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# The Reith Lectures 2025

with Rutger Bregman

## Moral Revolution



### 3. A Conspiracy of Decency

**ANITA ANAND:** Hello, and welcome to Edinburgh for the third of this year's Reith Lectures with Rutger Bregman. Now, this capital city means a

lot to our speaker, as once upon a time it served as a cradle for the Scottish Enlightenment. Today, we're at the University of Edinburgh, where during the 18th and 19th centuries, ideas of virtue preoccupied some of the greatest thinkers of their day. Now, in the 21st century, that same idea of virtue lies at the heart of Rutger Bregman's moral revolution series. He's asking how can we make goodness fashionable again? Now that question sounds pretty simple, but is the answer just as straightforward? Known for speaking his mind, Rutger Bregman has been setting out the case for a total transformation of the way we think and the way we live. He believes that working together small groups of ordinary people can transform the entire world. This third lecture is entitled, *A Conspiracy of Decency*. Please welcome the BBC's 2025 Reith Lecturer, Rutger Bregman.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUSE]

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** Hello, Edinburgh. Thank you so much for coming here tonight in such large numbers. Are you ready for it? Yeah? Okay, well, let's get started. On the night of October the 1st, 1943, the Nazis planned a lightning raid to deport every Jew in the small nation of Denmark. They chose the eve of the Jewish New Year; confident their victims would be at home celebrating. But when the soldiers came, the houses stood empty. Someone had tipped them off. Someone had tipped the Jewish community off. In secret, tens of thousands of ordinary fishermen and shopkeepers, doctors and priests had organised escape routes and ferried thousands across the sea to safety. And in the end, almost 99% of Danish Jews survived the war. There is a book about this extraordinary episode called *A Conspiracy of Decency*. Now that phrase has always stuck with me. When we hear the word "conspiracy", we usually think of flat earthers, anti-vaxxers or men in basements with tinfoil hats.

We, the rational ones, roll our eyes and say conspiracies don't exist. But as a historian, I'm well aware that conspiracies do exist. In fact, I'm quite obsessed with them. Not the paranoid fantasies of QAnon or 9/11 truthers but the real conspiracies of small groups with big ideas. History is full of examples. A dozen apostles spreading Christianity across an empire. A debating club of Jacobins, toppling the French monarchy. An obscure think tank engineering the rise of neoliberal capitalism. Which brings me to where we are in these lectures. I promise to structure them like a classic three-part sermon. Act one is *misery*. Act two is *redemption*. And act three is *thankfulness*.

London already got *the misery*. Liverpool got *the redemption*. And now you, lucky Edinburgh, you get *the thankfulness*. Now, in my churchgoing experience, the third act of a sermon is usually the sleepest part. But let's see if we can break that tradition. Because thankfulness, in my view, is not passive. It's not sitting back with folded hands. Gratitude means responsibility. To be thankful for the abolitionists is to keep building a freer world. To be thankful for the suffragettes is to protect and expand democracy. And to be thankful for those Danish citizens is to stand up for strangers when the knock comes at your door.

Their conspiracies of decency are not just stories to admire. They are unfinished projects that we inherit. Thomas Clarkson, the abolitionist I spoke about last week in Liverpool, once wrote a three-volume history of the Quakers, the radical Protestant sect that played a leading role in the fight against slavery. One of their distinctive practices was to bury the dead in unmarked graves. They believed you don't honour people with costly headstones but with actions. In Clarkson's words, "If you wish to honour a good man, let all his actions live in your memory so that they may constantly awaken you to imitation. Thus, you will show that you really respect his memory." This is, in the end, what thankfulness means. Not just appreciation but also imitation. To join your own conspiracy of decency.

The question I want to answer today is simple. What would such a conspiracy look like? What vision, what program could renew liberal democracy in our time? And is there something we can learn from those groups that pulled it off in the past? Let's start there and consider one renegade circle in particular. *The Fabian Society*. They were a band of British elites in the late 19th century who plotted one of the most audacious conspiracies in the history of politics. And here's the remarkable thing. It worked. In 1887, they unveiled their manifesto, grandly titled *The True Radical Program*. They called it *True Radical* because they wanted to out-radical the other radicals. And indeed, the manifesto read like a utopian wish list. An eight-hour workday, votes for women, salaries for members of parliament, progressive taxation, public education, free school lunches, and even the nationalisation of railroads.

At the time, such ideas were seen as utterly fringe. The kind of plans only cranks would put on paper. And yet one by one, every single demand became reality. Today, *The True Radical Program* doesn't read like a utopian

wish list but like a plain description of the modern welfare state. How did it happen? How did the impossible become inevitable? Well, the origins of this conspiracy were fittingly very conspiracy-like. It didn't begin in a parliament or a university but in a haunted house. In the 1880s, spiritualism was all the rage among London's elites. Seances, table tapping, ghost hunting, it was the pseudoscience of the day. And two young men, Edward Pease and Frank Podmore, shared an enthusiasm for it. Now, one night, they obtained the key to an old house in Notting Hill, left the door unlocked and returned at midnight, hoping to glimpse something abnormal. The ghosts, alas, sorely disappointed them that night. But while they sat in the dark waiting for rattling chains, their conversation turned to something more radical, the possibility of social reform. So from this health-serious ghost hunt emerged something more serious. Podmore, Pease and a few others founded a society called *The Fellowship of the New Life*.

