

Inequality, Pandemics and Climate Change with

Richard Wilkinson

Wednesday, October 27, 2021
12:00 p.m. Pacific Time

Event host: [SFU Public Square](#), SFU Vancouver, SFU Vancity Office of Community Engagement

Speakers: Laurie Anderson, Elder Dennis Joseph, Laura Lynch, Richard Wilkinson, Chuka Ejeckam, Maya Gislason

Keywords: Inequality, pandemic, climate change, crisis, vaccination, COVID, socioeconomic, greenhouse gases, sustainability, labour

If you have any questions about this transcript or its contents, please contact SFU Public Square at psqevent@sfu.ca.

LAURIE ANDERSON:

Hello, everyone! My name is Laurie Anderson, and I am the executive director of SFU's Vancouver campus. I am speaking to you from the unceded territories of the x m k y m (Musqueam), S wxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), s lilw ta (Tseil-Waututh), the Coast Salish. I am excited to be speaking to you about 'Inequality, Pandemics and Climate Change', the SFU Vancouver Speaker Series.

To start the conversation off in the right way, I would like to pass the virtual microphone off to Elder Dennis Joseph from the Squamish nation. Elder Joseph's ancestral name is Xwechtaal. Over to you.

ELDER DENNIS JOSEPH:

Giving thanks to mother Earth, the creator, all her children, those who have left before us. We are grateful and thankful for the life and love left to us. Blessings to each and every one of you. Thank you.

LAURIE ANDERSON:

Thank you, Elder Joseph, Xwechtaal. Thank you for getting us started in the right way.

We appreciate you for spending time with us today. For those of you who have just joined us, I am Laurie Anderson, the Executive Director SFU's Vancouver campus. It is my pleasure to welcome you to the SFU speaker series featuring Richard Wilkinson.

This was launched initially in 2012 to bring global experts to the global audience and through being online now, we can expand that audience wider than normal.

It builds on SFU's rich history of community engagement, and we have brought in in the past such eminent thinkers such as Naomi Klein, Gwen Dyer, and others to explore critical issues with people in the Vancouver region. SFU is very proud to be offering the SFU Vancouver Speaker Series with our colleagues and friends at SFU Public Square and at SFU's Vancity Office of Community Engagement. I would like to go over just a few quick housekeeping points before I introduce you to our moderator. We do have closed captioning available today, and you can turn it on and off by clicking the CC button at the black bar at the bottom of your screen, and then clicking "View subtitle".

We are also pleased to have ASL English interpretation available. If you would like to

revisit today's presentation in the future, you can do so either by visiting SFU Public Square's YouTube channel. Also, we will be sending a link to each of you in the follow-up email. If you run into any technical issues, you can send a message in the chat to hosts and panelists, and we will help out by reaching out to you.

Lastly, in the housekeeping area, I would like to draw your attention to our community guidelines, which you will find in the chat and onscreen now. We ask that everyone respect these guidelines so we can have a safe, honest, and socially accountable dialogue together today, and please, if you need to step away at any time of course for any time or any reason, please feel free to do so.

It is now my pleasure to introduce you to our moderator for today's event, Laura Lynch.

Laura is an award-winning journalist at CBC and the host of 'What On Earth' on CBC Radio, which one this year's Canadian journalism foundation award for climate solutions reporting. In the course of Laura's career, she has reported from across Canada and around the world, and lower has won the prestigious Nieman Fellowship from Harvard University and also awards from the British Bar Association, the Canadian Bar Association, the overseas club of America, and Amnesty International. It is a pleasure to welcome Laura as a moderator today. Over to you, Laura.

LAURA LYNCH:

Thank you very much, and I hope you can all hear me if not see me. We were having some technical difficulties before. It is my pleasure to be here this afternoon as you said

joining from the unceded territories of the x m k y m (Musqueam), S wxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), s lilw ta (Tsleil-Waututh) people. We have all seen how this pandemic has worsened has worsened inequalities around the world, and at the same time, the climate crisis has been impossible to ignore with the summer of wildfires, droughts, and more recently, the cycle that happened off the coast of BC.

