



# Mythologues Briefing For A Long Decisions Event

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## Mythologues

Briefing for a  
Long Finance Long Decisions Event

*March 2016*

### Background

Long Finance's Long Decisions Group consists of 30 people interested in how groups arrive at longer-term decisions in complex situations, ranging from the 'liquid democracy' movement to how decisions are made in the Linux community.

In 2013 Sir Geoffrey Nice (Gresham Professor of Law), in conversation with Michael Mainelli (Long Finance, Emeritus Gresham Professor of Commerce) and enlisting the support of Tim Connell (Fellow of Gresham College), Robert Ghanea-Hercock (Long Decisions), Jan-Peter Onstwedder (Long Decisions), and Giles Abbott (Professional Storyteller), raised the idea of trying to discover ways of **“extracting better narratives from inquiries and commissions”**.

We already have a number of event formats for developing narratives among people:

- ◆ mini-lecture – TED would be a good example;
- ◆ formal lecture – the traditional Gresham format, typically 30 to 60 minutes;
- ◆ panel discussion – a common format for informal discussions with larger audiences – sometimes with 'timelines' or 'cartoonists' helping to structure a narrative;
- ◆ seminar or symposia – a variety of types, but basically summarised as presentations followed by panels;
- ◆ formal debate – highly stylised with typically two or four debaters;
- ◆ tribunal of inquiry - official review of events or actions ordered by a government body in Common Law;
- ◆ commission - major ad-hoc formal public inquiry into a defined issue, with significant investigative powers and with the presumption that recommendations will be made;
- ◆ court of law – a trial or a tribunal with the power to administer justice.

Without discussing in detail the pros and cons in detail, these formats tend to divide between events where people are discussing but not laying down a narrative, or very fixed on achieving a result by adhering to a well-defined process. At Gresham we are interested in tackling subjects that may be complex with high degrees of uncertainty or ambiguity. We are not especially interested in the 'entertainment' value exhibited in a debate. We are not sure that the adversarial or the inquisitorial methods are good at discovery for complex issues. Robert Ghanea-Hercock stresses the importance of 'decoupling', i.e. separating advocacy from inquiry, which some of us feel is related to Rawls' 'original position' argument. We are also interested in having wide participation from the audience in the development of the narrative, perhaps why our existing symposia work – including one on Public Inquiries (<http://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/public-inquiries - 14 September 2010>). Finally, we are interested in a 'result', i.e. that a narrative emerges with which attendees would largely concur. Somewhat pompously, we want to change biases, “reweighting the biases for consistent action”.



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But what sort of new event formats or modifications to current formats might be suggested? A few came to mind:

- ◆ Vermont town halls where nobody can speak a second time till everyone who wants has spoken once;
- ◆ Long Now debates where one person has to repeat the other person's points to that person's satisfaction before they can begin their presentation – Stewart Brand promoted this and here is an example on synthetic biology - [http://fora.tv/2008/11/17/Drew\\_Endy\\_and\\_Jim\\_Thomas\\_Debate\\_Synthetic\\_Biology](http://fora.tv/2008/11/17/Drew_Endy_and_Jim_Thomas_Debate_Synthetic_Biology) [no winners or losers, probers – 15 mins each, interviewer then has to summarise argument; reverse roles; audience questions]
- ◆ continuous jury voting, where jurors have to give before the audience their reason for having, at the time they declare, decided a certain way.

### Core Idea

We are trying to answer a wordy question 'how do we develop a better format to have productive discussions, as part of the role civil society should play, about complex problems, so solutions can be develop that have genuine legitimacy across a wide swathe of the population, and that therefore have a better chance of being implemented'. After a few meetings, we suggest the following:

The core idea is that **the purpose of the Mythologue is for the group to agree which basic 'story' best fits the question**. Our core assumption is that we can identify a short list of narratives. The Mythologue is an interactive process helping the audience to use the short list of narratives to classify problems. Stories have historically been a good way to communicate complex issues, issues with nuances and multiple angles, and so the search for a narrative structure that can be used to start the debate. Stories, think Homer, have also been a good way to communicate complex issues over long periods of time (though perhaps the Poems of Gresham may be a subsequent stage).

Having participated, people should go away enriched by having worked together and engaged in classifying the situation to a narrative. It is hoped that, after having classified the situation to some basic plot, participants will:

- ◆ believe – have more understanding and be more comfortable with complex situations;
- ◆ explain – having worked to a convincing narrative, people should be more able to explain complex situations to others, possibly working towards solutions;
- ◆ inspire – by having a better overall idea of the situation and their role within it, where appropriate people may feel empowered to do something and encourage others to help.

