


Review

Climate Change Inaction and Meaning

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Abstract: Continuing growth, insofar as it increases human environmental impact, is in conflict with the environment. ‘Green growth’, if it increases the absolute size of the economy, is an oxymoron. Environmental limits are discountenanced, a pretence made possible because they are difficult to specify in advance. The consequent weakness in public discourse, both moral and intellectual, has worsened into contradiction as it has become ever more studiously unadmitted. It is obscured with language that is misleading or self-contradictory, and even issues from institutions that exist (and are relied upon) to respect correctness. At its most conforming it gives rise to overshoot, by which statements meant to sound authoritative are in fact open to ridicule. Such untruthfulness perpetuates climate change inaction, and in a kind of direct action those using such language, contrary to their public or professional duty, could be asked to justify themselves in plain English.

Keywords: environmental limits; Sustainable Development Goals; green growth; direct action

When words lose their meaning, physical force takes over.

(W.H. Auden)



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1. Introduction

This article is the third of three. The first showed how the simple truth, that economic growth must come to an end, is suppressed in favour of an often bogus optimism that helps to make meaningful climate change action a future object [1]. The second drew attention to how that had come about, a pervasive indifference and lack of accountability called post-reality [2]. This third gives examples of the consequent contradictions in public discourse that weaken meaning and suggests how, in a kind of direct action, they could be challenged to bring about more truthfulness.

Direct action does not always go well for the individual because, by definition, it is contrary to authority. When challenging an employer it is known as whistle-blowing, but as a cartoon by Fran has it: ‘Management doesn’t like the term “whistleblower”, they prefer “unemployed”’.

Direct action involves doing something, an outlook so applied that it is hardly within the ambit of scholarship, but scholars are depended upon, and in fact exist, to do what is now required: to take the lead in challenging the loss of meaning in public discourse. This form of direct action does not involve street protest, with its inevitable upset and counter-action, nor campaigning, in which correctness is easily subordinated to expediency. It is also specific and practicable for anyone, taking as its starting point the recent declaration of the eminent climate scientist Chris Rapley and colleagues that they will explain honestly and clearly the seriousness of the climate emergency, and ‘with courtesy and firmness’ will hold their professional associations, institutions and employers to the same standards [3].

2. The Contradiction

Economic growth will create the future wealth to maintain full employment, enable innovation, abolish poverty and meet our debts, and is in any case required to prevent economic collapse. This doctrine is unassailable while the associated costs to the social fabric and environment are disregarded. What began many decades (or longer) ago as a

somewhat remote logical weakness has worsened into contradiction because continued economic and social development are now largely in conflict with the environment.

As the contradiction has become ever more obvious it has become ever more strenuously unadmitted. An apt analogy is with Hans Christian Andersen's tale *The Emperor's new clothes*, even to the detail of a single Scandinavian child crying out from the crowd; at which point in the story, instead of admitting the emperor's nakedness, 'the noblemen took greater pains than ever to appear holding up his train even though there was no train to hold'.

Thus, the government of the United Kingdom recognized that so-called sustainable development involved 'contradictions' in 2005 [4] and 'tension' in 2011 [5], while extant planning policy [6] contains no hint of any conflict whatsoever. It even states that biodiversity gains should be sought in planning new development (an example of overshoot, discussed later).

The contradiction is sometimes denied with the further oxymoron of 'green growth'.

3. Green Growth

In the usual conception of green growth, Gross Domestic Product is decoupled from the consumption of natural resources so that growth can continue without adverse implications for the environment. However, absolute decoupling is not possible because, although it may be possible to make cars and skyscrapers more efficiently, they cannot be made from thin air. Carbon intensity (carbon emissions per unit of economic activity) measures this kind of efficiency.

Carbon intensity has been gradually decreasing [7–9], i.e., getting better, and since China's intensity was about $\times 3$ higher (worse) than the European Union's a decade ago [10], there is presumably still much scope for further improvement. However, total emissions have also been rising rapidly owing to continued absolute growth, largely overcoming the savings. Goal 12 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals regards decoupling economic growth from resource use as 'one of the most critical and complex challenges facing humanity' [11], a euphemism for the abundant, conclusive and easy-to-see evidence that it is not possible.

There is no such thing as green growth [8], no escape from environmental limits.

4. Environmental Limits

Environmental limits are relatively easy to understand in the specific case of pollutants with known effects on public health, so that optima can be specified (if practicable and enforceable), and such standards may also be appropriate when pollutants cause wider environmental damage, as when sulphurous and chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) emissions were curbed in response to acid rain and the ozone hole respectively. Otherwise they are difficult to define. Nine planetary boundaries [12] fail to capture the imagination and are arbitrary and remote [13], and limits in the form of targets (such as the 1.5 °C target for global warming) are equally questionable. Environmental limits are also virtually impossible to specify in advance and need not present themselves as discrete events.