I am pleased to introduce Richard Wilkinson. For decades, Mr Wilkinson has played a formative role in international research of the social determinants of health and on the societal effect of income and -- income in quality. He studied history at the London School of Economics for training in epidemiology. He is a -- Professor Emeritus of Social Epidemiology at the University of Nottingham Medical School , honorary Professor University College London, and visiting Professor at the University of York.

Richard is also a co-author with Kate Pickett of the award-winning and best-selling book, 'The Spirit Level', which put inequality at the centre of debate by showing -- conclusively -- that less inclusive societies fare worse. In their follow-up book, 'The Inner Level'...Wilkinson and Pickett described how inequality affects us individually, altering how we think, feel and behave. Wilkinson is also the co-founder of The Equality Trust, with the support of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, which seeks to examine the effect of inner quality . If you want to see a full biography, you can please look at the chat.

I want to know that following Richard Wilkinson's presentation, we will hear short responses from Chuka Ejeckam, a political researcher and writer, and Maya Gislason,

an assistant writer in SFU's Faculty of Health Sciences. I will lead us in a conversation taking questions from the audience, would you compose in the Q&A function at the bottom of your screen at any time. Without any further ado, Richard Wilkinson.

which have to be made are almost certainly much bigger than the degree of the second world war. Our chances of making the necessary transitions are not only obstructed by the prevailing myopia optimism but also by the popular view that 1.5 or 2° of warming is acceptable. I think that has given us that somehow it is alright, there is more time to go, and that we have a bit more room, but the last summer in the northern hemisphere, the fires, the heat waves, the floods show really the results of a 1.1° rise in temperature. 1.5° is a lot worse than that – 2° worse than that! I think actually, as we see the preparations for 26, it looks quite a lot worse than that. I remember some speeches, great speeches from 'The Guardian' newspaper reprinted years ago. It included a speech made in June 1940 after the withdrawal from Dunkirk. You may know at least some of it. It is the one where he talks about "We shall fight them on the beaches, fight them on the land and grounds, fight them in the fields," and so on.

A modern commentary on that speech noted that Churchill's only rhetorical device was to tell the truth. He did not shrink from referring to the withdrawal from Dunkirk as the greatest military disaster in our long history. He called it a colossal military disaster. He did not avoid mentioning the loss of Belgium, the Belgian army, the weakening of French forces, and the loss of industrial capacity. But at the same time, he kindled a spirit of resolve and resistance. This was not the speech three weeks earlier in which he had said he could offer nothing but blood, toil, sweat, and tears. I think we are in a situation that requires the same honesty. I think we are really on the edge of the precipice. We are just about to start the climate change conference in Glasgow, and I

believe our situation in relation to climate change is dire. I'm going to explain why I think it is so dire, and then I will go on to explain the necessity if we are going to minimize the damage of very measured reductions in inequality.

assumptions and most of them nearly all of them actually depend on taking carbon out of the atmosphere on a massive scale which is only being done on some experimental basis. Nothing on the scale, on an extraordinary scale, it would have to be done to make a real difference. I think most of us looking at that graph, knowing world politicians, can expect to get suddenly from (un

we're imposing on the environment, large-scale industrial production means we are using somewhere around 1.6 or 1.75 planets and that means we are eating into natural stocks, forest, water, soil, fish, pollution, plastics, species lost, it's not just CO2 in the atmosphere we have to deal with. And the reduction of the renewable energy technology itself from mining to installation and it entails several ecological intended relations. So it's the whole burden of our industrial system, the word industrial system that we are going to have to deal with. At the same time, carbon sinks are failing, the ways in which our natural environment absorbs some of the carbon, about half of the carbon being admitted to the atmosphere, taken into the seas. (indiscernible) found the Amazon rainforest is no longer soaking the CO2 -- but is becoming a matter of carbon dioxide.

