

The Turning Point

Something big is happening; really big. All the pillars of smug certainty are beginning to crumble. Nothing captured this more than the 'waste' sculpture taunting the G7 Summit in Cornwall.



The 'Mount Recyclemore' sculpture - made from dumped e-waste materials - symbolised far more than the 53 million tonnes of electronic goods the world throws away each year. It was a reminder that, faced with our greatest ever existential challenge, the world is saddled with rubbish leadership.

Nothing from the Summit matched up to the climate emergency. Nothing embraced the transformative vision the world cries out for. Nothing prepared the ground for the COP26 conference in Glasgow this autumn. The Leaders inside the Summit offered little more than the discarded laptops outside.

Fantasy politics

As if to hammer this home, the new report of Britain's Climate Change Committee (CCC) is a withering critique of the mess we're in. Within days of the G7 Summit, the CCC declared that the UK was "*woefully unprepared*" for the climate impacts ahead; explicitly expressing frustration at the lack of government action and concluding that Britain is in a worse position today than it was 5 years ago.

The problem stems from a political unwillingness to force through higher standards of preparedness for severe heatwaves, flash-flooding, drought and humid nights. Platitudes are no substitute for transformative programmes.

Boris Johnson's problem is that he looks for cosmetic answers to structural failings. The result is that Britain lurches from one crisis to the next; with Ministers making promises they fail to keep, eulogising about half-measures that don't deliver, and failing to address the economic and ecological implosions surrounding them.

Britain's 2018 heatwave offers a cameo of what lies ahead. It resulted in over 800 heat-related deaths. Wheat exports fell by 84% (in value). Rail services were disrupted by up to 50% and there were over 10,000 housing subsidence claims. Tomorrow's rising temperatures will push UK heat-related deaths to over 1,000 a year. Yet in the last 5 years, the government has allowed 500,000 new homes to be built to standards they know are 'unfit' for the heat extremes ahead. It is a record of greed and shame, not leadership.

Disrupted Everything

The biggest CCC challenge, however, was wrapped up in warnings about 'the disruption of future supply chains'. It cited the example of flooding in Thailand, resulting in a global shortage in computer hard-drives. They could just as easily have referred to Covid and the global crisis in supply of vaccines and PPE equipment.

The era of abundance is over. In future, food, medicine, raw materials, goods and services will all be subject to climate disruption. Tomorrow's security must be built around 3 different pillars: more localised supply systems, a reconstructed framework of international solidarities and an economics based on circularity rather than growth.

The world faces a '1945' moment; one that calls for new leadership, able to see the world differently. It also needs different mechanisms and institutions to deliver both social inclusion and climate security. Today's promises, however, are more about a fairer yesterday than a more sustainable tomorrow.

Look, for example, at the proposed global tax on corporate profits. Any tax-net that lets Amazon slip through completely untaxed is not much of a net. Yet you'd think G7 Finance Ministers had joined the ranks of super-heroes for all the self-congratulation they heaped on each other. Amazon's founder Jeff Bezos was so overwhelmed by the news he decided he and his brother needed a holiday flight in space. ('Travel to work' probably being another tax-deductible expense.)

Add to this the revelations about tax returns of America's richest - where glittering wealth goes hand in hand with zero tax liabilities - and you sense the prevailing insanity that continues to enrich the rich and imperil the poor. It will get worse, unless 'the burdens of taxation' are turned upside down.

Addictive delusions

Britain must begin this process with a confrontation of its own most egregious climate follies. Ignoring the CCC warnings, Government Ministers are set to approve new North Sea oil and gas exploration, only months before we host the COP26 conference. Ministers claim this doesn't count against UK climate targets because the exploration licences were granted back in 2001 and 2004. Hang on a minute. Just give this logic a rain check.

Past permissions to do something currently harmful wouldn't be something even the most bare-faced chancers would lay claim to. But it is what oil and gas lobbyists expect. They treat the public as fools and the government as playthings. And we comply.

