

THE FUTURE'S BRIGHT

It may feel like the world is going to pot, but the opposite is true.
Alix O'Neill finds out how optimism could really save us all

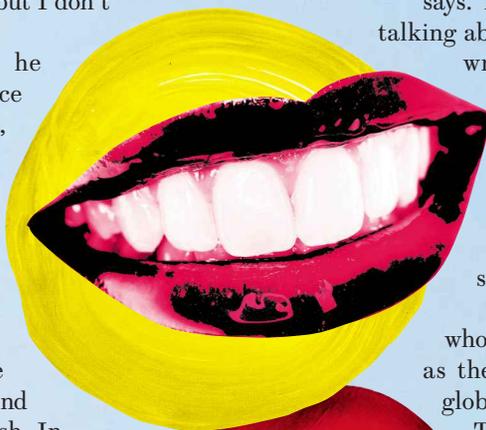
Recently, I had to turn off the news alerts on my phone. In the space of an hour, I learnt that we have just 12 years to avoid climate catastrophe, the oysters I used to relish eating now contain around eight pieces of plastic each, and visitors to Venice are five feet deep in flood water.

I used to be a sanguine soul. Now, I'm increasingly wondering whether all those 'preppers' gearing up for the apocalypse might be on to something.

Reassuringly, not everyone shares my less-than-sunny disposition. Swedish economic historian Johan Norberg points me in the direction of the latest figures published by the World Bank. Between 1990 and 2015, the number of people living in extreme poverty declined by almost 1.2 billion. 'That means that 134,000 people rose out of poverty every day for 25 years,' says Norberg. 'That's the greatest story of our time.' I'm tempted to tell him that in the same report the development agency said the decline was half the rate of previous years, but I don't want to kill his buzz.

'And what about health?' he continues. 'Look at the difference between Mozart, 35, and George, 10. Mozart died from a sore throat, because that's how you died 200 years ago, even if you were the greatest composer or the king. Today, George gets brain surgery for his tumour and, despite his heart stopping during surgery, the doctors revive him and he's back to his old self. And wait for it — George is a goldfish. In other words, our pets get better treatment than kings and composers used to get. That tells you something about why now is the best time to be alive.'

It's hard not to get swept up by Norberg's enthusiasm, but then he hails from one of the



top 10 happiest countries on the planet — and clearly happy people are less likely to think the world is going to pot. I'm not alone in my cynicism. A recent survey of 26,000 people across 28 countries by market research

firm Ipsos revealed most of us believe global poverty and child mortality are rising when the opposite is true. In Bill Gates' 'new favourite book of all time', *Enlightenment Now*, cognitive scientist Steven Pinker found that wealthier states are more likely to believe the world is getting worse, not better. 'This bleak assessment is wrong,' Pinker writes. 'Flat-earth wrong.'

This matters, insists Norberg, because complacency can arise from pessimism. 'A charity just told me that its constant focus on the world's problems has backfired,' he says. 'It worked well in the short run. By talking about all the things that are going wrong, they got people to send a cheque. But, having given the impression that the world is falling apart for 60 years, they started getting the response, "Why should we bother?" If we don't think that problems can be solved, we don't act, we despair.'

Thankfully, there are plenty for whom despair is not an option. Such as the scientists behind the growing global movement #EarthOptimism. The idea is to share environmental success stories that will inspire meaningful change without sugar-coating the challenges that remain. Here's a reason to be cheerful: deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon has reduced

by two-thirds since its 2004 peak. Meanwhile, we're seeking out positive outcomes in print. The political and economic upheaval of the past few years has kickstarted a new trend for 'up-lit' — joyful stories that lift readers' spirits. In October, at the Frankfurt Book Fair, a debut novel about a lonely old woman who adopts a dog sold to HarperCollins for a six-figure sum after a 10-way auction.

It's not just about giving us a morale boost. Negativism has political consequences. Among Britons who voted to leave the EU, 61 per cent believed that most children will be worse off than their parents, writes Norberg. According to a 2016 survey by the Pew Research Center, 81 per cent of Donald Trump's supporters think life has grown worse in the past 50 years. 'Right-wing politicians love pessimism,' says Gregg Easterbrook, Washington-based author of *It's Better than it Looks: Reasons for Optimism in an Age of Fear*. 'Because if the world is failing then you need a strong man to put guns at the borders.'

Easterbrook decries nostalgia: 'When exactly were these good old days? You really believe your grandmother had it better than you? Back when discrimination prevented women and minorities from working? When material living standards were a third of what they are today? When lifespans were 25 years shorter?'

Affluent Westerners, claims Easterbrook, began suffering what he calls 'collapse anxiety' — the belief that their way of life cannot be sustained and that at some point the whole system will collapse around them — long before the destruction of the World Trade Center made that fear palpable. He also suggests that the way in which we consume news these days is bumming us all out. If, for example, you see a disturbing headline in the paper, you can put it down and leave the room. The paper doesn't follow you. Your phone does: 'So bad news is physically close to your face.'

It's not all gloom, though. A new survey of 3,000 individuals found that more than 80 per cent of people were upbeat about their own future, while only 50 per cent felt the same about global issues. Tali Sharot, a professor of cognitive neuroscience at University College London, says: 'When it comes to ourselves we have a strong motivation to be optimistic because we care about our own outcomes. And we tend to think we have control over our own lives, but not global issues.'

Kate Pumphrey, who left her job as a corporate lawyer in the City to do a master's in environmental technology, disagrees. 'At Imperial we were studying some of the world's biggest, most systemic challenges, but

"WHEN EXACTLY WERE THESE GOOD OLD DAYS? YOU REALLY BELIEVE YOUR GRANDMOTHER HAD IT BETTER THAN YOU? WHEN LIFESPANS WERE 25 YEARS SHORTER?"

the whole campus felt so populated with brilliance and braininess and boldness that you couldn't help but feel assured we'd find an answer — and motivated to help do so.' In 2014, she set up The Hot Breakfast, a series of early-morning walks and talks over flat whites and bircher muesli, covering topics from sustainability to the gender pay gap. It's since exploded and now includes professional development sessions and a new peer-to-peer mentoring service. The premise is to bring together individuals from different sectors who want to — and crucially, believe they can — make a difference.

'Negativity is toxic,' says Pumphrey. 'I don't linger on problems, I'm interested in what can be done to fix them. I'm constantly meeting amazing people doing remarkable things. And that makes me very hopeful.' The breakfasts have led to everything from new business opportunities to unusual artistic collaborations between award-winning portraitists and environmental campaigners.

And there are more inspiring stories. After reading an article about girls missing school in the UK because they can't afford sanitaryware, 18-year-old student Amika George decided something had to be done. Since founding #FreePeriods last year, she's managed to secure £1.5 million in government funding to address period poverty. Now, young people are better able to access menstrual products through schools and charities. 'I'm optimistic about the future because I can see more and more people calling out injustice, speaking up and finding ways to make change,' she says.

Of course, there are good reasons to be cautious about embracing optimism. Critics of Pinker, Norberg and their academic cohorts claim that while progress has been made, it hasn't been continuous. And yes, on aggregate, global poverty is falling, but that's hardly a consolation for the almost 750 million people worldwide still living on less than £1.50 a day, while watching the super rich get ever richer.

'I'm not saying everything is fine,' says Easterbrook. 'Everything is not fine. But this Trump-Brexit line about the world ending is bulls***. Optimism is not complacency. It's the belief that problems can be solved. I think most people are, at heart, optimists. We just need to get positivity on the table in a way people can relate to.'