Just to take another example, the soil in the UK estimated to be losing 13 million tonnes of carbon per year equal to the annual reduction in carbon dioxide, sorry carbon dioxide emissions achieved by the UK under the Q02 treaty about 12 to 13 million tonnes of carbon per year, so just our soils emitting carbon, the little we did after - Q02. On top of that, there are feedback effects of global warming. The optic has become a source of greenhouse gases. The huge quantities of the main greenhouse gases, methane and nitrous oxide and the (indiscernible) is melting. The temperatures have increased up to 4° between 1990 and 2016 and greenhouse gas emissions from the acting permafrost are currently almost equal to the total emissions from Russia or Japan, so the feedback effects are really enormous. And there are suggestions that actually, previous great

distinctions may have been triggered by certain corruptions of betaine, so called

conflicts of access to water, land, food, and other resources. And vastly increased flows of refugees, causing even worse political reactions than we have seen already. I think you can see what an enormous impact flows of refugees and prejudice and so on has had in politics and in many of our countries.

A recent paper by Barnard and various other climate scientists published... I think it is maybe still -- in the press and signed by 25,000 climate scientists. I would like to redo this last paragraph. They say, "Over the next decade, we have a stark choice to demonstrate the very best of our natures as Homo sapiens – cooperative, innovative,

returned show enormous differences in how cooperative and helpful people are in more equal or unequal societies. Again, along the bottom, inequality – the more unequal countries, perhaps only 20% of the wallets are returned to their owners -- lost wallets return. Whereas in more equal countries, perhaps 80%... A huge difference. Huge differences in the public ethos of those societies! There are a great many studies looking at homicide rates as a measure of violence in different places all over the world, and this is fairly typical. The red dots are American states. The blue triangles are Canadian provinces. You see here amongst the Canadian provinces, homicides in this graph was drawn with about 15 homicides per 1 million population. Some of the more unequal American states, it is 10 times that level. Those are huge differences. There must be perhaps 60 studies showing these sorts of patterns, these relationships between violence and inequality. The first studies of this kind were published in the 1970s, and they still haven't gotten to the understanding about politicians! But if you look at really much more unequal

So what we are seeing is this breakdown of trust, reciprocity, helpfulness, public spirit in the most unequal societies being replaced naturally by a loss of trust, a loss of community life, and then people being actually frightened of each other as in these last two pictures. It is an awful change. It gets right to the heart of our social relations, our willingness to help each other, and actually, this picture I have been giving you the last few slides is confirmed by quite different data. This is data from two American economists. This is an international study they did, but it is also shown for American states. They looked at the proportion of the labour force in each country involved in what they call "guard labour". Guard labour, security staff, police, security officers, stuff like that. They are, in effect, all the occupations that we use to protect ourselves from each other. As inequality increases, a higher portion of the population is in guard labour. It confirms very much the picture I showed you of the decline... Well, the growth in antisocial societies, if you would like, with greater inequality.

I think it is a mistake to think this is just something funny about inequality itself. We have shown in both our books that basically all the problems that have social gradients, all the problems that are worse at the bottom of society, get worse throughout society with more inequality. Now, you will know that people in the poorest areas have the worst health, the poorest educational performance, and usually the highest levels of violence. What we are dealing with is whether we have a society, a social pyramid that is a steep

status more important. It leads, for instance, to fewer people marrying people from other class backgrounds. The whole society becomes more ossified. Social mobility declines. There is good data showing that, and I have shown you that community life weakens. And what happens is that with class and status becoming more important, we all become more worried about how we are seen and judged by others. Along the bottom of this graph, you have the income in deciles. The poorest of the population are on the left, and the richest tenth of the population is on the right. The top line is the people's worry about being judged. The bottom line shows that people worry less about how they are seen and judged. And of course, there are insecurities about how you are viewed, what others think of you, and amongst other things, they lead to more consumerism. One way we try and show our self-worth to others is by buying a flashier car, more expensive cars, or clothes with the right designer labels and things like that – all the things we hope will show us off in a good light. And of course, consumerism is one of the major obstacles to moving towards sustainability.

Why inequality has these very powerful effects became clear really as we were trying to understand health inequalities in different societies. Rather to our surprise, – when I say "ours", I mean researchers around the world looking at social determinants of health – we saw that it wasn't simply differences in material standards that damaged health. It was actually social status itself. Lower social status, quite apart from living standards, is damaging to health. Feeling inferior, feeling you are looked down upon, worrying how you are seen and judged is a really powerful form of chronic stress affecting... Well,

for themselves. Let me try now to stop sharing.