The aviation sector isn't much better. They plan to increase *actual* carbon emissions well into the 2030's, but are buying 'carbon offsets' and pretending these reduce their CO2 footprint below 2019 levels. It's like criminals planning a huge increase in house burglaries but offering, in mitigation, a tree-planting programme to create healthier neighbourhoods.

There is no economic recovery programme that can be built around carbon criminality. The court that will judge this is no longer parliament, the ballot box or public opinion. The planet will become both judge and jury in the case we are building against ourselves.

Carbon taxation is the key

To avoid climate breakdown we simply have to cut emissions. Taxing carbon is probably the starting point; a commitment that has to override all trade deals. A carbon border tax - on the transport (and production) of produce from Australia (and elsewhere) - would level the playing field for UK agriculture. It would also end the 'magical thinking' that emissions elsewhere simply don't count in what we consume. But the logic reaches much further.

Australia's plans to export coal to India as part of a \$4bn plan to manufacture plastics should warrant double taxation on any of the produce to be exported. The same would apply to China, and the vast array of plastic goods currently produced through coal power stations. Not far behind comes the range of goods coming from oil and gas.

What this would immediately raise is the prospect of a collapse in fossil-fuel asset values. It is what climate campaigners have been trying to get governments, banks and pension funds to recognise for years. But here's the problem.

At present, European banks alone have €532bn invested in fossil-fuel assets. The key is to get public money out before the collapse. Seeing the inevitability of decline, and fearing this would trigger the next sub-prime market crisis, fossil-fuel companies are calling for the establishment of a European 'Fossil Bank';

a 'bad bank' for bankrupt assets. Governments would be crazy to do so. Those managing public (and pension) assets just need to get them into safer spaces. Those wishing to play the markets should be left to do so at their own risk.

The same applies to carbon offsetting - one of the greatest scams of all time. It is folly rather than 'leadership' for the international community to promote such a mechanism. The world's largest oil traders are already gearing up to profit from buying and selling pollution permits. It is a market that could become 10 times bigger than the one for crude oil trading; a speculators paradise, profiting out of a crisis rather than averting it.

Gen-Z: the reconstruction army

These are eye-watering sums. Their importance emerges when you turn the numbers upside down. Instead of funding a carbon casino, carbon concealment or current additions, the money could go into 'reparation & recovery' programmes. That is what climate activists, Gen-Z campaigners and even parts of the Chesham and Amersham electorate are pushing for.

The Chesham and Amersham by-election result, throwing out the Tory candidate from one of their strongest ever seats, wasn't all about nimbyism. Legislating for reduced planning standards would wreck everyone's future. The government deserved the kicking. But it's happening everywhere. Dutch courts are forcing Shell to cut its carbon emissions. Five Polish citizens are taking their own government to court to overturn regressive climate policies. UK courts are defying government rhetoric and upholding the right of climate protesters to confront the climate emergency we face.

The challenge is to turn this from an oppositional movement to a propositional one; one allowing Gen-Z to become the reconstruction army that might just save us all. The key is in redirecting the economic resources they will need.

Soil restoration, flood alleviation, food security, renewable energy, waste reduction, and energy saving will form the centre of tomorrow's carbon-payback economics. To deliver it involves linking the newly disrupting middle (Chesham and Amersham voters and the CCC) with the impatient idealism of Gen-Z ... then writing a different future.



Capra's moment

Which brings me back to something that has disrupted my own thinking for the best part of 40 years. In the early 1980's Fritjof Capra wrote his book '*The Turning Point*'. In it, he described the way civilisations rise and fall; the steady build up of an era towards its apex; the reluctance to see its limits; the hostilities directed towards those who form the embryonic shape of what will follow; and the rapid implosion of an 'unchallengeable' era once its turning point had been crossed.

This is where we are now. Capra is coming home to roost. It is our moment to embrace the change ... or make way for those who can.

Alan Simpson
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