Prophesies of the end of civilization have been proved wrong repeatedly. Paul Ehrlich predicted a collapse that did not occur by not foreseeing the green revolution of the 1970s, by which plant breeding, fertilizers, pesticides etc. markedly increased agricultural productivity [14]. More cautiously, Dennis Meadows and colleagues [15] projected that ecological constraints would slow the pace of economic growth in the 21st C but did not speculate on exactly how or when such changes would come about. This complies with the first law of futurology: 'the more complete and exact a prediction, the less it is worth' [16].

However, the difference between an unspecifiable-in-advance limit and no limit should be obvious, and was summed up by Thomas Malthus [17]: 'there is a limit to [agricultural] improvement though we do not know exactly where it is . . . therefore, a careful distinction should be made between an unlimited progress and a progress where the limit is merely undefined'. In other words, to cry wolf (as environmentalists have been wont to do) is an

error, but to assume that there is no wolf is a more serious error [18]. Or as E.J. Mishan put it: 'A man who falls from a hundred-storey building will survive the first ninety-nine storeys unscathed. Were he as sanguine as our technocrats, his confidence would grow with the number of storeys he passed on his downward journey' [19].

At present, intimations of approaching limits, like the increasing harm of extreme weather events, simply evoke certain public and policy responses thought to be proportionate at the time. These are subject to change as the actual harm increases and/or becomes less remote, and in this case there is no limit, just reactions to harm that come too late.

Environmental limits are easier to think about if more local and specific, as optima related to way of life. For instance, 12,000 lorries might pass through Dover and the Channel Tunnel on a normal day, the UK's population travelled 800 billion passenger-kilometres in 2017, and in May 2019 the number of flights using British airspace reached 9000 per day. Are these volumes of traffic appropriate? In 2018 the UK Commission on Travel Demand addressed this question by recommending that, instead of building roads in anticipation of future (increasing) demand, the UK government should plan transport infrastructure according to how people want to live. Instead, in its 2019 budget, the government set out plans for 4000 miles of new roads, including a tunnel under Stonehenge and another Thames crossing below Dartford, with associated motorways in Kent and Essex.

Growth leads to shortage, which is then a constraint on growth, so to satisfy the shortage is to opt for further growth. For instance, the housing shortage was about as great a century ago as it is now, and quite possibly will continue to be as great in future until such time as it is resolved in some way other than by more building, more demand and more building *ad infinitum*. For such reasons environmental limits are discountenanced as though they do not exist, the elementary error pointed out by Malthus.

The notion of limits, orthodox economists might say, does not adequately represent the adaptability of the free market, fails to understand that much growth can be based on efficiency savings and innovation, and underestimates the power of technology. On the other hand, overall growth, however individual sectors of the economy evolve, can no longer be benign. For the orthodox economist Wilfred Beckerman the environment is just a sector of the economy, in which environmental protection must compete with other sectors such as business and welfare [20]. Dieter Helm, former Chair of the Natural Capital Committee, is equivocal: '... among the many reasons why nature matters, one is that it is part of the economy' [21], while for E.F. Schumacher '... economic growth ... has no discernible limit ... [but] the environment in which it is placed is strictly limited' [22]. Or, in the words of the US politician Gaylord Nelson (1916–2005): 'The economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment, not the other way round'.

Environmental limits are sometimes discountenanced by means of self-contradictory terms such as the 'partial irreplaceability' of ancient woodland.

5. The Partial Irreplaceability of Ancient Woodland

Until 2018 the UK government, in its planning guidance, described ancient woodland as partially irreplaceable. Now it says that it is irreplaceable but still accepts its continued loss, recommending 'partial compensation' (i.e., tree planting) when the loss is permitted in the planning system [23]. But the term 'partial compensation' also lacks meaning because the loss of something irreplaceable is incommensurate with any compensation. To illustrate, a shoddy replica of a Ming vase does not partially compensate for the loss of the original, and someone passing it off as such would not be partially innocent of fraud. It would make no difference if there were ten shoddy replicas. In the case of ancient woodland, compensatory tree-planting is not even analogous to a shoddy replica. It is an 'old canard that planting trees is a substitute for conserving trees, that woodland can be created at will ...' [24].

The guidance relies on obfuscation to countenance (without justifying) the continuing loss of ancient woodland. In contrast, and without caveat, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature describes lands with the conservation value of ancient woodland

as no-go areas for development [25]. About 0.2% of the area of England consists of semi-natural ancient woodland in good condition and favourable ownership. What minimum area is envisaged? A similar question could be posed for any uncounatenanced limit.