So, I want to say something about how great a quality is being used before to aid these huge transitions that we have to make now. (Name), who was the father of social policy and an official historian of social policy during the involvement are important, described how the government realized that to gain public participation in the war effort, it had to make people feel the burden of war was fairly shared. He described how, he said, if the Corporation of the mosses were thought to be essential to the war effort, then inequalities had to be reduced and the pyramid of (indiscernible) had to be flattened and as a result, what was marked by far-reaching policies designed to make people feel the burden, income differences were rapidly decreased by taxation, luxuries were taxed, and rationing was introduced for food. Action on the climate emergency now needs similar after egalitarian policies. We need similar increases and in quality to gain support for the action against climate change that we so desperately need.

In France, President krumping try to bring in raised fewer duties, raise fewer taxes but even while it was just a proposal, it was massive uprising of (indiscernible) movement that went on for months and months opposing that policy on grants that it was unfair and it led to general criticism that the whole tax system is unfair. If we are really going to

make an impact on climate change, and not M M M M M M g-irlycreas

[Richard shares his screen]

OK. I want to finish just by showing how more equal countries already do better on things to do with climate change. There was a survey of business leaders' opinions on issues to do with environmental regulations. And business leaders were much more supportive in low and equal countries on the left to more equal countries where I think businesses felt, their job was to look after their business and the government's job was to worry about the rest. Really big difference in that sense of responsibility among the business community. You can look at kilograms of carbon emissions by hundred dollars of income and you can see it's higher in more unequal countries. You can look at the amount of recycling, how much different countries recycle their waste, metals and plastics and glass, paper and so on. Recycling is much more material, in more equal countries.

So, to create a more sustainable society, it's no longer a matter of little changes in policy of trying to drive less, it's much more fundamental. Individuals are households, and ration cards are needed. So whenever we buy something, it takes something of our carbon emissions. We perhaps need a one child policy if we are really going to be able to move to a society which is sustainable. We want to be there for quite a long time. We want to be doing things like ending advertising. And actually we have to envision a world without fossil fuels which you might think might look like preindustrial societies but

with the benefits of modern science.

Universal insurance against climate risk will be necessary, you know, if we are much more prone to climate onslaught of different kinds, not only that but also food price rises, huge fluctuations, we need new forms of economic debt aggressive to deal with their differences. The main reason why inequality has grown is the runaway income at the top, the income differences within the company are 10 times more than they used to be. Maybe we need to set some threshold, one to 12 income policy perhaps. That nobody should be able to earn in a month what it takes other people a whole year to earn. And of course, we need tax reform, we need to deal with tax havens and tax avoidance.

But as life gets more difficult physically, perhaps we can ensure that it gets better socially, more reciprocity, more mutual support and that is actually probably the most important influence on well-being. Well-being is fundamentally in studies, a matter of quality of social relations, the quality of your relationships, whether you're involved in community life, whether you have friends, things of that kind. So I did using any quality, we can make our lives better and that way and better able to withstand the onslaught we face from climate change. Thank you.

LAURA LYNCH:

Thank you so much, that was an incredibly thought-provoking and sobering talk in which you also included some solutions which may sound radical for some people but may be

the right thing for the right time. I just want to make sure that our audience knows if you do have any questions for Richard Wilkinson, make sure you use the Q&A function, it can be accessed at the bottom of the screen below your video. Now we have two people to respond to Richard Wilkinson's remarks. (Name) is political researcher and writer, he holds a Masters degree in political science from the University of British Columbia, he also serves on the steering advisory committee of the SFU labour studies program and has served on organizing committee for UBC link initiator.

CHUKA EJECKAM:

Thank you so much. I want to respond to that in particular but one thing you mentioned, as you said it was evidenced by the discussion for national mobilization for war effort, you mentioned that it's essential for these burdens to be fairly shared to help encourage public support and buying participation in these sorts of things. I don't have an issue with that but I want to ask what you say in the degree to which this perception will be established? I don't know for example, that, you mention again that, how an increase in refugees were increase, would correspond with an increase, at no nationalism, or rejection of refugees and whatnot and in many of the industrialized democracies and certainly that's the case but in that regard, how then can you attempt to establish that principle of fairly shared burden in previously unfair world in which the interest or quarters our nations which have benefited from the past five centuries of involving in equal to have most to fear from their own, have most of your internally to response to

those things. For example, in the UK and in the US, while of course political leaders don't always or perhaps care for every individual in the country, there is a sensible responsibility to provide for them, then being members of the jurisdiction. So, through what arguments, what measures could countries like the UK and US and Canada and multi-level organizations be compelled to genuinely expand their wealth to benefit others?

