Below | Three Cambridge graduates combined fruit, smart stunts and savvy investment. The result? Innocent Drinks.
Opposite page | From nowhere in 2003 Sonos was launched at CES by John MacFarlane and friends who linked the internet to music for the home and thanks to a guardian business angel now run a global success

The new Victorians

Adrian Stokes comments on the state of the industry and what's needed for future growth

It's official and I quote: "the only hope for growth is to get behind entrepreneurs". Oh good - a politician proposes to back enterprise.

In 1984, when Mrs T was turning our industrial lights out, I started my design business. My bank manager gave me a £20K overdraft facility secured on my first flat. Hammersmith Council gave me a £4K grant to buy workshop equipment on the back of a business plan and I received £3.5K from the Design Council to promote a new product I'd designed...or did I dream it?

After 30 years bludgeoning our industries into oblivion, the army of PPE graduates who run things nowadays have decided innovation and manufacturing are the future. These are the sorts of people who Philip Roth describes as: "the deep thinkers who've never manufactured anything or seen anything manufactured, who don't know what things are made of, or how a company works, who, aside from a house or a car, have never sold anything and don't know how to sell anything, who've never hired a worker, fired a worker, trained a worker, been fleeced by a worker - people who know nothing of the intricacies or the risks of building a business, or running a factory, but who nonetheless imagine they know everything worth

knowing" - "all brains and no intelligence".

When the sh*t hit, in September 2008, I was as scared as anyone about the consequences of allowing that unholy trinity of bankers, property speculators and politicians free rein with our economy.

Having said that, we were only three short months from the arrival of a free-thinking, inspirational visionary, in the form of Barack Obama, imagining he'd signal a rejection of the barmy economics and cultural froth which had made most of us victims and a few obscenely rich. Just when the time was spit spot on, the perpetrators were on the rack and we were tuned in to receive the message loud and clear, nothing came through. On reading his autobiography I realised that we could have a long wait; Obama was someone things happened to. In no time it was business as usual, "same old same old", just like that phrase.

30 odd months on and it's depressing that in the entire Western world there isn't a single one of our super-educated, super-bright political front runners capable of articulating a plan beyond the next election cycle. It's even more depressing to hear our politicians on both sides deliver soma sermons on industrial regeneration having spent three decades allowing free access to our markets by spivs selling cheap imports, made by slave labour in far away places. Of course, behind the scenes they continue to court Aussie media tycoons and cave in to bankers' threats to move house. And so we can be sure that a politician's call to arms won't be backed up by any action significant enough to make the lives of the country-saving entrepreneurs and innovators any less difficult than it was when the last lot left. So it amazes me that despite the will-sapping policy making and regulation that is heaped on small businesses, the appetite of individuals to stand in the line of fire is still so strong; in fact I'd say stronger than I've noticed in 34 years. The simple truth is these brave-hearts are the only hope we have and unfortunately they really are "lions led by donkeys", which means some reflection on their make-up and motivation and prospects is worthy of a second look.

The appetite of individuals to stand in the line of fire is still strong

The first thing I'd say is that to a man/woman, every one of the characters who have lightened my door with a good idea, has been good company. These are individuals with conviction and a surprising range of backgrounds, from a street trader with a wallet full of cash, to a PhD from MIT, who ballroom danced and skied for his country. They are intelligent, savvy, lively but not arrogant; driven, workaholic but open-minded and most of all generous and appreciative. The fact that their backgrounds vary so much is interesting and defies stereotyping. Of course this contrasts with so much of modern business life and culture, which is designed to create "team players" and systems that rid individuals of the confidence to act independently, an approach that paralyses organisations and results in decision making by technique, prolonging the process and stifling progress; death by brainstorming.

My longest-serving client designs and manufactures broadcast equipment. In 1989 when we first worked with them, they were a lively, smallish, breakaway company started by three technologists whose success attracted predators on the lookout for fresh blood, presumably to impress their shareholders. The company is now part of one of the largest in its field, grown by acquisition and, rather like a plant fed on Miracle-Gro, big, blousy, rootless and about as interesting as boil-in-the-bag rice. The front-of-house is run by a management team planning a five to seven year exit and in the kitchen is an army of superb technicians outflanked by the sharp elbowed suits that send them on away days and expose them to consultants brought in to give direction...you can imagine.

It's now September, six months on from the first half of this piece, and the world's teetering again.

In the meantime I moved my home and office out of London, the Murdochs had a visit to Parliament and I attended a

Below | Dutch design graduate Max Barenbrug, with an idea for a pushchair system and partnered by entrepreneur/investor Eduard Zanen, created Bugaboo and made pushchairs desirable. Opposite | The best-known entrepreneurial success story ever; from garage to global domination, changing all our lives in the process.

These people combine instinct, intelligence, and bloody-minded tenacity

symposium at the Design Council entitled "Design for Growth" which was full of movers and shakers. Manufacturing talk was in the hot air, much of it breathed by a shiny-suited David Willetts, who assumed the rest of the room shared his advantage, when in fact we were too dumb and the only thing we shared were blank looks. It was difficult to decide which was the most slippery, the minister or his suit - long on words, short on ideas.

Back to the future...

My newest clients are both entrepreneurs, what a surprise; the first is a bright MBA and ex-corporate man on a mission. Armed with a good idea, he shook off the straitjacket, found a fairy godfather and outsourced a team to help make it a reality; so far so good. He will succeed, I have no doubt about that; he has the entrepreneur's instincts and once the product is in his hands, he has the knowhow and investment to channel it to his customers. He's taken a bold step but a calculated one. The other client is the ballroom dancing international skier and PhD from MIT! He also has a great idea and has assembled a team to realise it. His problem is that he's a scientist paying for the work out of earned income. No fairy godfather, or even business angel, just the need for some investment, maybe a version of the student grant, which would allow him to develop, test, tool and sell, for a share of the equity...but this is no country for bold men and if the lack of money doesn't get him, the unlevel playing field and hopelessly biased rules of the commercial game, will. But he'll keep at it; ducking, diving and doing what he can...why?

These people are non-conformists and whilst some will have started working life marking time, having paid little attention at school, or box ticking in a public service cul-de-sac, or even as high earners shackled to a corporate ladder, they are rather like

individuals in a Spielberg movie drawn to a hill, unsure why, but finding themselves amongst friends. What they represent is a tiny drop in an ocean of similar souls with the same combination of instinct, intelligence, and bloody-minded tenacity; a barely tapped resource requiring a sign.

It didn't really matter if the stork delivered their baby in the form of a new idea for an ice-cream cart/a waste bin for cars/a diagnostic device/the most incredible music player you ever heard/a device that finds your lost child from 1km away/a badge that monitors sound and saves hearing, or storage that will revolutionise the problem in hospitals. Given a fraction of the investment lavished on abortive computer schemes up and down the public sector, or on fighting wars in someone else's back yard, literally an army of new business leaders could start the bail-out process our country desperately needs.

In 1962 JFK realised the national potential of big ideas: "We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organise and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win." They did, of course, and put the USA on top of the pile for 30 years.

However nothing's forever and they, like us, have become a nation of fatuous, frivolous, freeloaders.

Bruce Mau in his book *Massive Change* tells us essentially that without rethinking everything we're f***ed. I believe him and so when David Cameron knocks on my new front door (which he surely will) and asks me if I know what his sign should read, I would tell him to forget one-liners and that his only hope is to start acting like the people he claims to be backing and take some big risks, because there is no future for our deskilled, spiritually bereft country without seat-of-the-pants visionary leadership right now. For entrepreneurs there is a massive opportunity, but only if the odds even up. About 174 years ago the Victorians started to change everything now it's time for The New Victorians to have a say.

P.S Recently Steve Jobs & Bert Jansch died, but we still have Barack Obama and David Cameron: God help us eh?

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