MODEM Dialogues - In conversation with Kerry Bannigan

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Kerry Bannigan. President of the Board, PVBLIC Foundation and Co-Founder of the UN Fashion and Lifestyle Network

Portrait Kerry Bannigan ® PVBLIC Foundation
Questions conceived and hosted by Florian Müller

MODEM:
Your professional path began in advocacy and evolved into building strategic alliances. Which early realization led you to understand fashion as a lever for systemic renewal rather than a stage for individual expression?

KERRY BANNIGAN:
Producing international runway platforms early in my career, I experienced fashion at its most amplified: global press, economic ripple effects, and cultural influence moving at extraordinary speed. Over time, I began questioning the architecture beneath. Fashion weeks are powerful cultural engines, but who benefits beyond the runway? What systems are strengthened, and which are ignored? How does this translate into lasting economic participation for those who make the industry possible?

That inquiry marked a turning point. I began to see fashion not simply as expression, but as infrastructure shaping labor conditions, supply chains, education pathways, material innovation, and access to opportunity.

When I later founded **the Conscious Fashion Campaign with the United Nations Office for Partnerships,** it was to translate fashion's cultural influence into systemic contribution. The Campaign used the visibility of major fashion events as an entry point, connecting the industry

to sustainable development and creating a shared language across sectors. Campaign partners represented over 800 annual events in 40 countries, reaching 12.2 million attendees and 136,000 businesses.

The shift was internal before institutional. I stopped asking how fashion could look responsible, and started asking how it could build responsible systems. That question continues to shape my work.

MODEM:
Working between institutions, global networks, and grassroots voices requires constant negotiation. How do you safeguard core convictions while entering new agreements?

KERRY BANNIGAN:
For me, it always begins with clarity. Earlier this year, co-hosting **World Logic Day** at the House of Lords, the focus was on the architecture of public–private partnerships and the incentives that sustain collaboration.

At PVBLIC Foundation, alliances are structured around measurable outcomes, not visibility. If structural progress cannot be defined, we are not ready to move forward. Safeguarding convictions is not about rigidity, but about defining non-negotiables early. If a partnership cannot expand access, strengthen systems, or create long-term value, it does not proceed.

Convictions are protected through transparency, governance, and shared accountability. Selectivity strengthens credibility, and consistency builds trust. Alignment is not only strategic, it is energetic. The partnerships that endure are those where values are genuinely shared.

MODEM:
Collaboration defines much of your work, even though power structures are rarely balanced. What helps ensure that perspectives from different scales are integrated fairly into shared initiatives?

KERRY BANNIGAN:
Designing equitable architecture is essential. During United Nations General Assembly week, our convenings at the SDG Media Zone are structured to bring youth advocates, emerging market designers, supply chain innovators, policymakers, and global brands into substantive dialogue,not as panels, but as working exchanges.

Participation is structured, not symbolic. Preparation happens beforehand, and follow-up is embedded afterward, ensuring smaller stakeholders are supported and commitments extend beyond the stage. Through shared ownership models and defined reporting timelines, equity becomes operational. For me, it requires governance, intentional design, and sustained accountability long after the spotlight moves on.

MODEM:
Looking back at the evolution of fashion responsibility, when did you sense a shift from conversation to concrete commitment?

KERRY BANNIGAN:
I sensed the shift when sustainability moved from communications into boardrooms. For a long time, the focus was on awareness, such as campaigns, pledges, visibility. Important, but often peripheral.

The turning point came when capital and regulation entered decisively. Investors asked harder

questions. Policymakers introduced disclosure requirements. Traceability and governance moved from aspiration to expectation. Environmental and social responsibility became tied to financial risk, regulatory exposure, and long term competitiveness.

It is no longer just a value conversation, but a structural one. While commitment remains uneven, expectations have matured. Responsibility is now embedded in compliance, reporting, and supply chain due diligence.

MODEM:
You often emphasize meaningful alliances over symbolic gestures. In whom do you currently see ambition and realism most productively combined in efforts toward systemic change?

KERRY BANNIGAN:
I am encouraged by leaders who understand that systems change is about infrastructure, not visibility.
The most credible ambition comes from those doing the operational work: **investing in regenerative materials, reengineering supply chains, strengthening procurement standards, improving reporting frameworks, and embedding governance mechanisms**. **These are not headline gestures; they are structural adjustments that endure**. Ambition without implementation capacity amplifies volatility. But ambition anchored in institutional architecture creates stability.

In policy discussions at the House of Lords, I spoke about education as economic infrastructure. Physical infrastructure only generates value when human and institutional capacity exists to operate, adapt and govern them. The same applies to systemic reform.

The most productive change happens when leaders across sectors approach reform with the rigor of investment capital: due diligence, risk mitigation, and design for durability. Ambition is essential. But when it is grounded in governance, discipline, and measurable implementation pathways, it becomes durable rather than declarative.

MODEM:
Structural change requires both frameworks and cultural understanding. Where do you see the strongest resistance to building a principle-led fashion ecosystem?

KERRY BANNIGAN:
Resistance is strongest where power and profit feel threatened. A principle-led ecosystem requires brands to reexamine purchasing practices, share value more fairly, and be transparent about wages, sourcing, and impact.

There is also cultural resistance. Fashion has long been built on speed, image, and reinvention. Accountability is often treated as an add-on rather than embedded in product, supply chain, and business model.

Then there is also the equity gap. Standards are still too often shaped without full participation from producing countries and frontline workers. When that happens, frameworks may sound right on paper but fail in practice.

Structural change requires shared infrastructure, measurable commitments, and inclusive governance. Principles only matter when built into decision-making and value distribution.

MODEM:

Across the conversations and sessions you facilitate, do recurring patterns of exhaustion or internal pressure emerge among industry leaders?

KERRY BANNIGAN:
Yes. One consistent theme is education. There is still a knowledge gap across organizations, from design to sourcing to leadership. Without shared literacy around what good actually looks like, decisions slow down. Sustainability becomes concentrated within a small team instead of embedded across the business.

That is why shared learning matters. During London Fashion Week, I joined an Industrial Sewing and Innovation Center (ISAIC) roundtable where industry leaders exchanged practical approaches to innovation and scalability. Those kinds of practitioner led conversations are essential. When leaders share what is actually working in practice, common literacy grows and better decisions move faster. We never stop learning, and continuous education is critical if innovation and sustainability are to move from ambition to execution.

This gap creates pressure. Leaders know change is necessary, but capability and consensus are uneven.

The next generation adds another dynamic. Younger talent is arriving with different expectations and a stronger values compass. Leaders feel both the responsibility and urgency to respond, often while managing legacy systems that were not designed for this shift. Innovation adds uncertainty. Promising tools and materials exist, but scalability, cost, and impact are not always clear. Leaders are expected to decide before pathways are proven. This combination creates persistent internal pressure.

MODEM:
In transformation-driven fields, endless public presence frequently overshadows personal equilibrium. Could direction-setting practices shift to foster lasting strength beside peak output?

KERRY BANNIGAN:
Yes, and I think it begins with how we define leadership in transformation. If direction-setting is measured by visibility and volume, burnout becomes inevitable. If measured by durability, different decisions follow.

This means fewer, clearer priorities tied to real timelines, and the discipline to not do everything at once. It also requires shared leadership so responsibility is not concentrated.

There must be protected space for learning, reflection, and course correction. Systems change requires iteration and cannot survive constant output.

We also need to normalize personal equilibrium as an asset rather than a luxury. Leaders who are grounded and supported make better long term decisions. They sustain partnerships and they stay in the work long enough to deliver structural change.

MODEM:
Current discussions increasingly focus on protection, safe spaces, and solidarity within creative communities. Which examples of mutual reinforcement have recently struck you as particularly authentic or forward-thinking?

KERRY BANNIGAN:
Two examples stand out because they combine creativity with real support systems.

TAMMAM and Gooddrop have collaborated to produce a couture garment crafted from UK-grown cotton, the first ever garment made from the innovative fibre, demonstrating what solidarity can look like in practice with a couture designer and an innovation led grower building a tangible proof point for localized supply chains, and using a public platform like London Fashion Week to make that shift both visible and viable. It is forward thinking because it links material innovation, domestic production, and storytelling into one credible model that others can learn from.

Also, House of Perna created Camp Perna as a space where the designer partners with local creatives to come together through fashion. It is intentionally designed as a safe and welcoming environment, where collaboration replaces competition and creativity becomes a connector. What stands out is that it **uses fashion as a vehicle for community building**. It is not about scale or spectacle. It is about creating space for people to gather, share skills, and feel supported. That kind of mutual reinforcement strengthens a creative ecosystem from the inside out.

MODEM:
If the global fashion system were to abandon one reflex in order to enable meaningful progress, would it be the pursuit of constant novelty?

KERRY BANNIGAN:
I would place constant novelty very high on the list, because it keeps the entire system locked into speed and volume. **Creativity is fashion's gift and it is what makes the industry magnetic.** The challenge begins when novelty becomes inseparable from overproduction and compressed timelines. That pressure does not stay at the top as it travels down the supply chain, affecting workers, ecosystems, and the ability of suppliers to plan responsibly.

When everything must be new and immediate, long term thinking becomes difficult. Strategic investment, material innovation, and responsible sourcing all require time and stability. *If we could decouple creativity from excess, we would create space for responsibility to deepen rather than compete with growth*. **Progress does not require less imagination, it requires more intention**.