Perhaps, it seems to me that the necessary position in those countries, in those jurisdictions, is that the political system, the public, and the government have to be willing to reduce the aggregate well-being of people within their own country or jurisdiction to increase the aggregate well-being outside of the country's jurisdiction. It seems to me to be a hard sell, obviously it's important but that I think is a concern that I have. I don't think that the concern should stall action but I only mean that, I guess I'm worried that you could achieve, I'm sceptical that you correctly get that collaboration. For example, there are some organizations or individuals who have no close to collaborate with, organizations like (indiscernible), Jeffrey Bezos and Bill Gates and organizational people who have no interest in the well-being of the world or nothing to the planets, is it possible that in, that the kind of collaboration that you discussed could be collaborative opposition against some of these interest are organizational people who in my estimation will simply not relinquish what they have got from the rest of the world, they are not actively stealing from us, the latter being possibility of a future of meaningful lives lived by all. The last thing I would mention his, my great fear, and have

mentioned this frequently, my great we're as well the countries of the world, as circumstances get increasingly desperate, the wealthy countries of the world will simply build walls and leave everybody else in the world to suf

projects rooted in the ethics and towards the goal of improving health for young people.

Over to you.

MAYA GISLASON:

Thank you so much. It's such an honour to be here. Thank you to Elder Dennis Joseph for your thoughtful and provocative ideas and also to the SFU V

well-rounded in science. We just had the

rethinking: what are the thoughts? What are our priorities? What are our practices? And I think that that is something else.

So I really appreciate what you have said, your wake-up call, and I wonder what your thoughts are about not being (indiscernible) in terms -- or uninformed in terms of our hopefulness, but actually being grounded in science. Then, trying beyond the pathways that are impeding us to bring the visions for change that young people are seeing in our futures and possibilities. Thank you.

LAURA LYNCH:

Thank you very much, Doctor Gislason. One more time, I'm going to remind everyone that if you have questions, use the Q&A function because I am moderating, I get to ask the first question! (Laughs) So...

Your talk, Richard Wilkinson, is very timely. I mean, always timely, but particularly so, I think, because just this week, we have been diving a bit more deeply into what is coming up at COP 26 in terms of the promises that have been made to less wealthy countries by wealthy, developed countries to give them money to help them deal with mitigation and adaptation when it comes to climate change. Those promises were first made in 2009: \$100 billion, which is a figure that was pulled out of thin air, renewed again in 2015, and promised to be delivered by 2020 for stopping, now this is a broken promise, and now there are more promises to increase that amount of money again. At the same time, the realistic figures that are shown to be needed is in the area of \$4

trillion, and perhaps more for the nations that have suffered a lot from climate change that was not created by them. It was created by more developed countries.

So Doctor Wilkinson, I am wondering, when you talk about what kind of sharing you would like to see, what kind of political leadership you would like to see, when you see what has happened on that front, what do you think?

RICHARD WILKINSON:

Well... All your comments are very useful and provocative. But I suppose the importance of facing the truth is that we then start discussing the reality of the predicament we are in. With Paris... The targets that countries made for themselves voluntarily, they weren't going to be enough to keep temperatures down anywhere near 1.5 or 2°.

They were asked at COP 26 to revise them. Those revisions, if countries kept to them, are estimated to perhaps keep temperatures down to a rise of 2.7°. But we know they are not going to keep to them... So, I think we are in for a minimum of 3°. 2.7 if they keep to them is the current figure.

But when Chuka envisages the response, the gun turrets, the washing the hands of humanity and so on, I think he is very likely right. But you see, the problem is that we have loathed ourselves into -- lulled ourselves into this myopia, this false sense of security. I thought that if we were able to convince people of a better sense of society, we would be able to make those changes. We have talked about carbon budgets, which have suggested that 1.5° is somewhat alright, that there is still some space to go...

Always, a false sense of security.

And I don't have answers to the problems you are raising, the ones you are rightly raising, but we can't even discuss them unless we are facing the truth. And I think that that is really what I wanted to do, and of course, there is lots of evidence that young people are becoming -- having sort of an eco-depression thinking about the future, but the despair is partially because of the inactivity, the lack of activity on behalf of governments knowing that we are not going to get there, and actually, if we had a cooperative, urgent activity, purposeful activity, if we did feel we were all pulling together to make the changes that had to be made, I think that that would be quite invigorating, despite the fact that we wouldn't be able to by any means solve all the problems. There are already additional walls over access to water and so on. Undoubtedly, there is going to be more of that, and I believe something like 90% of the loss of lives due to climate change is in poorer countries. You know, Chuka is right to emphasize that side of things. But you know... There is no point in thinking or talking about this unless we face the reality. This is the reality if you read this stuff. I have spent several weeks reading around this on top of what I knew before, preparing for this, and of course, worried that I may be making a mistake, misunderstanding things, having my own pessimism. But I really don't think that is it at all. I think that is what the science is telling us. There are no papers from IPCC, from Greta Thunberg, from these reports signed by thousands of scientists. We just have to make the politicians pay attention. We have to rise up if they don't!

the Paris uprising in 1968 when the girl fled from Paris thinking there was another French revolution coming, there were strikes from workers and students together. It was a period of prosperity, quite unexpected. And again and again, you get these changes in a totally unpredictable way. Chris Hedges, whose lectures you may have heard online, talks about how our number (indiscernible) when people have done not when they think is not calculated through some set of strategies that work, they have done what they can, when they felt there was nothing that they could do.

And people have... I think one of the examples he gave was (indiscernible) an agent who burnt himself to death and that started a huge uprising but there are all sorts of examples of people just doing the only thing they can do. Not based on careful strategies. And I think, perhaps, we need to take heed of that kind of way of thinking and realize that change can sometimes come when it's least expected, you can certainly, people will get the picture and generate major change. I'm not sounding convincingly helpful or optimistic because that's not a situation.

LAURA LYNCH:

That's interesting you said those things coming off of federal elections that had just happened. We are getting close to the end of time but I want to keep going. Another audience question, this is from Doug. How would you rationalize to Canadians that such a small country like Canada in terms of its total nest contribution of submissions in comparison to the rest of the world to drastically change our economic strucge. lo iY Mo thfmM

mitigate greenhouse gases that would lead to internet economic hardships within Canada and haven't negligible effect on greenhouse gases. Why would we do this?

RICHARD WILKINSON:

I would put emissions per person and life expectancy, you see that, fairly early in the transition from the middle income countries to the rich countries, the curve of life expectancy, the rises with GNP per capita, it starts to level off and so we have huge increases as countries get richer and the missions without any improvement in measures of well-being, happiness, life expectancy and health. To live up to a lower standard of living, we are not making genuine sacrifices on the quality of our lives.

What drives our bazaar for more all the time is what I try to talk about in terms of worries about what other people think of this our status anxiety, the drive consumerism, the people who get into debt, who get addicted to shopping and so on our people were most insecure about status, psychologically insecure and more likely to be depressed and so on. We need to understand what is driving our consumerism and higher level of consumptions and understand that it doesn't actually in the rich countries being increased rewards in terms of quality of life.

LAURA LYNCH:

Chuka, Maya, do you want to add anything?

CHUKA EJECKAM:

the choices to enable sustainability to happen in our particularly geographically stated

all that demonstrating, turning out of the street and so on is absolutely required now.

(Name) talks about the need for leadership, I don't know whether the leaders could do it on their own, there's a complete lack of any inspiring leadership at the moment. I don't know whether someone could focus opinion and a movement that could really get things done but there certainly is a need for quality of leadership because it is simply missing at the moment. I do think our primary task... And I'm starting to become active just in our village talking about heat pumps and so on and electric bikes, we have a village whatsapp and I put on, how much carbon one tank full of petrol uses in my car, it slightly less but of course those standards of living and that idea of how we could go on to the future is unrealistic but we have to do things to spread these ideas to all the people around us who are suffering from this myopia, this false optimism. We have to get rid of that and build the movement.

LAURA LYNCH:

