

PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

September 2021

A green future or greenwash

As the season of spring is ushered in with a shower of blossoms and warmer weather, we are reminded that regardless of what challenges the human race creates for itself, nature will do what it must to maintain a delicate balance. A cursory reflection over the past couple of months highlights the devastating impact that the climate emergency is having on the world. Wildfires have devoured parts of Siberia, California and Greece and devastating floods have hit Germany, Japan and Turkey. Meanwhile other natural disasters are unfolding on a regular basis. Such environmental disasters unequivocally demonstrate that nature's delicate balance has been upset, and as a consequence the climate emergency is knocking at the door of more and more nations. For decades, warnings bells have been ringing. For decades, the growing chorus of the world's leading scientists have been warning policy makers of the existential danger. This has been further backed by the recent release of the most comprehensive analysis yet undertaken of global warming by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Yet, why has the climate emergency not been given centre stage by policy makers? How can the growing number and scale of environmental disasters not be afforded appropriate significance by global leaders? Surely, they have the latest and most accurate data at their fingertips.

The past decade has witnessed a general failure on behalf of governments and corporate leaders across the globe to meet the challenge of the unfolding climate disaster. Meanwhile, Australia has become a global laggard when it comes to acting on the climate emergency.

The economics of unlimited growth and profit

The industrial revolution has been spurred on by the capitalist system which demands perpetual economic growth. It has meticulously stripped each and every corner of the earth of cheap fossil fuels. Large corporations backed by governments of all political persuasions have extracted natural resources at an alarming rate, all in the name of increasing profits and growing GDP. As the drive for economic growth gripped the world, political and corporate leaders have

detached themselves from the realities on the ground. Increasing air pollution, the degradation of waterways, and the poisoning of soil have impacted the flora, fauna and the human population. As the fossil fuel industry continues to accumulate billions in profits through the extraction of the earth's resources, those sitting in corporate board rooms or walking in the halls of power perceive nature as a force to be dominated and exploited for monetary gain. This narrow mindset has consequences which are unfolding across the world.

The past decade has witnessed significant environmental changes that threaten life; both of the human population and the plants and animals we share the Earth with. The IPCC report confirms "the planet is warming in step with rising greenhouse gas pollution" and that "even under the most ambitious emission reduction scenarios, the world is likely to be heated to 1.5 degrees or more above pre-industrial levels by 2040, making us susceptible to extreme weather events..." To sum up; the IPCC report is "a code red for humanity".

Given the scope and calibre of environmental experts that have contributed into the IPCC report, it is little wonder that the UN Secretary-General António Guterres stated that "the alarm bells are deafening, and the evidence is irrefutable: greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuel burning and deforestation are choking our planet and putting billions of people at immediate risk."

The IPCC report coupled with the growing list of recent devastating environmental disasters highlights the consequences of humanity's wanton exploitation of the environment. This has eroded nature's tolerance margins that have kept the earth's life support system within a delicate balance.

A hollow response

To address the climate emergency, our political and corporate leaders have sought solutions from the neoliberal bible. This is the very system that has been undermining wage growth, selling off public assets, degrading the social safety net, dismantled job security and secured ever increasing profits that make the rich all the more richer.

In a desperate attempt to conjure up a response to the climate emergency, two neoliberal approaches have come to the foreground. On the one hand, there are the climate change denialists who wage an endless campaign denying the

mountains of scientific evidence and the facts on the ground. This faction actively sows seeds of doubt in the community in order to distract and create division within society. The most notable stunt ridiculing the seriousness of the climate emergency took place when the current Prime Minister entered Parliament House brandishing of a lump of coal. On the other hand, there are those who promote “green” or “sustainable” capitalism. This faction has been behind the generation of mountains of international agreements, ‘green’ production proposals, climate pledges and ‘rubbery’ targets on greenhouse gas emissions. Large corporate polluters have embraced this approach by employing PR specialists to conjure up ‘green credentials’ based on hazy and distant plans to transition to zero emission targets.

Despite the promises and pledges made by governments and corporations alike, the ‘green sheen’ has done little to mask the prevailing attitude - business as usual. Green capitalism is simply a cosmetic change applied to an economic system based on consumerism, consumption, competition, corporatism and capitalism. This system is hell-bent on unlimited economic growth. Clearly, such an economic system is fatally flawed and no longer sustainable given that we live in a finite world with finite resources.

Greenwash & individual Action

Both governments and large corporations possess the necessary tools to take direct action and address the climate emergency. Governments can exercise leadership through implementing regulation supported by robust legislation and taxation to address environmental issues. Such mechanisms can assist in curbing emissions from the largest polluters, and help transition away from a carbon reliant economy. Governments also have a key role in educating the public and hastening a cultural shift towards reducing waste and consumption in our society. Large corporations also possess significant influence and capacity to bring about change both within their operations and their influence in society. However, the cross-over of interests between government and the fossil fuel industry has witnessed the public’s interests being relegated to the sidelines. The federal budget is testament to the skewed funding that has prioritised the fossil fuel industry ahead of renewable energy.

Rather than hone in on large extractive corporations who have directly contributed to the climate emergency through decades of emitting pollution, and the degradation of water ways and forests, the government and corporations have worked hand in hand to shift the focus onto individuals to tackle environmental problems. The public have been made to feel responsible for making the climate emergency go away by changing light bulbs, recycling household waste, reusing shopping bags and reducing power consumption. This artificial shift in responsibility dictates that the general public can make 'environmentally friendly' choices when purchasing goods and services. This view suggests we can consume our way out of the disaster by purchasing products that are 'good for the environment', that have been certified as environmentally friendly, and so on. Such an approach is based on the concept of 'greenwashing'.

Large corporations have adopted greenwashing as a method to distort public perception. By promoting themselves as environmentally responsible corporate citizens, their PR campaigns apply thick layers of green veneer to cover up their history of environmental exploitation and/or a poor environmental record. Backed by substantial advertising dollars, such corporations have been able to promote their green agendas through the billionaire owned corporate media via a combination of TV, talk back radio, social media, newspapers, magazines and sophisticated marketing. By deploying an array of PR tools, large corporations are able to present an environmentally friendly façade to the public based on promises of reaching zero emissions into the distant future, seeking to reduce their carbon footprint and pledging funds for green campaigns. Despite the pledges and promises, it's business as usual. The core aim of corporations is not to help the earth and wind back the climate disaster; their focus is simple - to continue to increase profits. Such profits come from high levels of consumption, regardless of the cost to the environment and society. Corporate greenwashing is a simple ploy to camouflage their real aims and methods in an effort to dupe the public into believing that we can continue to 'responsibly' consume our way out of the climate emergency, while corporations sustain huge profits.

A way forward

Continuing to sound the climate emergency alarm will not solve the problem. Nor will so-called solutions like green capitalism address the colossal challenge that

faces each and every one of us. Solutions to the environmental crises need to go beyond the limitations of private investment into green energy production (solar farms, wind turbines, wave technology). Real solutions require a collective response, both at the national and international level. They need to be free of vested interests in maintaining the profit motive, or propping up centuries old industries that have contributed to the current climate crisis.

A significant reduction in CO₂ emissions is key to tackling the climate emergency. The need to transition away from a high carbon economy is vital to achieving success if we are to adequately tackle the climate emergency. This means transitioning away from fossil fuels to renewable energy production. This will need to be underpinned by a shift from large privately owned corporations to community owned environmentally friendly energy production. An effective transition will rely on the creation of new jobs that pay well, and energy production that is localised, and in the hands of the community. This will ensure that the community's interests are at the heart of energy production which does not adversely impact on the local environment.

Putting a halt to deforestation and land clearing needs to be at the forefront of tackling the unfolding climate disaster. Both are highly destructive to the biodiversity of our environment. In Australia, deforestation and land clearing are occurring at alarming rates, often to make way for livestock for the meat industry. By resourcing and supporting the protection and expansion of our national and state parks, we will be able to put a halt to the damage done by deforestation and land clearing, and turn attention towards reforestation.

Our patterns of consumption need to change if we are to adequately roll back the climate emergency. A process of decommodification needs to take place supported by new forms of collective ownership and production. Such an approach must be based on an economy that no longer is fuelled by perpetual growth and driven by consumption and profit, but rather focusses on sustainability with basic human needs at its very core.

In essence, the public needs governments and corporations to be accountable to community interests. They also need to be part of the solution which ensures the

integrity and protection of biodiversity in all our ecosystems. It is also vital that those most affected by the carbon economy benefit from a transition. This can be achieved by making the largest polluters support a transition away from fossil fuels. Furthermore, social supports by way of a universal basic income will prove a safety net during any transition and beyond.

Despite the daily reminders of the climate emergency, the Liberal and National Party coalition continue to support the largest polluters through a host of avenues which ultimately comes at the expense of the public and the environment. A country like Australia blessed with natural energy sources like sunshine, oceans and wind continues to be led by the extractive industries and a federal government which promotes fossil fuels as a way forward. Currently, Australia has 50 coal mines proposals in the pipeline, ranking us 4th in the world. This all comes at a time when other nations are seeking to decarbonise their economies and pivot towards renewable sources of energy. Will coal be a viable option in 10, 20 or 30 years? Is this the best plan the federal government can cook-up?

Clearly, any forward thinking solution cannot guarantee the continuation of large carbon emitting corporations raking in profane amounts of profit at the expense of the public and the environment. Moreover, a transition away from environmentally hazardous industries must be implemented on an ethical basis where the majority of Australians benefit, where the environment is protected, and where Australia is seen to lead the way tackling climate change, rather than lagging behind at the back of the cue.

Make change happen

It is clear that there is a mismatch between the current economic system which solely relies on economic growth, and the environment. The neoliberal economic approach has both contributed to the environmental crisis and exacerbated the climate emergency through its insatiable drive for economic growth which has come at the expense of the environment. It is evident that we need to adopt a new social, economic and political approach that radically reduces high levels of consumption that cause carbon and other greenhouse gas emissions. To do so in a socially responsible manner will require a shift from large corporations

centralising energy production through private investment towards locally operated energy generation that supports the wellbeing of its community.

It is time to muffle the endless chorus of government and corporate leaders who focus on shifting the blame elsewhere. It is time to reject the promises, pledges and the piles of rubbery statistics and elastic targets. We know that the climate emergency does not recognise national borders. It needs a collective response, and it needs responsible leaders that have both Australia's interests and the world's interests at heart.

If you think that Australia needs to change its approach to the climate emergency, and if you believe that Australia needs to lead rather than lag behind, then join PIBCI and help us make that change happen.

Anthony B – Website Editor

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