

In praise of Greta Thunberg: We need to turn up the volume.

Quietly, quietly has not worked

I find that I am becoming a fan of Greta Thunberg. Since I am at best an armchair activist (and I am rarely at my best these days) that discovery comes as a surprise.

I have never doubted the value of her purpose to highlight the need for us to change course if we are to regain some control over the changes we are causing to the heating of our planet. Nor have I doubted the devastating consequences that will cause, consequences that we – and the nature around us – are already seeing and feeling. If the summer of 2022 with its temperatures in the upper 30s°C was an extraordinary year, what is an extraordinary year in the early 2050s going to be like to experience?

I have also not doubted the urgency of her purpose. The articulate Ms Thunberg makes her case powerfully enough to kick-start a Harley Davidson. And she has been directing her barbed arrows at the right targets: those with the power to make happen the unpopular but essential changes in our human behaviour.

But I have hitherto doubted the wisdom of the stridency in her tone. Does it work to influence those who control the levers and finances of power? And does it work with those who need to change behaviours – I mean us, you and me?

And I have arrived at the view that shouting loud and long is the only hope we have of waking people up. Especially those with the power and the money. We have been doing far too little, and for far too long. We are well behind the game. Quietly, quietly hasn't worked. The longer we dither and tinker, the greater the changes we will all be required to make. Consequently, the harder it will be to obtain the popular consensus that is essential to their enforcement in a democratic society.

Fossil fuels: the bounty that has turned poisonous

Let's look at the bigger picture for a moment: The explosion of economic wealth in the West and beyond over the last two-and-a-half centuries has only been possible because of, and has primarily been fuelled by, the exploitation of fossil fuels to feed our industry, our homes and our travel. For that the world has to be grateful.

But the dark side of that fossil fuel bounty, which has for at least the last 40 years been ever more stridently pointed out by scientists, and is now plainly obvious to us all wherever we live in the world, has been the emission from those same fossil fuels of carbon dioxide and other gases that have combined to heat up our atmosphere and destabilise our weather patterns. Fossil fuels have been not only the engine of our prosperity but, at the same time, they have been the insidious parasite within, poisoning the very air we need to breathe as they destabilise the climate that all life needs to survive and flourish.

The exponential rise in global temperatures and the increasingly and dangerously volatile weather patterns will increasingly become the dominating cause that dictates the rate of economic growth, of political instability, of food, water and energy availability and costs, of immigration pressures and biodiversity collapse. It is not possible to deal with these effects without starting with their common major cause: climate change.

The core question we face, therefore, is how to restore climate stability at a level the world can adjust to whilst maintaining and spreading global prosperity and a diverse natural balance. This is supplemented by questions of what will it cost, and what changes we will all have to make to our own lifestyles if that balance is to be achieved.

Answers to those big questions are well above my pay grade. But the simple truth is the longer we continue to prevaricate the more difficult, painful and costly the wrench of the tanker's steering wheel needs to be. Hence the harder it will be to sell to people the changes to their lifestyles that achieving net zero will entail. And, as no vote-seeking politician likes a hard sell, the temptation to keep one's head in the sand becomes all the greater.

The problem with putting one's head in the sand, though, is that another delicate part of the anatomy tends to be sticking up in the air, invitingly, to kick. And if we don't kick the politicians into urgent action, the changing climate certainly will kick us all in the proverbials.

Are we not in grave danger of forgetting the core principle of sustainable living by supporting our own short-term needs at the expense of the ability of future generations to meet their own needs?¹ That necessarily entails tailoring economic policy to meet the essential environmental end-game of stopping run-away planetary warming.

The Government has gone missing on fighting climate change

Where, though, do we see the necessary sense of direction and urgency that Ms Thunberg so eloquently cries out for? The current energy cost and gas supply crisis is the direct product of our continuing national fossil fuel dependence. Three quarters of our national energy generation is still based on internationally priced gas. It is impossible to overstate the urgent need to escape the clutches of fossil fuels by promoting major additional investment in renewables and subsidising home and business energy efficiencies. This is a far more cost effective, long term, solution to energy stability and climate change mitigation than the current subsidisation of our sky-high gas bills.