The pretence of no limit is maintained by an excessive conformity.

6. Conformity

Some conformity in professional and public life is of course necessary and proper since our institutions could not function without it, but it easily grades into a craven conformity that involves both intellectual and moral weakness.

6.1. *The Individual*

A sometimes unfortunate consequence of conformity is that individual employees take their ideological lead from their employers and appropriately fine-tune the outlook that they bring to their work, undermining creative potential and resulting in political and intellectual timidity [26]. Leo Tolstoy thought that this was understandable:

‘One man does not assert the truth which he knows, because he feels himself bound to the people with whom he is engaged; another, because the truth might deprive him of the profitable position by which he maintains his family; a third, because he desires to attain reputation and authority, and then use them in the service of mankind; a fourth, because he does not wish to destroy old sacred traditions; a fifth, because he has no desire to offend people; a sixth, because the expression of the truth would arouse persecution, and disturb the excellent social activity to which he has devoted himself’ [27].

Other authors are less forgiving. In 1934 the American novelist Upton Sinclair said: ‘It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it’, cited in [28], and the authors of UN reports are suspected of confining themselves to what is politically acceptable to remain within their own highly-salaried comfort zones [29]. Or, as the provocative journalist James Delingpole put it, ‘if you are being paid large sums of money to conduct a research programme, you’ll obviously want to defend your mink-lined, gold-plated carriage on the climate change gravy train’ [30].

6.2. *United Nations*

The SDGs [11] are an ultimate source of contradiction but the UN does not admit it [31], and that lead is almost universally followed. In an example of the harm this causes, the eminent economist Sir Partha Dasgupta describes the goals as ‘a remarkable, even noble, achievement’, but then says that they are not accompanied by an examination of whether (if they are achieved) they are sustainable [32]. Presumably this negation of meaning arises because Sir Partha cannot bear to be critical of the UN.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is said to use carbon offsets to claim that its meetings, involving delegates flying from all over the world, are ‘carbon neutral’ but the consensus view, as mentioned later, is that offsetting is disreputable.

The IPCC also discounts climate feedbacks on grounds that they are uncertain. In its sixth Assessment Report of 2021 [33], it stated that: ‘... additional ecosystem responses to warming not yet fully included in climate models, such as CO₂ and CH₄ fluxes from wetlands, permafrost thaw and wildfires, would further increase concentrations of these gases in the atmosphere.’ In fact these feedbacks are already significant and may well soon come to dominate. In 2021, by mid-August, about 4.3 Gt of CO₂ had been released by wildfire alone [34], equivalent to more than a tenth of humanity’s total annual emissions. The IPCC’s ‘ecosystem responses’ are a euphemism for human suffering on a scale that cannot yet be conceived.

The IPCC disregards the precautionary principle, even though it is precisely applicable. The principle states that uncertainty, if scientifically plausible, should not be a reason to postpone action, and refers to harm that is morally unacceptable because it is effectively

irreversible, inequitable to present or future generations, or imposed without adequate consideration of the human rights of those affected [35].

It could be argued that it is not up to the UN or the IPCC to take a moral lead, but neither is it to encourage a craven conformity by contradiction, self-serving conduct and deliberate understatement.

6.3. The Government

In the UK, the government strives to conform to a close approximation to business-as-usual, but its decisions can be challenged in law (by judicial review) if they are 'Wednesbury unreasonable', described as 'conduct which no sensible authority acting with due appreciation of its responsibilities would have decided to adopt' [36]. It is worse than being merely unreasonable, which might be confused with disagreement since different individuals may well disagree with decisions arising from policy (the policy itself is inviolate).

In 2012 the UK government was advised by one of its Select Committees to be honest in its reporting of emissions to permit authentic leadership, to draw attention to (increasing) domestic consumption and to increase the influence of the UK overseas [10]. The advice was not followed. The government continues to say, based on the reporting of territory emissions as though they are the total, that it is one of the most successful countries in the developed world in growing its economy while reducing greenhouse gas emissions [37]. This has made legal challenge possible on grounds that the government is not adhering to its own policy.

Fracking in England was halted at judicial review on these grounds, and around the world, as governments fall behind with their commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, such legal challenge is increasingly common. In 2018 more than 1000 such lawsuits were said to be in progress [38]. In one, notable for the reasoning of the court, the Norwegian government was sued by petitioners over its decision to issue new oil drilling licences in the Arctic. The court ruled that, as the future production of oil would be exported, Norway was not responsible for the consequent emissions [39]. The Scottish government must similarly decide whether to issue a drilling licence for a new deep-water oil field near the Shetland Islands, the oil industry having supported 100,000 jobs and contributed £9bn a year to the Scottish economy [40].

Litigation to recover financial loss caused by climate change (from corporate interests as well as governments) is also expected to increase. The lawyer Christopher Stone has described the climate as a 'shifty client' [41], and an early claim for compensation by victims of Hurricane Katrina was dismissed [42], but as the science of extreme weather attribution advances [43], unpredictability is an increasingly weak defence. In 2017 the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority stated that climate risks are 'foreseeable, material and actionable now' [44]. Along such lines, an insurance company has sued the City of Chicago for not having taken reasonable steps to protect residents against flooding and storm damage, while the decision of St Johns County, Florida, to decline the increasing expense of maintaining a coast road (continually damaged by storms and erosion), has been challenged by affected homeowners on grounds that they are being deprived access to their land.

6.4. National Institutions

If quasi-independent institutions (such as those of scholarship, the BBC and government agencies) do not question faulty policy, there is no mechanism for redress. Society must rely on the rectitude and independence of mind of the individual officers of those institutions.

6.5. Scholarship

In the 1940s George Orwell suggested that a 'good' education instils an unconscious conformity. Noam Chomsky called it 'hegemonic common sense' [45], an instinct to be deferential to authority and to conserve the privilege conferred by the *status quo*.

In institutes set up specifically to contemplate the consequences of policy failure, as when addressing the prospect of climate change-related human suffering and the risks of human extinction, one might expect that failure to be critically examined, or at least admitted. Instead, the Centre for the Study of Existential Risk at the University of Cambridge makes 'proposals for risk management that can be implemented within the existing policy landscape' [46]. The universities of Cambridge and Oxford collaborated to offer the UK government the opportunity to match their scholars' 'excellence in extreme risks with policy leadership', but largely disregarded climate change on grounds that policy-makers were already giving it attention [47]. Oxford university's Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment countenances carbon offsetting provided it is of 'high-quality' [48], supporting the position of those in authority, while many others, after the failure of offsetting to constrain emissions over three decades, regard it without caveat as disreputable [49–52].

What is actually propelling humanity and the rest of the biosphere towards destruction, largely a failure of policy and leadership, is effectively ignored (in these examples and no doubt many others). To respond that it is naïve to do anything but work from within is to affirm the point made by Orwell and Chomsky. Scrupulous scholars exist specifically for their independence of mind. They do not knowingly work within a faulty paradigm. They do not belong to what the writer Pankaj Mishra has called the 'intellectual service class' [53].

6.6. *The BBC*

The mainstream media have a systemic weakness limiting their ability to report honestly on climate change and climate change inaction. Even the more liberal media cannot be expected to tell the truth about a world dominated by corporations, particularly about climate change with its roots in mass consumerism, because they are themselves profit-seeking corporations dependent for much of their revenue on advertising [54].

The BBC has no such conflict of interest yet the Environment content of BBC News, provided by its Science Editor David Shukman and colleagues, exhibits a similar conformity. In recent years its lack of proportion has been maintained by argument skewed in favour of business-as-usual, mock optimism and various other misleading devices. The Extinction Rebellion protests of October 2019, demanding that the BBC 'meet its crucial moral duty to tell the full truth on the climate and ecological emergency' [55] had some effect, with Mr Shukman first falling back on an approximation to mock ignorance: it is a 'revelation' that the Greenland ice sheet is not only being melted by warming air but also by warmer seawater [56], and a 'bombshell' that some flood-affected settlements in Britain must eventually be abandoned [57], before falling silent.

His colleague Mr Harrabin continues to pretend a debate, contrary to the BBC's own guidelines. In December 2020 he wrote: 'Some experts believe that dangerous climate change may already have occurred' [58], and in August 2021: 'according to many observers, there have been significant improvements in [climate] science in the last few years' [59].

A review of the BBC in 2011 warned against false balance in reporting climate change [60] but the BBC continued to be criticized for it, and in 2018 was found to have breached broadcasting rules by admitting (without challenge) false statements by climate deniers. The BBC's response was to invite its journalists to a one-hour training course [61]. The BBC told its staff that the position of the IPCC was to be favoured, but that other shades of opinion should not be excluded, such as those of contrarians and sceptics when debating the speed of climate change [61]. In fact the IPCC's position is open to criticism in the opposite sense because of the conservatism that inevitably arises in any large institutional assessment [62], the fact that some signatory countries exert influence to weaken or omit some findings, and the consequent pressure on individual scientists not to stick their heads above the parapet [63]. According to the eminent scientist Bill McGuire, 'there is not a cat in hell's chance' of keeping warming below 2 °C, cited in [64], let alone below 1.5 °C.

