

[Economist breaks cover](#) [1]

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The Next Generation group departed from tradition at Tuesday's meeting by featuring a sit-down speech instead of the more customary 10 minutes standing-up. It was longer, too, as was entirely justified by the quality of the speaker ? none other than Tim Harford, author of "The Undercover Economist" and a Financial Times columnist.

His theme was a comparison of industrial disasters with the recent financial meltdown. Drawing on the experiences of the Piper Alpha oil rig explosion, the Three Mile Island nuclear leak, and other disasters such as the Chernobyl melt-down, he pointed out that there was no single cause, but a succession of failures in a variety of systems. Many of those systems had been put in place as additional safety features, but had only added to the confusion and the complex sequence of failures.

The lesson to be learned was that the systems themselves were over-complex, and that greater safety could be achieved by procedural simplicity. The lesson he drew from the financial crisis is not that additional safety measures should now be bolted on to prevent a recurrence, but that financial systems should be simplified so that everyone can see what is going on, and more crucially, can see when they start to go wrong.

The audience of 100 who made it through the London tube strike was rewarded by an insightful speech packed with fascinating nuggets of information to back up the speaker's central thesis. It was a tour de force, and Mr Harford stayed on afterwards to meet TNG members and take the discussion further with them. As usual at TNG meetings, there was social value to the event, with wine served before and after the speech, and plenty of opportunities for members to meet and talk to each other.

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