However, the political classes are so focussed on looking down at their feet worrying about today's cost of mortgages, energy and groceries that they have no eyes on the path ahead or the horizon beyond. Safeguarding the environment and regulating to limit global warming are viewed by those in high office at best as low priority and, at worst, as roadblocks to progress.

It is a fallacy that economic development and environmental development are incompatible, and that the environment and control of rising temperatures must stand aside in tough economic times. It is impossible to have an economically vibrant economy isolated from a thriving natural environment and clement climate, so interconnected are they. Sustainable economic growth is only possible (and arguably only affordable) by working with our natural capital assets.

What really bugs me is the disastrous aloofness of the political classes (all primary colours) from gripping what is, after all, THE SINGLE most important long-term challenge that we all face. There is barely a national politician to be found who understands that our long-term prosperity utterly depends on securing a healthy environment, and that all economic and other policies, short-term and long-term, have to work towards that sustainability goal. Climate change does not go on hold

whilst we fight other battles or hope that yet-to-be invented or commercialised technology will find a work-around, so we cannot for one moment lose focus on it.

And we need action, not fine words. So, three cheers for the recent Net Zero Review chaired by Chris Skidmore MP which concluded that climate action delay will hurt the economy. They have been told this before – repeatedly². But this is an independent review commissioned by the Government from one of their own. So, this time will they listen; and will they act?

It is all very well for the Government to boast that the UK was the first developed country to enshrine binding carbon reduction targets into law. Which is all very fine, dandy and aspirational. But, as time slips away and as emissions and temperatures increase, they have not followed through in that boast with the necessary actions and directions. As evidence:

- Read the Climate Change Committee (CCC)³ – the Government’s official adviser on climate change - telling Parliament in June 2022 that we are not on track to meet any of the 2025, 2030 or 2035 interim targets⁴ set to reduce net carbon emissions so that by 2050 they are no higher than they were in 1990 (net zero). THE CCC reports: *“the Net Zero Strategy contained warm words on many of the cross-cutting enablers of the transition, but there has been little tangible progress..... We are yet to see a public engagement strategy from the Government, three years since Net Zero was placed in legislation. The Treasury has not set out how the full range of costs and benefits of the transition will be shared fairly. It remains unclear how central, devolved and local government will operate coherently towards the Net Zero goal.”*
- Read the High Court judgement last July declaring that the Government’s self-same Net Zero strategy to achieve its emissions reduction targets (a strategy document which the Government took 6 years to produce after signing up to the Paris Accord) is so vague and vacuous that it is illegal because its deliverability cannot be measured.⁵ The Government was sent away to rewrite its homework (yet more delay!). Their latest drafting effort has been widely criticised as even more vacuous than its predecessor.

Meanwhile, whilst the Government seeks credit for setting a 2050 net zero emissions target, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published a major report as long ago as 2018 warning that global temperatures will rise 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels by as early as 2030. And only last month the World Meteorological Organisation predicted the 1.5°C threshold could well be breached as early as 2027 – just 4 years away.

The International Energy Agency is just the latest organisation to have advised that all coal, oil and gas development must be stopped now if net zero is to be achieved by 2050. The IEA tells us that this is the only way to close the gap between rhetoric and reality⁶. This call remains unheeded in the UK. Indeed, the Government has recently permitted a new coalmine in Cumbria and exploration for oil to start near Guildford in the Surrey Hills. There is no significant governmental pressure on the Shells and BPs of this world to stop drilling for new reserves of oil, and switch investments towards renewables, carbon capture etc, which only makes up a small fraction of their investment programmes.

And why, for example, does the National Planning Policy Framework require planners to give great weight to the economic benefits of oil and gas exploration, but not to climate change mitigation? And why, bizarrely, are planners not required to take account of the fact that fossil fuels extracted from a proposed drilling site will be burned off site and emit greenhouse gases?

In short, when it comes to the doing, there is a mega-gap between aspiration and delivery. It is a gap caused by inadequate political leadership and, one suspects, fear of public reaction to the practical implications for our lifestyles. Had the politicians started acting to control greenhouse gas emissions in the 1980s and 1990s when the scientists were already becoming strident on the issue, the necessary actions and costs to reduce emissions, challenging as they would have been even then, would have been noticeable but manageable. But they barely bestirred themselves then. So here we are at the start of 2023, and the wrench to the wheel required to turn the tanker round will be massive.

Local planning authorities need to step up to the plate

The planning system is in particular need of coherent, top down, direction on prioritising local planning strategy and decisions on climate resilience and achieving net zero. No comprehensive direction from Westminster currently exists, as the CCC has repeatedly pointed out. There is a vacuum where central direction is required. and precious little money to support local public or private initiatives. Too many local authorities are using that as an excuse to sit on their hands.

Which is inexcusable. The CCC identified back in 2019⁷ that local planning authorities have a 'crucial' role in effecting changes of behaviour needed to achieve net zero. It reported their place-shaping powers and actions potentially influence around a third of UK emissions, principally in the buildings, transport, waste and land-use sectors, and that Local Planning Authorities therefore have significant power to accelerate or slow the net zero transition, using a range of existing levers to deliver local action to reduce emissions and prepare local areas for a changing climate.

So, yes, amidst the depressing dearth of central direction, we need local authorities to step out of their comfort zone right now and exercise leadership over controlling greenhouse gas emissions. They have the power tools to make a considerable difference if they would only close to use them. Only they can. Few of them do.

Perhaps we need to remind ourselves that local strategic planning is about local authorities organising and directing the overall best use of land: space for us, and space for nature. Best use means long term sustainable use. Sustainable use fundamentally involves ensuring nature's and our long-term health through a healthy environment and climate. It is not about (or should not be about) a reactive response process to developers' aspirations to build new housing and commercial buildings at locations that suit them. Few councils adopt a proactive holistic approach to strategic planning. What we too often see is well-intentioned floundering in the absence of central political leadership.

There may (shamefully) be no national requirement⁸ for new homes to be built to a net-zero energy efficiency standard, but that is no reason for local authorities not to mandate it. It makes me angry that we have local planning authorities who can get away with believing that siting big developments near to big roads turns them into sustainable developments. That we have planners who ignore the vitally important economic value of the countryside in absorbing carbon emissions when they decide to surrender green spaces for houses. That we have others, fixated on delivering their required housing quotas, who consider establishing priority nature habitats within their district as a burdensome distraction.

We need to see local authorities embedding climate change policies into all their main plan policies. These policies should contain stretching and monitorable targets aligned with our national targets (see endnote 4), that enable the councils and their constituents to measure progress to net zero, to toughen any policies that are not delivering, and to be held accountable. Without targets, policies are just hot air – and we have too much of that already.

Local authorities must not get away with just doing the minimum. As though, by sprinkling some pixie dust and sitting back, the problem will solve itself. It won't. The planners have the tools, but too often they do not have the will. And with the Government looking in another direction, there is no-one, other than us residents, to kick their backsides into action.

So yes, Greta Thunberg, I am with you. Let those with the tools of power use them, and use them now, to help protect the world we know for the generations to come. As for the rest of us, we all have to care. As Ms Thunberg says: it cannot be left to anyone else to sort out. It has to be us; and it has to be now. So let's get out of that armchair and start shouting!

Michael Brown

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Note: This article is not written at the behest of CPRE Sussex. These are the author's personal views.

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- ¹ The United Nations General Assembly has defined the objective of sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (UN Resolution 42/187).
 - ² Perhaps most authoritatively in the HM Treasury-commissioned report by Prof Dasgupta, "The Economics of Biodiversity" (2021) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-report-the-economics-of-biodiversity-the-dasgupta-review>
 - ³ <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/2022-progress-report-to-parliament/> at p.15.
 - ⁴ Interim national carbon reduction targets: 51% by 2025, 68% by 2030, 78% by 2035 and 100% by 2050 (compared to 1990).
 - ⁵ <https://goodlawproject.org/news/we-won-net-zero/>
 - ⁶ <https://www.iea.org/reports/net-zero-by-2050>
 - ⁷ <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/local-authorities-and-the-sixth-carbon-budget/>
 - ⁸ In 2006 the then Government legislated for all new homes to be built carbon neutral by 2016. After the 2010 general election that law was scrapped and has never been replaced. What a wasted opportunity!