A kind of false balance is also evident when climate change is said to be of concern to scientists or experts, seeming to imply that others differ. However, since climate sceptics belong to the past, the false balance is between one view and no view at all; between knowledge and ignorance. The regular news coverage also quarantines climate change by mentioning it then swamping it with countervailing items. Rather than putting the burden of evidence on scientists, it should be ‘some economists’ who defend business-as-usual.

Finally, when familiarity with the practice of science is obviously necessary for critical reportage, why are Mr Shukman and his colleagues (and no doubt many of their superiors) unschooled in science? In a simple example of malpractice, they have repeatedly stated that any one extreme weather event cannot be definitively attributed to climate change, but by repetition the statement becomes untrue by effectively assigning to attribution science a predictive ability of zero. It confuses scientific doubt, which allows understanding to advance, with a cavilling and reactionary doubt that tethers the world to the *status quo* [65].

Mr Harrabin’s reportage has been mocked by the respected climate scientist Julia Steinberger [66], while we find (or used to find) Mr Shukman standing on melting ice sheets looking about him, frying eggs in the desert sun and surveying from aircraft the aftermath of extreme weather events. Or, as he mentioned in 2020 in advertising himself as a speaker, travelling to Tuvalu, a round trip of nearly 19,000 miles, ‘to witness sea level rise’.

6.7. Government Agencies

After the flooding in England in early 2020, Sir James Bevan of the Environment Agency said that the number of dwellings on flood plains is expected to nearly double in coming decades so it is not realistic to ban development on flood plains. Three months earlier, his colleague John Curtin had said ‘If you were never to develop again on the floodplains you’d freeze development in many major cities’. He mentioned new riverside houses in Derby that are flood-resilient, with access above river level and the carpark below, that will ‘keep the economic hub of Derby going’ [67]. This kind of resilience neglects the inconvenience of being marooned in floodwaters with one’s means of transport ruined or otherwise inoperable.

The EA has a legitimate interest in house-building, but it exists (and is trusted) to defend the interests of ordinary householders and businesses, among its other duties. The Chair of the EA, Emma Howard Boyd, with her background in corporate finance and fund management, might not recognize the contradiction in the Agency’s statement that ‘A healthy and diverse environment enhances people’s lives and contributes to economic growth’ [68].

In 2018 the European Court of Justice made it illegal to continue adding nitrates (from agriculture and sewage) to the waters and wetlands of the Solent region (which are internationally important for wildlife), bringing house-building in the region to a halt. Subsequently the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs announced £4M for an offsetting scheme to ‘unlock housing growth’ in south Hampshire’. Such offsetting, even if meaningful, would seem to defeat the object by maintaining nitrate pollution at its current (harmful) level. Nevertheless Tony Juniper, the Chair of Natural England, said that it would help nature’s recovery while addressing the demand for new housing [69]. Like the officers of the EA, he fails to notice any conflict between continued house-building and the purpose and interests of the agency he represents.

A consequence of the need for such conformity is that the character of those achieving seniority tends to change to become less ready to dissent.

7. Dissent

Many of our various institutions exist to respect evidence yet perversely accept global warming without dissent. It is a paradigm, a kamikaze mission [70] or a grand unifying delusion [71]. The *status quo*, from the UN downwards, continues to lead us to catastrophe, all political parties conspire to give a green gloss to business-as-usual, and many others abet delay for their own expedient reasons.

In exploring why high-ranking members of the Republican party were complicit in keeping Mr Trump in office, the historian Anne Applebaum drew parallels with the collaborators of Vichy France and East Germany and found that their justifications were similar. They told themselves: ‘We can achieve great things’ in good conscience, for instance by concentrating on some minor but worthwhile cause. ‘We can moderate the harm’ by remaining within the system. And ‘my side might be flawed but the opposition is worse’, which was Marshal Pétain’s argument for collaborating with the Nazis [72].

James Thomson explored how such a situation came about in US policy towards Vietnam. As experts became increasingly negative they were replaced by ‘can-do guys’ who were loyal and energetic. Dissenters did not survive or were ‘domesticated’ to become devil’s advocates. (The president would greet one such dissenter with an affectionate ‘Well, here comes Mr Stop-the-Bombing’). Officials did not resign or protest because acquiescence was to live to fight another day and preserve ‘effectiveness’. Finally, they became preoccupied with public relations rather than policy [73].

The conformity of ‘can-do guys’ is relatively easy to identify because it is prone to overshoot.

8. Overshoot

The UK government has long sought to ‘exploit any benefits’ of climate change [74] and still, in September 2021, Annex 2 Glossary of the National Planning Practice Guidance refers to ‘exploiting beneficial opportunities’ of climate change. Even the UK service of the Met Office ‘supports . . . decisions to address the risks and opportunities posed by a varying and changing climate’, and also promotes ‘sustainable growth’.