To that end, we need a set of basic 'stories' or narratives and have explored a few sources for developing an authoritative list:

- ◆ The Golden Bough - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden\\_Bough](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Bough)
- ◆ The Seven Basic Plots - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Seven\\_Basic\\_Plots](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Seven_Basic_Plots)
- ◆ The Thirty Six Dramatic Situations - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Thirty-Six\\_Dramatic\\_Situations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Thirty-Six_Dramatic_Situations)
- ◆ Critical System Heuristics - <http://wulrich.com/csh.html> (see Figure 1 especially)



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- ♦ risk personalities -  
[http://www.zyen.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=259&Itemid=359](http://www.zyen.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=259&Itemid=359)  
(see Diagram 6 especially)

We believe that issues relevant to the Mythologue format are complex and should be ones that affect the potential audience's daily lives. At the same time, the issues have to be reduced to a question that doesn't afford much ambiguity in answering. Some examples of complex questions, almost unfair questions, follow:

- ♦ should the NHS be broken up?
- ♦ are house prices too high or too low?
- ♦ do we need more competition in UK banking?
- ♦ should mankind stop emitting CO<sub>2</sub> now?
- ♦ how do we solve the Euro crisis? should the UK 'leave' Europe?

### Format

We also have a number of suggestions of nice 'add-ons', e.g. one team simultaneously building a timeline during the event, perhaps have people create a wiki together before a 'Mythologue', or a cartoonist recording things, as well as the use of silence and some short group breathing or 'mindfulness' exercises (Rohan Narse). Current draft format:

Roles – Moderator, Timekeeper, “Advocate, Provocateur,” “Storyteller, Bard, Kynic,” “Jurors, Audience”

1. The Mythologues of Gresham – an explanation of the event and why by the Moderator – 15 minutes – handout of the X basic plots (table with plot description, main characters)
2. Specification of the Question – 2 minutes
3. Audience votes on which narrative best fits
4. Presentation by Advocate ‘For’ – 5 minutes (emotional, and must specify which story they think best fits, and a list of ‘witnesses’ (if any))
5. Presentation by Provocateur ‘Against’ – 5 minutes (emotional, and must specify which story they think best fits, and a list of ‘witnesses’ (if any))
6. Long Now style interview and assumption by Storyteller of the question (decoupled) – 10 minutes
7. Long Now style interview and assumption by Bard of the question (decoupled) – 10 minutes
8. SILENCE
9. Storyteller, Bard, and Kynic call ‘For’ witnesses (if any) for joint interviews and limited audience questions – 15-30 minutes
10. Storyteller, Bard, and Kynic call ‘Against’ witnesses (if any) for joint interviews and limited audience questions – 15-30 minutes
11. BREATHING OR MINDFULNESS GROUP EXERCISE
12. Storyteller presents the story in his/her suggested favourite narrative – 5 minutes
13. Bard presents the story in his/her suggested favourite narrative – 5 minutes (both Storyteller and Bard can agree on the same narrative)
14. Kynic explains why no story can work, or creates a new one – 5 minutes
15. Audience votes on which narrative, or none, best fits



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### Basic Stories

The current working thesis is to limit the possible storylines to four, depending on the nature of the threat or opportunity, and the nature of the necessary or envisaged response.

	Nature of threat or opportunity	
Nature of response	Specific	Vague
Individual	Monster	Lone Quest
Collective	Group conquest	Group quest

**Monster:** the well-defined challenge can be overcome by the lone genius, someone with a unique capability that unlocks the solution. Could be the brilliant diplomat who brings together two nations on the brink of war, the scientist who discovers the next antibiotic just before humanity succumbs to drug-resistant bacteria, the businessman who invents a business model that makes restoring the Haitian rainforest work. Society is engaged and supports/cheers on the hero but doesn't contribute much.

**Lone quest:** a vague challenge that creates widespread anxiety or loss, something like an unknown mental illness that increases suicide rates a hundredfold, or a great financial crisis that wipes out trillions of dollars of 'wealth', or global climate change. A lone individual (or small group, or a number of not-connected individuals) embark on the odyssey that might lead to a solution (Craig Ventner's ocean exploration to find micro-organisms that might hold the key to untold advances in science, or Kurzweil's pursuit of artificial intelligence). Society might stand by and applaud, or frustrate, or be ignorant, but is likely to be divided in its opinion and support many different efforts with very different potential solutions. Or society might fragment over the possible paths to salvation and the squabbling degenerates into arguments, trade wars, or even real wars.

**Group conquest:** the Apollo approach: large scale widely supported efforts involving major institutions. UN peacekeeping, joint military blockades against a rogue nation, WHO campaigns to contain SARS. Active support by a united citizenry enables large scale resource mobilisation. Also: stopping Arctic exploration with an army of inflatables, mass demonstrations.

**Group quest:** maybe the hardest to picture. A multinational programme to invent technologies to protect against stray meteors, or a UN programme to map the ocean floor, or the EU creating a carbon trading market?



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## Appendix A – Diagrammatic Representation

