

Education, population, poverty, tax...getting views on topics like those in Jersey isn't the difficult part – but have you ever noticed how many people sound eminently credible when talking about them, even though they may actually be basing their views on conjecture, false facts and blind guesswork?

There is a real danger in making the 'facts' fit the opinion, rather than the other way around – which is exactly the point at which someone with an eye on the latest buzzwords will smugly insert the phrase 'post-truth' into the conversation, imagining its actually helpful.

So, we've asked the Jersey Policy Forum to add some robust material to those crucial local debates – the point is not to provoke agreement or acquiescence; it is to provide reliable material on which others can build their views.



Gailina Liew, Director, Jersey Policy Forum

## What if...?

**Summer is here and Jersey is one of the most beautiful places in the world when the sun is shining and you're enjoying a cliff walk, playing in the sea, exploring one of the many beautiful beaches or meandering through the green lanes. I marvel at the variety of physical topography packed into its nine-by-five mile footprint that almost doubles in size when the tide is out. The feeling of space, tranquility and energy that such stunning natural environments provide rejuvenates the people that are lucky enough to visit or live here. These beautiful natural environments incredibly co-exist with a diverse range of economic activity that is reflected in the rural and urban settlements where people work and live. One might debate whether the balance between these natural and other environments is ideal, but that debate would need to be based on a common set of assumptions and goals in order to be productive.**

**Let's explore how we might use thought experiments to tackle such seemingly intractable public policy challenges. Why? Because we have a newly elected legislature and Council of Ministers that will need to work together to produce the next set of strategic plans for Jersey. And also because I believe that all who live, work and play here have a shared responsibility to protect, respect and nurture this place for the generations to follow.**

So, what is a thought experiment?

"Aoccdnrg to rscheearch at Cmabridge Uinverytisy, it deosn't mttar in waht oredr the litteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer be at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a ttoal mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit a porbelm. Tihs is besauae ocne we laren how to raed we bgien to aargnre the lteerts in our mnid to see waht we epxcet to see. The huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but

preccsiev the wrod as a wlohe. We do tihs uncnsioniscoly wuithot tuhoght."

A child or someone who is just learning how to read in English would be very confused by the paragraph above but you, the reader of this piece, can likely make sense of it despite the jumbled letters. Why is that?

Our brains have evolved to recognize patterns, in effect creating short-cuts to minimize the amount of conscious attention and energy we devote to routine tasks. This allows our brain to focus energy on learning new things or things that do not happen routinely so that we can assess whether they are threats to our own safety and well-being or to those that we are charged with or choose to protect. This is why you are more likely to continue with an exercise regimen, for example, if you can find some way to include it in one of your normal daily routines.

Children struggle to read the paragraph of jumbled words because their thinking patterns have not yet been set and so they are more able to see what is actually in front of them. But over time, as children practice reading, their brains will filter and

process the information into the most commonly encountered patterns (i.e. words) and will automatically substitute or re-order the letters in jumbled words to reflect what they expect to see as opposed to what is actually there.

A thought experiment is a way of thinking and presenting an argument that might help us to see and describe what is actually in front of us, based on a theory and the application of logic, to prove or disprove a statement. The statement often appears to be counter-intuitive or counter-factual. An example of this would be Galileo's assertion that a heavy and light object, dropped from the same height, would fall at the same rate and land on the ground at the same time. This was contrary to the prevailing beliefs at the time based on Aristotle's understanding of physical laws. Galileo could not generate any evidence to prove his assertion at the time but he was proven to be right when the first US astronaut to land on the moon, Neil Armstrong, dropped a feather and hammer on the moon and both landed at the same time.

A thought experiment is often triggered by asking, "what if?", a question that

challenges people to put aside the assumptions and expectations they have built up from experience and apply the methodical discipline of examining the question and exploring the consequences as if the question actually states the truth. Going back to the opening paragraph, in the public policy sphere we might challenge ourselves and the newly elected legislature to engage in meaningful dialogue and debate with a few questions:

What if Jersey were to become a no-emissions (pollutants, garbage and noise) island?

What if working in caring, service, creative and teaching roles were the most highly paid jobs available?

What if migration is viewed as an opportunity to develop a sustainable human resource as opposed to a burden?

What if the Crown Dependencies were required to have a public register of beneficial ownership?

What if all students graduating from secondary school were required to work for a year in a service or manual labour role in Jersey before proceeding

to employment or further fully-funded vocational/educational endeavours?

All of these questions and more could be approached within the framework of a thought experiment. Could we engage with our most creative and free-thinking people (eg. artists, children) and pull people in with different perspectives and knowledge as opposed to just relying on "the experts" (who may not be able to break out of the thinking patterns that have been set in their minds) as part of this approach? Would it encourage us to be more curious and creative, listen more carefully to each other, learn from successes in other parts of the world, and give us the room to explore new thinking and create new solutions? Would the discipline of defining a challenge and constructing a sound argument help to bring people together and make solving complex challenges more interactive and hopefully fun? What questions would you like to explore using the thought experiment framework?

**Get in touch, participate and share your views with us at [contact@jerseypolicyforum.org](mailto:contact@jerseypolicyforum.org)**