Their conviction was that social transformation had to begin with personal transformation. Because if you could change yourself, then changing the world would be easy peasy. The members pledged to live by higher virtues. They advocated pacifism, vegetarianism, simple living and intellectual honesty. Their objective was the reconstruction by society in accordance with the highest moral possibilities. By living lives of clarity and restraint, the new lifers hoped to set an example that others would follow, which would, in time, transform society itself. Still, as their meetings continued, a division began to appear. For some, the fellowship was primarily a moral project. For others, it was also a political project. And as the months went by, the debates about wages and taxation gradually began to crowd out the discussions of pacifism and simple living. Until on the 4th of January 1884, the politically-minded members of the fellowship split off, forming their own society. And it was ghost hunter Frank Podmore who proposed the name for his new club, *The Fabian Society*. He chose that name for quite conspiratorial reasons. Quintus Fabius Maximus Verrucosus, the Roman general, had worn down Hannibal's army not through pitched battles but through patience and persistence. His nickname was *The Delayer*. And that was the spirit that Podmore wanted to capture. Socialism, he believed, would not conquer Britain by storming the gates of capitalism but by slipping quietly through the back door. Unlike the Communists, the Fabians didn't believe in a single violent revolution to usher in utopia. Their chosen emblem was the tortoise, an image of slow, steady advance. And their coat of arms depicted a wolf in sheep's clothing. For other obvious PR reasons, that particular symbol was later abandoned.

From the outset, the mix of patience and subversion gave the Fabians an air of intrigue. And it wasn't long before the brightest young minds of Britain wanted to be a part of it. The Fabian Society became magnet for the most talented and, for lack of a better word, coolest people in Britain. Its members included luminaries such as H. G. Wells, Emmeline Pankhurst, and Bertrand Russell. Most who joined were fresh university graduates who loved to debate. Talk was their medium, and through talk their ideas took shape. When a lecture went down particularly well, it was turned into a pamphlet or a lecture tour, which in turn could spark a lot of media attention. The most influential of these tracks came from the so-called seven Fabian essayists, among them the playwright George Bernard Shaw, who was also the author of that true radical program.

Just seven years after its founding, the Society had already distributed some 100,000 pamphlets, which was an astonishing number for the time. One of the reasons the Fabians were so fashionable was that they were masters of marketing. They didn't churn out long tracks on long-dead German philosophers, but they wrote in plain language, accessible to anyone in the street. At the same time, they catered to the aesthetic tastes of the elite. Most revolutionary pamphlets of the day were sloppily designed and printed on cheap, ugly paper, which gave them a disreputable air. Dirty, amateurish, not to be taken seriously. The Fabians, by contrast, took pride in producing material that looked polished and elegant. Sleek invitation cards printed on blood-red paper, conferences that ran with flawless precision. As George Bernard Shaw recalled, we used to be plentifully sneered at as fobs and armchair socialists for our attention to these details, but I think it was by no means the least of our merits.

In this way, the Fabian Society became a nursery of political talent. For young, ambitious idealists, joining the Fabians was the coolest move you could make. It was the place to be, host to the sharpest debates, the most glamorous gatherings, and the best parties. And bit by bit, Fabian members began to take seats on school boards and local councils. And this was the beginning of a long march through the institutions, because the Fabians knew that the minor bureaucrats of today could become the major powerbrokers of tomorrow. They left an impressive legacy. The Fabians founded the London School of Economics and played a central role in the creation of the Labour Party. For the next half-century, Fabianism set the tone, and the once unthinkable became reality. Public education, universal

healthcare, an eight-hour workday, votes for women, and progressive taxation, with marginal rates for the rich climbing as high as 90% in the 1950s and '60s.

After failing to summon the dead, the ghost hunters of Notting Hill ended up conjuring something much more powerful: the spirit of modern social democracy. Today, much of that Fabian legacy is under siege. As we all know, taxes for the rich have plummeted, social services are strained, and democracy is faltering. Ironically, the decline of the Fabian project was also the result of a conspiracy. On April 10, 1947, a small group of intellectuals gathered in the Swiss village of Mont Pèlerin. They called themselves *neoliberals*. Among them were philosophers like Friedrich Hayek and the economist Milton Friedman. They feared that the growing power of the state would usher in a new kind of tyranny, and so they rebelled.

Like the Fabians, the neoliberals knew that effective resistance would take time. Hayek wrote that the interval between the change in opinion and the corresponding change in policy is usually a generation or even more. And Friedman agreed. He said that people now running the country reflect the intellectual atmosphere of some two decades ago, when they were in college. The neoliberals believed in the primacy of self-interest. Whatever the problem, their answer was the same. "Roll back the state. Unleash business." The government should turn every sector into a marketplace, from healthcare to education. And the neoliberals knew that they were far outside the mainstream, but that only spurred them on. By 1969, Time magazine described Friedman as a Paris designer whose haute couture is bought by a select few, but who nonetheless influences almost all popular fashions.