However, any such benefits and opportunities are no such thing if the associated losses are greater, and are obviously distasteful if at the expense of the physical suffering of others. The finding that the continued expansion of the UK’s airports and road networks would be profitable to the UK implied that ‘it made economic sense for people to die in order that we can travel more’ [75], while for each job in a proposed coal mine in Cumbria, the associated climate impacts would kill 100 others [76]. Already in the decade 2001–2010, 20% more people were killed by extreme weather (some thousands per year) than in the previous decade [77], and many times more died from disease and malnutrition owing to crop failure [78]. Climate change now causes over 150,000 deaths annually from extreme weather events, the associated disruption to agriculture and increase in disease incidence [79].

The National Planning Policy Framework [6] states that an objective of new development should be a gain in biodiversity. It might be said that a suburban garden has more wildlife than the same area of an arable field, and that argument can be maintained from site to site, but at the landscape scale the trend is exactly the opposite owing to the loss and fragmentation of habitat and the increase in various kinds of disturbance. Every year at least 3000 square kilometers of good farmland are lost to new buildings and roads in already developed countries [80]. Consequently, during the last 50 years, the total abundance of wild fauna has halved or more than halved [81], and the downward trend is continuing.

In a final example worthy of ridicule, until mid-2021 Year 10 students of Geography learnt from the BBC’s educational website (BBC Bitesize) that the benefits of climate change include healthier outdoor lifestyles, the ability to grow more crops in Siberia, new shipping routes created by the melting of the Arctic ice and more tourist destinations. George Monbiot was quoted as saying that ‘you could come away thinking [that] on balance it sounds pretty good’ [82].

9. The Case for Plain English

Some politicians, as in the United States of America, are, or at least were until recently, straightforwardly dishonest about climate change, while HM Government prefers to be

devious, clothing itself in innumerate metrics and self-contradiction. It thus intends to mislead and understands its motive to be disreputable [1].

Because the defence of business-as-usual involves contradiction, it often has to be expressed in English that is vague or obscure. According to George Orwell ‘the great enemy of clear language is insincerity . . . where there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms’.

Those expressing themselves in such language may be indifferent to truth (when it is the bullshit of the philosopher Harry Frankfurt [83]), insecure [84], ignorant [85] or incapable. If incapable, as an anonymous diplomat put it, ‘what appears to be a sloppy or meaningless use of English may well be a perfectly correct use of English to express sloppy or meaningless ideas’ (cited in [86]).

Vague and obscure language often recalls the business-style jargon called ‘garbage language’ [87] and its environmental equivalent, ‘greenspeak’ [88]. Among innumerable examples the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds adopted a ‘strategic, landscape-scale, cross-boundary approach to biodiversity delivery . . . [with the aim of building] a consensus for a vision of a sustainable future’. The World Wild Fund for Nature had ‘an ambitious strategy to leverage its unique assets’. And Future Earth, an agency of the UN, has ‘a vision for integrated and solutions-orientated research that can support a transformation towards global sustainability’.

These are the same phrases over and over again. Instead of sounding authoritative and energetic, they are formulaic and vapid. They fail to inspire, lack or conceal meaning, and alienate those who genuinely care about the environment. They also reinforce the values of those who would destroy it for profit [88].

There is one way in which contradiction can be expressed in plain English, namely by means of the straightforward lie. For instance, in 2019 the then foreign secretary Jeremy Hunt said ‘we believe that protecting the environment can go hand-in-hand with economic growth’ [89].

10. Scholastic Moderation

There is no point in telling truth to power with scholastic moderation if it knows it already but has decided to ignore it. As Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, says: ‘It is just possible that sustained pressure will bring about a modest change of heart among decision-makers and ‘wealth-creators’, and some serious adjustments *might* be made . . . [but] I can hear the sound of people not holding their breath’ [90]. Jeffery Sachs asks: ‘Will the world’s governments [help] to end poverty and save the planet? . . . the jury is out . . . ’ [91], but there is no jury. James Hansen, in his open letter to Boris Johnson to persuade him not to open a new coalmine in Cumbria, adopted a cajoling tone that wavered towards flattery: ‘ . . . in reviewing UK progress in reducing fossil fuel emissions . . . the UK deserves congratulations’ [92] (although this was largely contradicted in a footnote). The respected climate scientist Kevin Anderson accused colleagues of ‘massaging assumptions’ about climate change, even of muzzling their junior colleagues, but the deception (he said) was well-meant and the sycophancy well-intentioned [71].

To have the greatest effect language must be forthright, for which there is plenty of precedent in formal as well as popular writing. The historian Gerald Geison found that Louis Pasteur had been dishonest when it served his private interests, and that certain discrepancies in his record were ‘ethically dubious’ or ‘deceptions’ [93]. The Nobel prize-winner Max Perutz came to Pasteur’s defence. Such views, it seemed to him, were ‘humbug masquerading as an academic discipline’, and its practitioners set themselves up ‘as judges over scientists whose science they failed to understand’ [94]. Even if, by being frank, researchers are at risk of losing preferment, embarrassing an employer or (formerly) being hounded by climate deniers, it is difficult to imagine scientists with the character of Max Perutz mincing their words today.

The Nobel prize-winner Peter Medawar addressed various *bêtes noires* in his book *Pluto’s Republic* [95], in tone remaining humane and decent but described in a review as

an exercise in intellectual kick-boxing [96]. In his book *Sustainability—Without the Hot Air*, David MacKay, former Chief Scientific Adviser to the Department of Energy and Climate Change, wrote in relation to sustainable energy that ‘we are inundated by a flood of crazy innumerate codswallop’, and was concerned to cut the UK’s ‘emissions of twaddle’ [97]. And Kevin Anderson said that we are ‘clever enough to understand the problem [of climate change] but too stupid . . . to respond’ [98].

11. The Case for Direct Action

The behaviour of reasonable people is informed by wholesome values, but the more influential the individual, or the agency the individual represents, the greater the moral and intellectual failure when those values are not exercised.

In the philosophy of utilitarianism, the moral worth of an action (or inaction) is judged by its consequences. ‘Too many people reflect that, since they are not deliberately harming the environment, they are absolved from action, [but] that is wrong’ [99]. The remoteness of the suffering of others (whether physical or temporal) makes no difference to moral obligation because to emit greenhouse gases has the same practical effect as bulldozing the crops of a subsistence farmer (Peter Singer cited in [100]).

12. Direct Action

Online petitions and charters that declare concern about climate change often appear effortless, but in their recent oath the eminent climate scientist Chris Rapley and colleagues committed themselves to a specific direct action: ‘with courtesy and firmness’ we will hold our professional associations, institutions and employers [to our own high standards of honesty and clarity]’ [3]. This kind of direct action does not involve protest or campaigning, it is open to anybody and has influence beyond the individual.

Following this example, the greenwash and negation of meaning purveyed by public servants (including officers of local government and government agencies), the reputable media, some academics, industry advocates and many others could be critically questioned, and the questioners could be anyone: scholars, boards of governance, employers, employees, teachers, school children or other members of the public. David Cromwell of the independent Media Lens summed up the approach as it relates to poor journalism: ‘As we have learned over the years, [they] *hate* being challenged by informed members of the public’.

Scholars could give renewed emphasis to public education and public deliberation processes [2] and climate scientists, when speaking in a personal capacity, could be more frank, for instance in making their findings and interpretations known independently of the IPCC.

Professions could be firmer in regulating the behaviour of their members [101]. Some, like medicine and law, do police their ethical standards and hold their members individually to account, while many others have codes of ethics that are little more than waffle. Economics as a profession is virtually alone in lacking *any* code of ethics [102]. Different schools of economics are said to have their own views of human nature [103], while values are not incorporated into orthodox economics at all, when they may be regarded as no more than a collection of platitudes [104]. Shareholders could push their companies to do their part [105] (although private companies have a legal duty to maximize profit for their shareholders).

No new law can be created until its non-existence is widely challenged [41]. The change in corporate law proposed by the lawyer Robert Hinkley, that the pursuit of profit should no longer take precedence over the public interest [106], could be promoted. Directors of companies could also be made personally responsible for compliance with the public interest so that they err on the side of caution [106]. Ecocide could be made a crime (it was considered for inclusion in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court but was omitted in 1996), or the legal concept of moral turpitude, described as ‘an act or behaviour that gravely violates the sentiment or accepted standard of the community’

could be adopted outside the USA. If foreknowledge admits intention, policies that prolong climate change inaction increasingly resemble crimes against humanity [107].

Mass-membership organizations such as the National Trust (the largest voluntary organization in Europe with about 6M members) and English Heritage (0.7M members) are more quiescent than they could be [21], and could be required by their members to do more to advocate for the long-term conservation of their assets.

Individuals could enquire as to the limits of growth in their own locality and protest continuing development. The public in England has begun to understand that there is no meaningful housing shortage [108], and in the recent by-election at Chesham & Amersham, a 16,000 Conservative majority was overturned largely owing to anxiety about proposals to facilitate more building.

Such questioning is not necessarily difficult and will no doubt increase as the UN process continues to fall short of expectations and climate change-related hardship gets worse. 'A huge rise in activism and informed protest continues to be our best hope to bring about necessary positive change' (Phil Webber in [109]), and without climate campaigners and activists '... we won't curb climate change' [110].

13. Conclusions

The UK government and other national and international institutions do not admit that growth, and the policy edifice it has given rise to, is increasingly built on contradiction and cannot continue. To obfuscate on this point is to be dishonest. To foster the somnolence of the public is to abuse its right to an unprejudiced future. And to persist with a close approximation to business-as-usual, as climate change causes ever more human suffering, is little short of murder.

Until the contradictions are admitted no UN conference, government policy, scholarship, journalism or campaign will be effective in countering climate change inaction. The dishonesty is overarching, a paradigm within which everything is more or less faulty, and while it prevails there can be no clear sight and little change in society's path towards self-destruction.

We have relied on a history of innovation—the agricultural and industrial revolutions, use of fossil fuels etc., that have furnished ever more energy and put off any limit to growth, but only at the cost of further increasing human environmental impact. It is like having a poor hand at poker and raising the stakes, so that the longer the game goes on the bigger the eventual loss. Our institutions and cultural heritage have outlasted the conditions that produced them [111], and 'what was common sense has become ... suicidal myth' [112].

The first article in this series showed how an often bogus optimism prolongs climate change inaction [1], the second how it is enabled by a pervasive indifference and lack of accountability [2]. This third argues for a precondition of the required change in direction, that the need for it be openly acknowledged [113]. It neither exhorts nor admonishes, nor occupies any imagined moral high ground. It merely invites less self-deception and deceit among those trusted to be honest, variously portrayed as ideological fantasy, self-interest, stupidity, craven conformity or misguided loyalty, which have become increasingly easy to question as the required contradictions have become ever more obvious.

Such frankness would seem to be a modest aim, and no more than might be expected from the principles set out by Lord Nolan in 1995 (including openness, integrity, honesty and leadership), to which anyone holding any kind of office in the UK is meant to comply. However, the doctrine that growth is limitless is an article of faith or, in the words of the eminent ecological economist Herman Daly, an idolatrous religion [114], and like a religion it is treated with unquestioning politeness [115].

Under the circumstances reasoned argument is unlikely to make much headway, but positions of seniority are increasingly occupied by those whose unsubtle efforts at pretence easily overshoot, opening themselves to ridicule. In a well-known cartoon by Joel Pett poking fun at adherence to business-as-usual, a presenter stands at a lectern by a screen bearing the words 'green jobs, energy independence and rainforests'. A member of the

audience cries out: ‘What if it’s a big hoax and we create a better world for nothing?’ The Juice Media provides satire in the Australian vernacular [116], and similarly brutal honesty, for instance in the form of alternative conferences [117] or satirical awards, could attract more popular attention.

According to the historian Sophia Rosenfeld there is a continual conflict between truth from authority (which she calls ‘expert truth’) and a more common sense truth arising from the wisdom of the crowd [118]. (This popular instinct is not to be confused with anti-intellectualism, the view that plain sense is an adequate substitute for, or superior to, formal knowledge [119]). Already, direct action in the form of civil disobedience is widely advocated [16,120–122], while the philosopher Andreas Malm has argued (dispassionately) for activism that destroys property, including fossil fuel infrastructure and sources of luxury emissions [123].

Anger, on the other hand, easily spills into violence against the person. Sooner or later, as climate change does ever more harm, the continuing efforts to make climate change action a future object will fail. Public anger will increase and is likely to be directed at those seen to be most culpable, whether through inaction or profligate consumption.

Already the abuse and intimidation of politicians is said to be routine in 21st C politics, while the novelist Kim Stanley Robinson, in *The Ministry for the Future*, envisages the use by activists of drone swarms to cause passenger aircraft to crash [124]. At the opening of COP26 in October 2021, Boris Johnson, the British prime minister, said that ‘the anger . . . of the world will be uncontainable’ if the talks fail, and on the same occasion António Guterres, the UN secretary-general, said ‘we are digging own graves’ [125], although it is doubtful that he had his fellow delegates specifically in mind.

Under these circumstances, to weaken or destroy meaning in public discourse is not clever or Machiavellian. Apart from sowing discord and undermining our institutions when they should be strong, it is increasingly dangerous for the individual.

Returning to the case for direct action, the historian Howard Zinn said that ‘... there are victims, there are executioners and there are bystanders, and the objectivity of the bystander calls for inaction while other heads fall’. Dante was firmer: ‘The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in times of great moral crises maintain their neutrality’, while E.O. Wilson was similarly intolerant of those simply trying to mind their own business: ‘to wish for a long healthy life, personal freedom, dignity and obedience to wise rulers—these are the goals of your family dog’ [126]. While we are deviously encouraged to avoid facing facts these are harsh dicta, but in an analogy due to Mark Lynas [127], we are not uncomprehending as we recline in the living room watching a fire spread in the kitchen. It is not, after all, somebody else’s planet.

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