have to find a

replacement at very short notice – i.e. here I’m referring to the sometimes stressful logistics of running an operation like this that’s really effective and consistently good-enough to meet its aims.

CL: Thank you, again, for another thought-provoking answer. Isn’t it interesting how things can become ‘unmemorable’ when we’re right in the thick of it? To me, the very existence of your stall is memorable in itself, and I’m aware there have been numerous ups and downs along the way.

You mention several core principles or aspects of the experience that I’d like to pick out. First, this business of managing the interplay between necessary structure and healthy free flow of ideas and practices. In my experience, the potential difficulty of managing this balance is at the root of many community-group disintegrations. That your group has flourished as well as it has for as long as three years is laudable. And especially in light of the second point I wish to highlight – the incidence of hostile reactions from a portion of the local population. External hostility is, of course, unpleasant on its face. Managing this experience is, for most of us, not easy – and this can easily translate into hostility and dis-ease within the group itself, as we struggle to navigate and process our discomfort.

This brings me on to the third point. You describe how, in the early days, you ‘gave back as good as you got’ from hostile elements, and how you’ve evolved to a different position, where you do your very best to respond with equanimity, and without inflaming discord. This is a significant transition. Remarkable, in this case, because of the very forces at play, that could as easily have led to a ramping up of aggression in and by your group.

Fourth point: I’m impressed by the consistency of your group’s activities, the simple ‘showing up-ness’ of running the stall every week, along with the ongoing monitoring and adaptation of process and organisation. Consistency is often bruited about as a high virtue, and certainly vital to any endeavour. But many of us don’t actually

do it, or do it for a short while and then give up! People get bored, distracted, frustrated – and stop showing up. Clearly, some projects are well let go of if they turn out to be a less-than-good idea. But one could equally argue that we can't know if something is a good idea without first being consistent with it for a goodly piece of time.

There are numerous other points I could pick out. Overall, I'd like to highlight the developmental aspect of the endeavour. Clearly, you and other group members have been going through a learning experience, and are still doing so. I imagine there must have been some openness to learning, whether or not awarely, in the group early on. I'm curious as to whether or not this has been explicitly spoken about in the group. I'd like to come back to this theme towards the end of the interview, as part of our wrap-up.

I appreciate that there is a repetitive aspect to the project, as in opening the stall, running the stall, closing the stall, carting materials from A to B, to A, and so on – and the regular meetings. So many conversations, interactions, experiences and so many leaflets and papers handed out, read, integrated and thought about. I wonder if we can select and focus in on a few nodal events that took place along the way, as a way to colour in the story for readers, and give a flavour of the adventure!

Immediately springing to mind is the incident with the sandwich-boards and the policeman who drove eight miles, I believe, specifically to arrest you! Would you care to tell us about the whole Citizens' Conversations sub-project, and the specific incident I'm referring to here? One of my favourite parts of the story is when the constabulary contacted you asking you to collect your sandwich-boards, which would otherwise go to auction. Priceless. I'll – nearly! – stop talking now and let you tell the story your way.

And further, if there are two or three other particular incidents or events that stand out for you, please describe what happened, and how it played out. Honestly, I think many of us live blissfully unaware that some of what you and

your group have experienced over the past three years actually occurs in real life! Ken Loach – step aside!

Again, please answer this as you feel to. There is no reasonable way to capture all of the insights and themes of the Info-Hug in one conversation, but your descriptions of the events and experiences help us 'outsiders' to get an inkling of what's been going on, and what it all means.

Over to you!

RH: Has 'openness to learning... been explicitly spoken about in the group'? Well I can't say for certain, but I don't remember it being overtly discussed. But it's still been happening! – and my hunch is that it's not been happening any less effectively without it having been consciously named (in fact, some might argue – and I could be among them – that it's actually *preferable* for learning to be unconscious rather than consciously articulated; but that's a whole other conversation!). The key point, I think, is the *personal qualities* of the people involved: thoughtful, sensitive, 'emotionally intelligent' people will tend to *quite naturally* 'learn from experience' or be open to evolving experiential learning without needing to consciously articulate that that's what they're doing. And I'm delighted to say that the vast majority of people who help on our street stall are people with such qualities in abundance (and those who don't especially possess such personal qualities will tend to drop out anyway, as they find a dissonance between the culture of the 'stall community' (if I may use that term) and their own personal styles – and about which differences I make no judgements, needless to say).

The Citizens' Conversation initiative. Well, I really can't remember whose idea it was; but in one of our regular meetings (at which we often brain-stormed new ideas for our campaigning activities), someone came up with the idea of making sandwich-boards, with each person having one in front with the cation 'Citizens' Conversation', and the board on the back having a thought-provoking question that might generate a conversation with the public – like,

for example, ‘Is the cure worse than the disease?’, or ‘Have we all been duped?’. With several of us being former psychological therapists of various hues, and being aware of the massive mental-health issues that were being generated by covid lockdowns (which we believed to be doing far more harm than good to people’s health and well-being), we framed this as a community-generated, bottom-up mental-health initiative to help spawn ‘healing conversations’ with any members of the public who wished to engage with us on our wanderings around Stroud town centre. This, then, was our rationale for this initiative – an attempt to do something to counteract the iatrogenic lockdown madness that was all around us, and which so many putatively intelligent people seemed to be accepting unquestioningly, uncritically buying into what we saw as being decidedly flaky, if not bogus mainstream narratives about covid.

So a group of maybe eight of us met up on a Saturday and spent some hours making the boards with their various captions – it was great fun both dreaming up the captions that questioned the mainstream covid narrative, and actually making the boards! Then, one Friday, six or so of us walked around Stroud in twos, wearing our boards and talking to anyone who wanted to engage with us. Surprisingly, perhaps, there was more bemusement than hostility in people’s responses to us. But we did attract rather strange attention from the police that day (there was still a lot of anxiety around, and still some regulations in force regarding social distancing etc.). A rather shady-looking plain-clothes police officer accosted us along with what he said was a trainee policeman (who was in uniform), and he proceeded to question us as to what we were doing, warned us about the regulations and then let us go on our way. He was polite and relatively non-confrontational.

But the next day was a very different story! On that Saturday, Stroud was upgraded to new tier-4 lockdown regulations – but four of us still went out on the street with our sandwich-boards. And the rest is history! – we were duly arrested by a zealous police officer, charged with breaking lockdown regulations for holding an ‘illegal

gathering’, and spent some three hours in Quedgeley police cells before being released, ‘case under investigation’. Some of the extraordinary story has been reported in newspapers like the *Daily Sceptic* – see, for example, <https://tinyurl.com/yr9fs72s> and <https://tinyurl.com/yshuv9vt>; and there are details of the case and the incident on our crowd-funding page, here – <https://tinyurl.com/4rs82yvz>. In all, we raised around £7,000 for successfully fighting and overturning our two convictions for breaking coronavirus regulations, thanks in large part to the assistance of *Daily Sceptic* editor Toby Young and our many generous friends – and of course a brilliant legal team, in particular Andy at Murray Hughman Solicitors.

In retrospect, for me this was a fascinating and challenging experience, to say the least. Taking on the full force of the legal system and the police is no small matter, and I was quite shocked at just how scared I was of, and during, the whole process. When a letter from the courts came through the letter-box, it sometimes took me days to pluck up the courage to open it – I’m serious. I share this because it really brought it home to me just how much fear perhaps we all have of ‘the law’: after all, we’re brought up in a culture that instils fear of the police and ‘the law of the land’, and without any learning about our unalienable natural or common-law rights. But again, that’s for another conversation.

Other memorable / landmark examples? Hmmm – let’s see. I particularly remember a man we subsequently called ‘Basil’ (named after Basil Fawlty of *Fawlty Towers* fame), whom we subsequently discovered to be a secret services individual being paid to disrupt our street stall. He would make scenes next to the stall, engage passers-by about ‘those disgraceful anti-vaxxers’ etc., and generally try to whip a frenzy around our stall. I eventually got to a place where every time ‘Basil’ showed up, I would treat him as a joke-figure with the most derision and sarcasm that I could muster – and I think that worked quite well, and to some extent disarmed his act. ‘So just how much are they paying you, Basil?’ (in a loud voice), was one of my choice lines.

Another incident was when a prominent local campaigner against our street stall seized a pile of newspapers from our table and ran off with them – only to be pursued by my friend and me at breakneck speed – we thankfully succeeded in retrieving the papers in one piece!

Yet another incident was when one of our haters smashed our table – leaflets, books etc. flew everywhere down the street. Immediately, random passers-by very generously came to our assistance, and I immediately hared off to the local B&Q, bought a new pasting table, and within 30 minutes or so, we were up and running again. ‘The show must *and will* go on!’, I said to anyone who’d listen – and it did!

There have been condemnatory letters to the local newspaper urging the County Council’s Highways Department to have our street stall closed down, and local councillors also trying to have our stall closed down – including engaging the assistance of the local Conservative MP for Stroud; but all such attempts have so far failed.

We’ve been very heartened that the local ‘community’ police officers have been very supportive of our stall and our right to be there and share our message and newspaper. It confirms other reports I’ve heard from people ‘in the know’, who say that there is significant support for freedom campaigners like ourselves very high up in the police force – notwithstanding our constant monitoring by the security services.

But perhaps most importantly, I want to mention our friends and supporters – that’s perhaps the most memorable and, often, deeply moving experience of all. Some months back, a middle-aged man I’d never seen before took one of our papers from me, and said as he took it, ‘This paper is the only thing that stops me from topping myself’ – and he clearly meant it. Others have come up to us, sometimes almost in tears, thanking us profusely for having the courage to do what we’re doing. One chap once went down to the card shop, bought us a ‘thank you’ card and wrote the most movingly beautiful message in it. And early on it the covid madness, a number of people came up to our stall, with it

soon becoming clear that they’d been totally isolated with no-one to talk to – they were so grateful for our welcoming presence and invitation to chat about anything that was concerning them. And finally, we’ve had lots of thank you’s for our courage in handing out thousands of leaflets at the height of the covid fear-mongering putsch – including leaflets on the covid injection that had information they’d never have heard on the mainstream/legacy media. I’m convinced that the authoritative literature we handed out will have saved lives, and possibly a very large number of severe ‘vaccine’ injuries too.

So, all in all the negativity and hate we receive from a very small minority is, for me, more than outweighed by far by the positive feedback and, frankly, love that we receive from so many people on a regular, ongoing basis.

Does that anywhere near answer your question?...

CL: Thank you, Richard. Yes, absolutely – these anecdotal stories are vivid and help paint the picture beautifully. It’s wonderful to hear about the positive feedback from grateful citizens.

Your description of the personal qualities of members of your group is lovely, and very touching. I see what you mean when you say that such people tend, naturally, to ‘learn from experience’. I suppose it’s no coincidence that such people were and are attracted to the Info-Hug project. A pleasing reminder that perhaps when we choose a path for the ‘right’ reasons we tend to attract the ‘right’ kind of people. Benevolent community generation, one might say.

Thank you as well for acknowledging the fear around the interactions with ‘The Law’. I think you’re absolutely right: probably the majority of us are indeed brought up to see the law as having absolute and irresistible authority over our lives. No doubt, tangling with the legal system can have genuinely dire consequences. But I think you refer to something else, a kind of primal terror that is not helpful, and that perhaps

undermines our capacities for free thinking and adult decision-making.

It seems there was plenty to go around in the covid regime years, in terms of stimulus for the deep fear centres. One of the aspects I found most sinister was the lack of public debate, and the extreme difficulty of private debate. People were shouted down for having a different opinion, discussion was avoided. I heard from a lot of people that this silence was in itself a source of intense loneliness, fear, and a sense of unreality and danger. The Info-Hug, by its very existence, flew – and flies – in the face of the unspoken agreement to ‘not talk about it’. I wonder if your stall helped people to step aside from that, clear their heads and walk free of it. It sounds like perhaps it did. Not to mention – the numerous people who made healthier choices as a result of reading some of your materials about the ‘vaccine’. Bravo!!

I think this may be a good moment to speak of ‘cancel culture’. From my own observation, cancel culture occurs most commonly in certain religions, and certain authoritarian cultures, whether in organisations, communities or nations. I’m actually reading a beautiful exposition of this in Ursula K. Le Guin’s science-fiction novel *The Telling*. She somehow manages to represent both the cancelled *and* the cancellers, such that one finds oneself empathising with both groups. Not an easy read! Enlightening.

You’ve talked about your background, some of your guiding values and principles, some of your campaigning activities across the years, some of the triggers in the covid-regime situation, and some of how you and your group chose to respond and activate yourselves. I imagine you’ve engaged with cancel culture in numerous situations along the way, and no doubt have learned a lot about it, and about your relationship with it, as a consequence.

I would love to hear your personal perspective of the phenomenon, especially in light of the experience of the past few years. What do you now understand about the roots of it, how it plays out, how it affects individuals and society,

and how one might best navigate the terrain around it? I fully appreciate that a full answer to this question is a book in itself, not to mention a conference! So perhaps a few thoughts that indicate some of the more important aspects, as you see them?

I’d also like to throw out an assumption and ask you to confirm it, or correct me on it. My assumption is that much of the negative feedback you and the group have received is basically triggered by your simple refusal to comply with the cancel culture; and that by the same token, much of the positive feedback is from people who appreciate you doing so. Of course there are specific points of agreement and disagreement – but would you agree that your non-compliance with cancel culture is the, or one of the, most essential aspects of the Info-Hug?

Again, I deeply appreciate your taking the time and attention for this conversation.

RH: Thanks again for your kind words. Re ‘when we choose a path for the “right” reasons we tend to attract the “right” kind of people’ – well that certainly rings very true for me. Also, I certainly think that the Info-Hug, by its very existence and presence on the High Street, has had a major impact on huge numbers of people. It’s not only those who stop, have a chat and/or take our newspaper and/or literature who are influenced. One of our main and most prominent stall banners proclaims, ‘**Free thinking for the good of all**’; and another says ‘**Love & truth for peace & freedom**’. Even people who don’t stop will often see these ‘slogans’, and at some level the messages we’re seeding will no doubt ‘land’ and have an influence – well that’s my hope, anyway.

‘...Managing to represent both the cancelled and the cancellers, such that one finds oneself empathising with both groups’ (Le Guin) – well that certainly resonates with the place we’ve got to over the past three years. In a press letter that the Info-Hug had in the local *Stroud News & Journal* last week as I write (signed by 14 of us), we wrote: ‘...We are far more interested in understanding the complex dynamics of division than we are in fuelling divisiveness.... [W]e

genuinely wonder about, and have compassion for, the fears underpinning this [cancel-culture] ideology.” Which brings me neatly to...

Cancel culture! – yes, ‘...enough material for a while conference there!’ (as they say). I recently bought several whole books on the cancel culture theme – and T.J. Coles has written an excellent two-part article on the phenomenon in recent issues of *Nexus* magazine. You’re right – as a psychologist (of sorts), I’ve spent a lot of time trying to understand the psychological dynamics underpinning the propagandist strategies deployed against truth and freedom campaigners like ourselves, in order to shame and silence the truth, and thus advance what are, in my view, anti-truth narratives of mass deception. I believe it’s essential that we’re able to recognise these cancel-culture devices, both in order to protect ourselves from them and also to help us develop counter-strategies that can neutralise and expose them for what they are.

We don’t have the space here to delve into the fascinating *sociological* origins of the cancel-culture phenomenon – though the 2020 *Harper’s Magazine* open letter, ‘A Letter on Justice and Open Debate’ (see tinyurl.com/y22wszn9) and Michael Knowles’ 2021 book *Speechless: Controlling Words, Controlling Minds* (see tinyurl.com/3z8y7tdm) are as good a place as any for researchers and interested lay persons to start.

Here in Stroud, our Info-Hug freedom street-stall has been the butt of pretty odious cancel-culture (CC) techniques for several years now. Casting around baseless smears in public leaflets constitutes a classic CC tactic, and we’ve had to think long and hard about how to respond – if at all. One scatter-gun smear that’s been promiscuously deployed against us and others is that of ‘anti-semitism’. Journalist Neil Oliver speaks eloquently to this in his excellent talk of seven months ago, ‘The slow creep of ugliness into the language of public debate is impossible to ignore’ (see tinyurl.com/5936989n), which, as I write, has had over 151,000 views on YouTube alone.

One grotesque irony is that the people casting around such smears are using and exploiting the appalling suffering of the Jewish people in order to manufacture a pretext to sanctimoniously demonise and ‘cancel’ anyone who dares not to fall in with their narrowly defined ‘Regime of Truth’ – which must never be questioned or deviated from, or ruthless, dehumanising cancellation will be the result. When the name-calling anti-semitism smear is deployed – as with journalists Mark Stein and Neil Oliver of GB News, and MPs Jeremy Corbyn and, more recently, Andrew Bridgen – this *of itself* is about as anti-semitic as you can get. The Doublespeak irony of these contortions is truly breathtaking.

The net result of this anti-semitism weaponising strategy is to comprehensively close down any open-minded, freely critical thinking about what the highly complex term ‘anti-semitism’ might mean or connote. Even a cursory investigation of these questions reveals very quickly just how historically, culturally and psychologically complicated the phenomenon of anti-semitism actually is. Yet in this Orwellian world, no space for open critical thinking about the phenomenon seems to be allowable.

The cancellers’ whole approach to issues like the Holocaust is monolithic and, at root, totalising and totalitarian – ironic, really, as these people commonly *claim* to be the liberal defenders of human rights! – yet more inversion. Yet nothing could be further from the truth; and my hunch is that these people commonly have no awareness of the contradictory, self-nullifying nature of their basic position.

This is how I believe the CC process works. First, the cancellers take unto themselves the right to define what constitutes *the* one and only ‘truth’; and once so defined, they hyperactively seek out anyone whose view deviates from their own, and they then deride and cancel them without entering into any meaningful exchange of views or dialogue. In this way, they can feel good and virtuous about themselves, achieving this by unfeelingly othering and demonising the Other.

This whole approach does a gross violence to free thinking, nuance, complexity, diversity and difference. It's a thoroughly pathological strategy which deploys the 'victim' card in order to close down and silence any meaningful debate or conversation. Moreover, their constant pursuit of anti-semitism, akin to a kind of modern witch-hunt, actively contributes to highlighting anti-semitism, and keeping it prominent in modern culture – a self-fulfilling and self-serving strategy, if ever there was one.

Our Stroud Info-Hug group is very different. We consciously strive not to hold monolithically 'lockstep' views about anything – and there will likely be a range of views in our (or in any other) group about, for example, the Israeli state, Zionism, the Palestinians etc. And there certainly exists no Thought Police enforcer-system operating to ensure that no-one thinks thoughts outside of the politically correct narrative, that you diverge from at your peril!

How to counter CC manoeuvres and smears? I would always try my best to steer away from advocating 'fighting fire with fire' – i.e. using CC techniques to silence its purveyors. As soon as we sink to their level, we're in danger of losing the argument in a mire of self-contradictions. The degree of robustness of our response will of course vary, depending on personal temperament, circumstances and the like; but as a general principle I would advocate *calling out* the CC process and its toxic dynamics – its anti-truth devices and techniques, and its violation of critical thinking, civility and open-mindedness. And with their strategy and its disreputable tactics laid bare for all to see, we hopefully maximise the likelihood of fair-minded people seeing through the noxious CC game, and so opening themselves up to engaging with the truth in all its richness and complexity.

Finally, would I agree with you that our non-compliance with CC is the, or one of the, most essential aspects of the Info-Hug? I'd say it's important – but there'll be different views on what is most important. For me, our most important *raison d'être* is to alert people to the way they are being gas-lighted, manipulated, propagandised – even to the extent of being

deliberately misled and lied to by political leaders, corporatists and mainstream media platforms like the BBC. For me, the more people wake up to the essential role that *free, reflective and critical thinking* plays in a genuinely free society, the less the likelihood that nefarious forces will be able to railroad the great mass of the population into complying with highly damaging and quite unnecessary restrictions and attacks on human rights and freedoms. If we can contribute to that 'waking-up' process in any way, I'll be delighted and, for me, our job will have been done.

CL: Richard, thank you for that powerful response.

There is something of the all-guns-blazing 'manifesto' in how you word your comments about cancel culture. I'm hearing outrage, along with a passion to do your utmost to help create a better balance. I suspect many of us feel some of the same concern, but perhaps with less explicit articulation of that. Perhaps Info-Hug is an external manifestation of something that lives in the breast of many free-thinking individuals up and down the land. I like to think so.

To me it's sad to hear about the various 'attacks' you and your group have experienced. And yet, I suppose these behaviours are an almost inevitable extension of the very thing you're seeking to bring to light. It delights me to hear about your commitment to reflection and consideration in regard to how, or even if, you respond. In my view, this kind of inner work is a big part of what is called for in these times. Looking in from the outside, observers could be forgiven for completely missing what goes on behind the scenes, and the amount of time, energy and sheer heart that goes into managing yourselves and your actions.

Richard, I feel expanded and humbled by the story of Info-Hug as you've shared it, along with your generous disclosures about your life journey to this point in relation to campaigning for truth and freedom. I am filled with gratitude for your consistent and long-standing, dare I say dogged, commitment and service to our

collective connection to free-thinking and all of its gifts.

How you worded this section is deeply moving to me, and joy-making:

For me, the more people wake up to the essential role that free, reflective and critical thinking plays in a genuinely free society, the less the likelihood that nefarious forces will be able to railroad the great mass of the population into complying with highly damaging and quite unnecessary restrictions and attacks on human rights and freedoms. If we can contribute to that 'waking-up' process in any way, I'll be delighted and, for me, our job will have been done.

I know there's so much more that could be said, but I feel we've given readers plenty to chew on for now, and it's almost time to bring our discussion to a gentle close – for now!

I've loved this exchange with you. I'm curious to hear 'how was it for you?'. You spoke at the beginning about your thought process in considering doing this. Looking back now, how did it feel along the way? And how, if at all, has this process of disclosure and discussion affected or integrated how you feel about the Info-Hug, your involvement with it, or any other related aspect?

I'm intrigued as to how reading this piece may have affected our readers, and what they may carry away from it. For my part, I'm aware of internal threads of inquiry running on themes such as collective endeavour, the interface between internal process and external behaviour, generosity of spirit and focus of application, reaction and response, passion and equanimity, friendliness and alienation. I feel like much juicy processing will continue for me, as a direct result of this discussion with you. So thank you, on my own individual behalf, as well as on behalf of our readers, and of course the Stroud community, and wider communities who follow and appreciate the Info-Hug.

Before we finish – is there anything else that you'd like to mention, either that hasn't been mentioned so far, or that we've discussed but

that would benefit from repeating or embellishing?

RH: Well thank you for the opportunity, Catherine! One thing I'm aware of is how, when I'm immersed in something with full commitment, it's far from easy for me to step back from, and take a meta-view of, the import and impact of what we're doing. So I'm happy for someone else to have done that, to have taken the trouble and patience that you've done here to draw something out of me that could be of wider value. And then of course there's the cultural curse (if that's what it is) of English self-deprecation and the wish to avoid limelight and plaudits, from which cultural trait I plead 'guilty' to carrying around with me.

You ask, 'how did it feel along the way?'. I don't have much to say about this – I just did it! I love writing, and I like conversing, and despite the length of this interview (sorry, reader!), it didn't feel at all like hard work. And I'm not aware of having discovered anything particularly new (though there are always new nuances in understanding that emerge in such a conversation), as I spend a lot of time thinking into all these issues on an ongoing basis – so I've essentially been sharing insights and understandings that I've already reached. That's the best I can do with that question.

You also asked, 'how, if at all, has this process of disclosure and discussion affected or integrated how you feel about Info-Hug, your involvement with it, or any other related aspect?'. Well the first thought that comes to mind is that it's work-in-progress, that it will continue (hopefully!) to evolve and *mature*, and that it's the Info-Hug *process* that is all – not any pre-conceived 'goal' or desired destination. I guess that in these sharings and probings, I've come to be more aware of the importance of what we're doing, and perhaps the unusual nature of it – and perhaps especially the achievement of having sustained this campaigning for over three years now, having a stall on a twice-weekly basis for all that time (our friend Janet often refers admiringly to our 'stamina'). Without a group of great people equally committed as I am to what we're

standing for, it would have been quite impossible to maintain this campaign for night on 175 continuous weeks – and I guess that speaks to just how important we all think our cause is, not just locally but as a paradigm for our human future.

My final point might be a surprising one. I'd like our 'opponents' to read this long interview carefully and to reflect on it, from their perspective. And then if one of them were up for it, it would be great if you, Catherine, would interview her or him, in the same even-handed way you've interviewed me here. I'd love to read and reflect on such an interview. If this could happen, my hope would be that at least some degree of mutual understanding and even, perhaps, bridge-building and partial meeting of minds and hearts might unfold.

And going back momentarily to my days as a practising therapist, I find myself imagining a Gestalt exercise, along the following lines. A member of the Info-Hug group and one of our 'detractors' would meet with a skilled facilitator. The Info-Hug rep plays the part of one of our detractors, and the detractor rep plays the part of an Info-Hug campaigner – and from those imagined inverted places, they have a dialogue. I've witnessed extraordinary learning and totally unexpected insights coming out of such facilitated exercises. Certainly, until something like the latter two suggestions begins to happen, for me the job of the Info-Hug will necessarily only be partially done – as the ongoing existence of schism and conflict is the last thing we want to be involved in, or have any part of. But alas, at the moment at least, I'm afraid these divisions seem to go hand-in-hand with the counter-cultural territory of what we're engaged in.

Thanks again for this wonderful opportunity, Catherine, and for your patience with it – and with me! Are the final words yours or mine?... – I'm happy either way.

CL: Thank you, Richard. Beautifully and poignantly put. I love that perspective you describe of a 'work in progress', that will be complete when, and only when, we see a significant reduction in the schisms and conflicts

in regard to free thinking and critical reflection. May there be deep and integrated Peace, Love and Understanding. This is the humanistic way.

Namaste!

About the contributors

Richard House has been editing or co-editing *Self & Society* journal for over a decade. His latest book (co-written with Thomas Hardtmuth MD) is *Beyond Mainstream Medicine: Towards a New Paradigm for Health* (InterActions, Stroud, 2022) (<https://www.wynstonespress.com/Beyond-Mainstream-Medicine.html>). He is also editing an anthology containing the best of the first three years of *The Light* newspaper, to be published in December 2023 (see www.thelightpaper.co.uk/brightest-of-the-light).

Catherine Llewellyn is a humanistic facilitator of many years' standing. Her biography, philosophy, podcast, writings and offerings can be found on <https://beingspace.world>. Contact Catherine at catherine@beingspace.world or call/WhatsApp +44 7770 267230.

The Stroud Info-Hug Street Stall