Crises were central to Friedman's thinking. In the preface of his masterpiece *Capitalism and Freedom* from 1982, he wrote words that became a neoliberal mantra. I think it's worth quoting them in full. "Only a crisis," Friedman wrote, "actual or perceived, produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function, to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable." Strikingly, this neoliberal strategy echoed the Fabian approach from a century earlier. On the title page of the very first Fabian pamphlet from 1884, we read, "For the right moment you must wait," as Fabius did most patiently when warring against Hannibal. "But when the time comes, you must strike hard." And that's exactly what

happened. When the crises of the 1970s hit, stagflation, the oil shock, massive strikes, the neoliberals did strike hard. They had spent decades building a network of think tanks, journals, and foundations, ensuring their ideas would be the ones lying around.

In the subsequent years, a new common sense was born. The government was the problem. Markets were the solution. Progress meant deregulating, privatising, cutting, globalising. Step by step, state-owned companies were sold, unions weakened, and social benefits cut. Conservative leaders like Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher adopted Hayek and Friedman's once radical doctrines. Soon, their political adversaries followed suit. Bill Clinton declared the era of big government is over, while Tony Blair, with his New Labour, embraced market reforms once associated with the right. And for a while, neoliberalism did seem to work. Inflation was tamed, growth returned, and stock markets soared. But as the decades passed, the price became clear. Hollowed out communities, spiralling inequality, financial crises, and ecological destruction. Today, the ideology that reigned from the 1980s until the pandemic no longer inspires. It is intellectually exhausted, morally bankrupt, and politically toxic. Yet its ghost still lingers, haunting our institutions, constraining our imaginations.

When I, as a 25-year-old, wrote my first book, *Utopia for Realists*, I wanted to banish this ghost. I was simply bored with neoliberal politics. The debates felt so narrow and technocratic. Where was the bigger vision? Where were the bold ideas that once transformed societies? The book was my attempt to reclaim utopia as a political compass. To show that what once seemed radical, like women's suffrage or weekends, had become common sense. And that we could do the same again. Build a society of trust and abundance. In the decades since, I have received about half of what I wished for. Politics is certainly not boring anymore. The old consensus is shattered. Across the world, people are hungry for change, for grand narratives, for a sense of direction. But instead of a renaissance of hope, we've seen a resurgence of fear. Instead of solidarity, we've witnessed the rise of resentment. Neoliberalism is dead, and it has been replaced by demagogues who promise greatness while peddling hatred and division. And so the question I once posed with optimism now returns with greater urgency. Can we once again reclaim utopia, not as a naive fantasy, but as a guiding star for renewal? Because the crisis has arrived, the iron of history is hot, and now everything depends on the ideas lying around.

Fabianism and neoliberalism had coherence, conviction, and a strategy. They had a story about what went wrong and a vision of what to do next. They had institutions willing to play the long game, and they built a counter-elite that reshaped the world. Where is the progressive equivalent today? What comes after neoliberalism? Where are the neo Fabians? What would today's true radical program look like? And who is organising the next conspiracy of decency? Let's start with the good news. I think the foundations for a new social contract are already being laid. We are in the midst of a quiet renaissance in economic and social thought. In the first place, we've relearned something that the Fabians already knew. The government doesn't just cut checks. It can take the biggest, boldest risks. Without public investments, we wouldn't have the internet, GPS, or even the touchscreen on our phones. The same goes for the mRNA vaccines that saved millions of lives during COVID. Again and again, it's been taxpayers, not billionaires, who made the breakthrough bets.

Now imagine a state that embraces this rule fully, where the brightest minds don't waste their energy polishing PowerPoints at McKinsey, but build high-speed rail or cure entire classes of disease. Imagine the massive profits from AI, technology, rooted in decades of government-funded research, flowing into a national wealth fund that paid every citizen a monthly dividend. I'm not talking about a lumbering, red-tape-ridden government here. On the contrary, deregulation still matters if we want to make abundance real. Not in the old neoliberal sense of slashing rules to goose shareholders' profits, but in a new sense of clearing away the bottlenecks that keep us from building the things people need. Too many of our problems are created by rules of our own making. Zoning codes that ban new housing, permits that trap wind farms in years of paperwork, procedures that reward stalling instead of doing. These aren't minor inconveniences. They're why rents are sky high, why commutes are miserable, and why clean energy isn't rolling out fast enough. It's scarcity by design, and it fuels the resentment that dominates our politics. Of course, lifting these artificial barriers is only half the battle. Building a society of abundance also takes resources on a scale we have not dared to imagine in decades. And people ask, quite recently, how will we pay for all this? I think it begins with a tax system that is fair, simple, and built on the principle that work and wealth should play by the same rules. For too long, the rules have favoured money made from money over money made from work, and that's why billionaires can pay lower effective tax rates than their own employees.

A new school of economists, people like Thomas Piketty and Gabriel Zucman, have shown that it doesn't have to be this way. Imagine a world where banks automatically share account information so fortunes can't quietly disappear into Swiss vaults or Caribbean shell companies. Where global corporations no longer shift profits to Ireland or Bermuda but pay a minimum tax rate where they operate. Where a billionaire with a 200-million-dollar yacht contributes on the same straightforward terms as a nurse or a teacher. For decades, we were told that this could not be done, that the rich would always slip through the cracks, hiding their money in offshore accounts and fancy trusts. But now we have the tools, the spreadsheets, and a step-by-step plan to make tax fairness a reality. And when everyone pays in, society can pay out. Imagine every parent having affordable child care. Imagine schools where teaching is one of the most respected and best-paid professions. Imagine colleges that launch young people into opportunity instead of debt. Imagine healthcare that is accessible to all, not just to cure illness but to keep us healthy in the first place. Of course, this would be just the basics. We can and should go further and be as utopian as the Fabians were. We could build countries people dream of living in, where everyday life feels lavish in the best sense. Where the bounty of technological progress is shared by all, not hoarded by a few. Where leisure, beauty, and security are everyone's birthrights.

Neoliberalism taught us that such things are too expensive. But in many cases, what looks expensive is actually efficient. Solving poverty or homelessness costs far less than managing and policing it. And here's something many people don't realise. It's actually normal for costs in areas like healthcare, education, and the arts to rise faster than the price of things like phones or fridges. The economist William Baumol already observed in the 1960s that prices in labour-intensive sectors rise faster than in sectors where work can be easily automated. A fridge can be produced ever more cheaply, but an hour of real human attention cannot. Economists gave this trend a name. They called it *Baumol's cost disease*. But here's the irony. William Baumol himself never saw this as a problem. He saw it as a blessing. The more efficient our machines and computers become, the more time we can free up for what truly matters. Caring for the vulnerable, educating our children, and making beautiful art. "The real obstacle to having these things," Baumol warned, "is the illusion that we cannot afford them."

The basics of a good life are not luxuries we must trade off against growth. They are the dividends of growth. Neoliberalism said we had to

choose, but we don't. We can have prosperity and fairness, efficiency and dignity. We can have our cake and eat it. In short, the contours of our true radical program are beginning to take shape. But like the Fabians and the neoliberals, we should remember that dreams and desires, plans and programs are not enough. Ideas only matter if they are organised, institutionalised, and carried through the storms of history. That means more than a few good speeches. It means building durable networks of people and institutions, deep-pocketed donors who are willing to think in decades rather than election cycles, policy shops that can translate ideals into legislation, movements that can win over diverse constituencies, and cultural platforms that can shape public opinion, from the courthouse to the classroom, from the op-ed page to the dinner table. Above all, it requires perseverance. History shows what small groups of thoughtful, committed citizens can achieve if they play the long game. Of the 12 founders of the British Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, only one lived long enough to see slavery abolished across the empire. Of the 68 women who gathered at Seneca Falls in 1848 for the first women's right convention in the United States, only one was still alive when women finally won the vote. And she was too ill to go to the polls that day.

Our job is not to conjure a utopia overnight, but to fight with the persistence and the patience of General Fabius, to follow in the footsteps of the moral pioneers who came before us, to be thankful not with nostalgia but with imitation. Thank you.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUSE]

**ANITA ANAND:** Rutger, thank you very much. We're going to take questions from our audience here in Edinburgh. Rutger, the examples that you gave, people who live by higher virtues, the highest moral possibilities. You named the Fabians, of course, the suffragettes. I suppose you could add the Theosophists to that pot as well. They didn't drink, they didn't eat meat. Some might say, "Oh God, that sounds like a lot of hard work." Is that the kind of person you're looking for today to also lead your moral revolution?

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** I did find it really interesting about this story. I've got a lot of friends on the left who love to shout things like, "Overthrow the patriarchy, destroy capitalism, change the system." And then, they go on to the pub and have a beer. What I really find interesting is that these people were transforming themselves and also society. They were making, as

anthropologists would say, "costly sacrifices." You could just see from a distance that they were for real, that they had skin in the game. So I really believe we've got to aim for both. We've got to change ourselves, and we've got to change society at the same time.

Nelson Mandela, the year after he stepped down as president, he said, "Look, changing the world is relatively easy compared to changing yourself. If you can do the latter, then the former becomes pretty easy."

**ANITA ANAND:** Yes, but how's that going to go on a T-shirt? Join our movement, life will be less fun. Is that —

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** Well, it can still be a lot of fun.

**ANITA ANAND:** How many sign-ups do you think you're going to get?

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** So for me, the right mix is 80% enthusiasm and 20% shame/guilt. But we've got to use the full motivational spectrum. People are mixed bags, and it's, yeah, surely if you read the memoirs of the great moral pioneers of the past, from the abolitionists to the Fabians, it wasn't always fun. They were really running a marathon, and there were so many disappointments along the way.

**ANITA ANAND:** Okay. Let's take some questions. Great...let's start over here.

**KENNY:** Kenny from Stirling. I was interested by your use of the Fabian Society and the neoliberals, and the abolitionists. It strikes me that all these groups were middle-class and had a certain amount of money and a certain amount of time to develop these thoughts and then to campaign for them. Where is the space for normal working-class people to develop these ideas and thoughts, instead of them being given ideas by the neoliberals and convinced that they're right?

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** Great question. So we need both, that's the simple answer. Let me give you an example from American history. So the late 19th century is usually characterised as the Gilded Age, an age of incredible corruption, incredible inequality. When we had these robber barons, a little bit like the Jeff Bezos and Elon Musks of today, who were hoarding wealth on an unprecedented scale. Now, what came after the

Gilded Age was the progressive era. Just like in the UK, it was a breakthrough of social democracy, the eight-hour workday, the breakup of these big monopolies, people like Theodore Roosevelt leading that movement. But it happened both in a top-down and in a bottom-up way. So Roosevelt was a Harvard graduate who was like, "You know, we don't just check our privilege, we use it to make this world much better."

But it was also a bottom-up movement of working-class people coming together for the first time in unions and putting an enormous amount of pressure on elites. So that's also what I think we need today. We have seen the breakthrough of a couple of extraordinary political entrepreneurs recently, like Zohran Mamdani in New York, who built this massive movement.

**ANITA ANAND:** But he's not a working-class man— let's go back to our questioner.

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** But that's a good example. He's leading a coalition.

**ANITA ANAND:** Sure. Okay, but let's go back to our questioner. Tell me what you think, whether, you know, it is possible for somebody who's got a job —

**KENNY:** Again, it all seems to be middle-class people leading the revolution and expecting working-class people to follow them. Where is the space for ideas and revolutions to come from the working classes that aren't led by people with money?

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** Fair enough. So I have two answers to that. One is history is littered with examples of people with few privileges, but who still move mountains. In a recent book, I talk about Rosa Parks, for example, who was a humble seamstress but is arguably one of the greatest political strategists of the 20th century, who obviously played a leading role in the civil rights movement. Lech Walesa in Eastern Europe was an electrician who became one of the leaders of the anti-communist movement.

When I think about the role that I can play, I'm thinking about who can I most effectively speak to? And I think that's usually to my own people. So when I sometimes talk about people who waste their lives at a McKinsey or

a Goldman Sachs in those BS jobs, it's because I'm really angry at my peers. It's because I think they got to do something for society instead of just taking and whining and doing nothing. So I just think I'm personally more effective in that way.

**ANITA:** Ok, thank you.

**ANNA SABINE:** Hi. I'm Anna Sabine. I'm a member of parliament in Westminster and I'm the Lib Dem spokesperson for culture, media, and sport. It was a fantastic talk. Part of the reason I became an MP was I was worried about my teenage children and how they saw the future, and in particular how they saw politics as being relevant or not relevant to their future. And I wondered if you, based on your comments tonight, had any messages for young people that might be listening to your talk.

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** So I think that there are many, many roles to play in every great movement. We need the radicals who push in the fringes, but sometimes we also need the moderates who are actually able to make compromises and get things done. So it really depends on the specific skill sets that people have. But what's a piece of career advice that works for everyone is find your small group of really committed people who are morally serious and who bring out the best in you. If you have that, then you can move mountains.

**JOHN DAVIS:** I'm John Davis, former professor of education. And I was struck by what you were saying about small groups. And the Independence Referendum, there was a lot of examples of small groups. We called it the "butterfly revolution." But to make a link to that gentleman's question earlier, there was spin outs from the referendum, and a group was set up called *The Common Wheel*, which just means Commonwealth. We're interested in everybody. Sharing in the same wealth. And there were local groups and there was a national organisation, but it brought together people like plumbers, joiners, electricians, early years workers. I think our greatest success was to influence the blueprint for the early years programme that the Scottish government developed.

But my question is, they baulked at increasing the pay of the early years workers. So we managed to influence the general policy. But the really important bit, they said, they couldn't afford. So what do you do with that point ...they did all the changes apart from increase the pay.

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** Political change is really hard. That is why I keep emphasising that point of perseverance. One of the issues today is that you can write a tweet, you can post something in Instagram, and it's fairly easy to get a lot of people out there in the streets. But this is both a blessing and a curse, because in the past, what you needed to do is to build a huge organisational framework.

Take the March on Washington, for example. I mean just imagine how much work that was to bring all those people there, to make sure it was a peaceful protest. They didn't have Twitter back then. But when people saw the March on Washington, they also saw the enormous organisational apparatus behind that, and all the work that was put into that, all the bonds of friendship and camaraderie that were behind that. So that was a great way of building power that is more difficult today. But that is something we've got to try and find a way around.

**VAL McDERMID:** Val McDermid, writer. It seems to me that we've ignored one of the major forces in the world right now, and that's the internet. In my experience, you can have small groups of people coming together with great ideas, they put it out there, and they get stomped on all over the internet. Toxicity out there is tremendous. That was not an issue before, when people like the Fabians were getting together. Nobody was piling on Sidney and Beatrice Webb and saying, "Your nuts, go away, you've damaged people." But now, if you come up with these ideas, you get stomped on, you get put out, you get chucked out the conversation. How do we deal with that?

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** So what I find frustrating is that a lot of people on the left, or who call themselves progressives, when they hear technology, they can only think of billionaires shooting themselves up in space, to, I don't know, please their own ego. We have developed a very negative view of technology. But if I think about the extraordinary progress we've made, the social democratic progress, technology played a leading role in that.

**ANITA ANAND:** But that's not what you're saying, is it, Val McDermid?

**VAL McDERMID:** No, what I was saying is that when you bring small groups together on the internet with ideas from either right or left, it doesn't really matter. If people disagree with you, you get stomped on. It's a toxic space, it puts pressure on people, and it's unbearable.

**ANITA ANAND:** So, Rutger, the point is that before, you didn't have ideas stifled with a great weight of social media, like a pillow in a cradle. But we have that now. So how do you shout through that now?

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** I would argue to the contrary that, actually, the internet has made it easier to be weird. It's easier now to find those other weird people out there and to realise that you are not alone, that there are safe spaces for radical do-gooders out there that you can join. Obviously, yes, you've got to ignore the comment section sometimes, but actually, in my life, I've found it often liberating to find people on the internet and realise, hey, wait a minute, there are other people who, for example, believe that we shouldn't accept poverty and that we can abolish it with something called universal basic income."

**ANITA ANAND:** Did you want to come back?

**VAL MCDERMID:** But how does that lead to progressive change if people are shouted down by someone with a bigger megaphone, if people are excluded by people with a bigger power base? It doesn't necessarily lead to progressive change to sit around and talk to people who think the same thing as you do in a small room.

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** So I agree with you that we have a massive, massive problem with the toxicity of social media, and what I'll be calling for in my next lecture is what you could describe as a neo-temperance movement. I agree with you that the problem is very serious, and so the solution needs to be really ambitious as well.

**IAIN WHYTE:** Iain Whyte, I'm a Scottish Conservative councillor here in Edinburgh, so I'm probably one of your sceptics in the room, Rutger. I see a public sector that's spending all our money at the moment. We've got tax rates at the highest they've ever been in peacetime, as a share of GDP. We've got huge public spending. We've got a fifth of the working-age population in the UK not working. What is it that makes you feel that human nature won't get in the way of utopia?

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** Sure. Well, two things. One, yes, if you look at the whole share of GDP, the size of the public sector has grown. My point is that that is a *good* thing, and that is to be expected because of the Baumol

effect. Because government is mostly responsible for things like education and healthcare, that are just much harder to make more efficient. Actually, if you make a doctor or a nurse more efficient, often you're destroying the very quality of — or the very point of, what they're doing. As I said, one hour of real human attention is not something you can easily automate. So that's one important thing.

The second important thing is that, actually, the government is often doing the more meaningful work as well. So I talked about the phenomenon of BS jobs. It turns out that, according to a recent large-scale study, actually there are three times as many BS jobs in the *private* sector as in the public sector. And I'm talking here about people who think that their own job doesn't add anything of value to society. So it's not me saying it. People can say, like, "That guy's a historian. That's the definition of socially useless." It doesn't work that way. It's people saying it about their own job.

Then the third point is also really important. Tax rates for the rich have actually gone down, down, down. So the tax system has become way too unfair. It's often forgotten that actually in the '50s and the '60s, the golden era of capitalism, when we have massive innovation, massive growth, tax rates for the rich climbed as high as 80 to 90%, the marginal tax rates. We have much more substantial inheritance taxes. And I think that's actually what we need if we want to have a vibrant economy. What you do is you tax unearned income. But instead, what we've gotten is the opposite in the last couple of decades.

**ANITA ANAND:** Did you want to come back?

**IAIN WHYTE:** My concern is that I see a public sector here in Scotland where people are essentially working for themselves or within the system. And it's not really serving the public as the priority. Often, the way our trade unions and others work, they work for the workers in the system, or the middle managers work to ensure an easy life, your BS jobs, rather than making sure the front line is actually helping the public.

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** So that is a concern that I share. What we've seen since the '70s, as tax rates for the rich have been going down, is that a lot of the most talented people have been going not to government or academia or NGOs, but instead to big tech companies, big finance, big pharma companies, where often they contribute much less to society. So I'm

really interested in the allocation of talent. And I think we've got to find ways to make government great again, to make it the coolest place. Like the Fabian Society was one of the coolest places you could be, to really convince our best and brightest that to work for the public, for the public good, is the most prestigious and most meaningful thing you can do with your whole career.

**ANITA ANAND:** So just a quick follow-up. I've worked in politics and political journalism for a very long time. I have met, almost all of the politicians I've spoken to who have said, "I was that person. I came in because I cared, I wanted to make a difference, I wanted to make things better. That's why I went into politics to begin with." Is that what they're doing? Or do you think there's something about the system that then corrupts that pure, virtuous imperative? They may not agree with you, but they are going into it because they have a belief. Or is the system somehow corrupting that the changes that you want to see aren't happening?

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** So people are mixed bags, obviously. And there is something, I believe, about our current power structure, about our current political system, that sometimes doesn't select for the best people. In my first lecture, I called this *the survival of the shameless*. If you want to survive in this media environment, it doesn't bring out the best in you all the time.

But look, one reason I talked quite a bit in this lecture also about deregulation is because I think those advocates of the power of government, like I am, need to take a long hard look in the mirror and ask themselves the question like, "Okay, but if we've had these high tax rates, or at least we had substantial public revenue, then why has the government not always been able to deliver?" And I think that one of the main reasons is that we have a lot of rules, we have a lot of what they call NIMBYism, the not in my backyard people. But also quite a lot, like, for example, a lot of environmental organisations that have been standing in the way of actual building. So, we've got to have those uncomfortable discussions.

**ANITA ANAND:** Okay.

**CHRIS HOY:** Chris Hoy, Ulster Scot, not a member of a political party, just a citizen. You talked about examples in the past of societies that were uniform in terms of moralism, in terms of culture. We live in a very diverse, multicultural, plural society, and yet you're advocating for single moral ideals.

How do you arrive at moral absolutes, and what do you think the origin of morality is?

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** That's a big question!

**ANITA ANAND:** Yes. Can I just say if in case you didn't hear it — the entire Edinburgh —

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** I know the answer actually.

**ANITA ANAND:** — audience just drew breath in unison.

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** So, I think that we humans, well, we're not as bad as we sometimes seem. We don't find our morality in the heavens; we don't find it in scripture, we find it in human nature itself. We find it in our inclination to help one another, to live lives together, in our empathy, in our compassion, that has been a part of our evolution for a very long time. Now, obviously, we can also institutionalise those — there's something to work with here. We can institutionalise that in big ideas, whether that's abolitionism or what the suffragettes did. But for me, it's about finding the good in human nature itself.

**ANITA ANAND:** Can I ask the questioner himself? Answer your own question.

**CHRIS HOY:** The examples you've given are some very uniform societies in the past. We do not have that today. I think that is something different. I think we struggle to understand the very origins of why liberal democracy is a system we have and worth defending.

**ANITA ANAND:** So then, to take one step further, are we doomed, in your opinion?

**CHRIS HOY:** I don't think we value it at all. And yet, we are trying to agree on a moral *absolutism* in a pluralist society. I think we're going to struggle for agreement because of that and I don't think you've satisfactorily got to the origin of morality.

**ANITA ANAND:** Thank you. Rutger?

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** Yes, so I'm not a moral relativist. I think that some ideas are better than others, and some ideas are more moral than others. So, for example, we talked about democracy and I think that —

**QUESTIONER:** How do you know that?

**ANITA ANAND:** How do you know that, asked the questioner.

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** Well, I find my morality, as I said, in human nature itself. In a way, I ask the question, as I said, like, "Why have we conquered the globe? What makes humans so special?" I know that there's a dark side to human nature as well. There's the tribalism. There's our groupishness. And there are ways we've got to try and overcome that.

But, yeah, when I look at the history of moral progress, what I see is an expanding moral circle. For me, it all started with the abolitionists who fought against the slave trade and slavery. And then out of that grew some of the greatest movements that humanity has ever seen. The movement for women's rights, the movement for civil rights, the movement for animal rights that hopefully now is taking off. We're still in the middle of that story, and we can follow in the footsteps of the great moral pioneers who came before us.

**LISA SLATER:** Hi. And thanks for the lecture. I thought it was really good. My name's Lisa Slater. I'm from Glasgow. I wondered, I think people have skirted around it a wee bit, and it was a follow-up question, I think, from Val's question around how you establish and maintain a movement that has to live for such a long time in the face of the rapid rise of right-wing politics currently.

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** So I think we can learn a lot from religions here, actually. It's got to be much more than just voting every four years or signing an online petition. It's got to be a whole lifestyle. It's got to be a whole social circle. There was a really interesting article in the New York Times about the success of Mamdani's campaign and about how it was an antidote to loneliness for so many people from Gen Z. It's like they got together, it became a face-to-face, a physical thing. Like, we've got to get out there and see real people in real life.

**ANITA ANAND:** Gentleman right at the back.

**MICHAEL WEATHERHEAD:** Michael Weatherhead from the Wellbeing Economy Alliance. In your lecture, you talked about that it can take a generation between a change in perception and a change in policy. I think there is a change in perception that the current economic system no longer has answers to the pressing crises, but we have a climate crisis, which doesn't allow us to wait a generation for changes in policy. What thoughts do you have as to how we might accelerate the transition?

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** So I've never really liked the doomerist framework of, we have only five years or ten years or whatever the number is, left to tackle climate change. Humans are also extraordinarily creative and adaptive creatures. At least that's what I see time and time again, in history. What I think what we need right now is still to have that long-term framework because even after climate change, there are going to be other existential threats that we face as a species.

Sometimes I think that if people are past the age of 30, they can be lost. You have a mortgage, you have kids, you have a set of cheese knives. So it is important to get them when they're young. Obviously, there are always exceptions, especially in Edinburgh. But I think it's striking that both the Fabians and the neoliberals realise that you need to have that long-term strategy, and you start with people when they're relatively young.

**KATHERINE SANGSTER:** Hi, Katherine Sangster. I'm the Scottish director of the Fabian Society.

( Laughter and applause)

So, thank you very much for your lecture. We are still making pamphlets, but we're maybe not as fashionable as we once were. And my question to you is how we counteract that in an age of distrust of elites, of distrust of academics, and where most people get their news from TikTok and their friends and Facebook. So, absolutely, I'm all for a new Fabianism, but how do we counteract what we're seeing online and that kind of anti-facts in politics?

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** Well, the secret is in your history. Go and read Edward Pease, *The History of the Fabian Society*, and you will find out that they were able to make the Fabian Society quite exclusive. It was really the thing that you wanted to be a member of. The parties were excellent, so

that's important. The design was brilliant. I looked at your website, and it looked a bit boring to me. I was like, "I don't think Edward Pease would have liked that." So, yeah, the answer should be found in your history.

**ANITA ANAND:** Thank you very much. Great...

**MAIRI SPOWAGE:** Thank you for the lecture, Mairi Spowage. I'm the director of the Fraser of Allander Institute, which is an economic research institute. You said near the end of your lecture that now we have the tools to build a different sort of tax system that looks at income and wealth more equally. But I guess my question is, what are those tools? The debate about wealth taxation in the UK has foundered quite quickly on the realities of the economic system that we are currently in. So, what do you think practically are the tools to build that system that's in your vision?

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** So I'm really excited by the rise of a group of what you could call radical nerds. I mentioned Thomas Piketty, the economist, Gabriel Zucman, one of the greatest experts in the world on tax evasion and tax avoidance. And there's also now a really exciting proposal for a global billionaire's tax that has been proposed by the people, by Gabriel Zucman and the people around him, but that has also been endorsed by big and powerful countries like Brazil, for example. So I think there's real momentum right now and that we should just stop from accepting that we can never solve this problem. Like, if the world comes together on this issue, it can easily crack down on tax paradises like Bermuda, like Ireland, like the Netherlands. We should not accept this.

**ANITA ANAND:** Thank you .. there's a woman over there.

**ELSPETH WILSON:** Hi. My name is Elspeth Wilson. I'm an author. As someone who's vegan and finds a lot of joy in being vegan, as well as finding it very transformational, both for myself and how I act in the world, I noticed you obviously mentioned vegetarianism quite a lot throughout, or a few times. And I'm wondering if you feel optimistic about the future, not just of humans but other animals that we live with, particularly ones that are categorised as livestock currently?

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** I honestly think that the fight against factory farming is one of the greatest causes, perhaps even *the* greatest cause, of our time. It's not popular being a vegan or a vegetarian today. I think as a

movement, we got to think really hard about the kind of coalitions that we can build in order to be actually effective, because it's not just about your moral purity, right. It's much more about what you actually get done. But I think it's one of the great causes of our time, and that the historians of the future are going to judge us very harshly for what we are doing to animals today.

**ANITA ANAND:** Ok

**SUSAN MURRAY:** Thank you for the powerful and inspirational lecture. My name is Susan Murray, and I run the David Hume Institute here in Edinburgh. We are an educational charity inspired by David Hume's Sceptical Inquiry. He believed knowledge came from the world around us and from speaking to people, not sitting alone thinking in a dark room. Two of our advisors have died this year, Professor Sir Geoffrey Palmer and David Gow and overwhelmingly, in their memories, it's always been acts of kindness that people have remembered them with. So I wondered if taking inspiration from them and honouring their legacies, how do we avoid more people sitting alone in dark rooms thinking hard, and we take practical actions so turn your conspiracy of kindness into an academic. If you've got any lessons from history you can give us.

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** Well, making the world a wildly better place can be a lot of fun as well. Was it Emma Goldman who said, "If I can't dance, then it's not my revolution." I think that's really important. Life is about many, many things. I see myself as a pluralist. Yes, I think morality should play a very important role in a rich and well-rounded life, but it should certainly not dominate everything.

**ANITA ANAND:** Thank you. Now, who thinks they've got the killer final question. Go for it, we're all behind you.

**HANNAH:** Hi, I'm Hannah. I live in Edinburgh. I'm originally from the north-east of England. Shouldn't all of these cool university grads stop hosting parties and chatting about a lot of ideas that won't actually happen, and, as other people suggested, maybe just give away their money to people who are currently living in poverty and will die in poverty before their own fantastic ideas ever had a chance to come to a stage like this?

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** The answer is yes. A lot of people in rich countries don't really realise how rich they are. So I'm from the Netherlands. If you have a median wage in a country like the Netherlands, you're already part of the richest 3% of the world. It's very easy for us to forget that half of the world population lives on \$7 a day, and that is corrected for purchasing power.

So when we talk about living a virtuous and good life people talk about recycling they talk about voting every four years, and that's all good, that's nice but actually one of the biggest things you can do for your fellow humans is to donate a significant chunk of your income. It's actually quite a transformational experience as well. As I started doing this, I started seeing my own giving a little bit like a stock portfolio. It's like the money is not gone, but it's out there working in the world, making it a better place.

**ANITA ANAND:** Listen, thank you so much. That's all we've got time for. We had so many more questions we didn't get a chance to get to, but thank you to those who did ask and apologies to those we didn't get to.

For the fourth and final programme in this series, we'll be at Stanford University in Silicon Valley, in the United States. There, Rutger will argue that Big Tech is out of control and threatens the very essence of what it means to be human. But for now, thank you to our audience here in Edinburgh and particularly thank you to our Reith Lecturer 2025, Rutger Bregman.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUSE]