

Thinking Big

What are the big ideas about to change the world?



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Want to change the world? Every so often someone comes up with an idea that does just that. Edison's light bulb is an obvious example, but there are hundreds of other ideas that go beyond technical innovation. Ideas about how we organise and run our society or the way we live our lives, such as votes for women and universal healthcare, can have a dramatic impact on millions of people.

So what are the big ideas of the 21st Century? This series looks at some of the most ambitious schemes currently being dreamt up, from a society powered without oil to a new global currency. The architect of each scheme lays out their grand plan, including the effect on governments, businesses and ordinary consumers. Along the way we hear from fellow enthusiasts and sceptics as each tries to promote their vision. Are these new ideas a stroke of genius or hopeless pipedreams?

The American Pipe Dream

Can America live without oil? In 2004, Amory Lovins and his team of scientists, engineers and economists at the Rocky Mountain Institute published a blueprint for making America oil-free by 2050. Yet despite an initial flurry of press reports his big plan seemed destined to remain just an idea.

Five years later, however, and his idea is on the brink of going mainstream. Al Gore recently challenged the United States to end its reliance on fossil fuels and Obama has begun many policies to reduce America's part in global warming. Could Obama sign up to even more radical measures?

Amory Lovins lays out his grand plan, including the technical solutions that are already there, what Government and industry have to do and what consumers can expect. Supporters and sceptics debate whether an oil-free America could become a reality.

A Woman's Place is in the Boardroom

Will more women in top business roles increase profits or just increase red tape? In 2002, Norway realized that most of the country's leading companies had no female board members. The government gave businesses up to two years to make their boardrooms 40% female. Those that failed to meet the target were threatened with closure.

Spain has now passed a similar law and Germany is moving in the same direction. But what difference will it make to business performance? The former Minister for Trade and Industry in Norway makes the case for his big idea, arguing that it makes sound national economic sense: "It's all about tapping into valuable under-utilised resources."

Ditching the Dollar

Could a standard worldwide currency actually work? Nobel prize winning economist Robert Mundell wants to replace the Dollar as the world's reserve currency with a new global currency: "Each country would produce its own unit that exchanges at par with the world unit." Few thought it could happen, but the global financial crisis has brought the world a step closer to a worldwide currency, backed by a global central bank.

When world leaders tried to ease the worldwide recession, they activated the International Monetary Fund's power to create money. Some argued that this move began a world currency; one that was outside the control of any individual country. Would a global currency prevent a repeat of the crisis now unfolding in the world's markets?

Image: Chris Doyle

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