

We Should All Be Eco-Warriors Now

By Gordon James

According to the historian A.J.P Taylor, ordinary men and women in Britain in the late 1930s “had little idea that a great European war might be imminent”[1]. In the autumn of 1938, they were encouraged to turn a blind eye to the Nazi threat by the Daily Express which assured them, “Great Britain will not be involved in a European war this year or next year either” [2].

For most people, improving their standard of living and escaping unemployment was of far greater importance. And, despite the warnings of the Chiefs of Staff, most MPs preferred to deal with “the themes which really interested them - the means test, special areas, the condition of British agriculture”[3].

The grim new reality did not strike home until Hitler’s tanks started crossing borders.

Today, as climate scientists queue up to warn of the global storm we are creating, a recent Government poll indicates that just 20% of British people are very concerned about it [4], and many politicians, especially at Westminster, seem happy to push it further down the agenda.

Once again, the public are being misled by influential newspapers, like the Daily Mail. In April this year, for instance, it carried an article, *‘Is this finally proof we’re NOT causing global warming?’* even though the scientist who led the study had told the paper it was misrepresenting his work [5]

And once again, it’s the economy, the latest antics of politicians, and other more immediate issues that are to the fore. As I listen to and read news reports, I am constantly bemused at how much attention is given to day-to-day events and how little is given to the climatic changes which are threatening to turn them upside down within our children’s lifetime. We’re on the Titanic again.

I am not alone in feeling a sense of exasperation. The Chief Economist of the normally conservative International Energy Agency, Fatih Birol, has stated forcefully that, unless we alter course soon by switching to cleaner forms of energy, there will be a catastrophic 6° C rise in average global temperature this century. He believes that the situation is worse than ever because “climate change is sliding down the agenda of many governments, including the governments that have been the champions of fighting against climate change [6].”

This, to an extent, is to be expected during difficult economic times as governments respond to the very real concerns and often tragic circumstances of ordinary people. The worry though is that these circumstances will become far more tragic if governments fail to respond to the huge economic and social threats posed by climate change and fail to embrace the immense opportunities offered by developing a low carbon economy.

While the extreme droughts in the USA, Russia and elsewhere have pushed up global food prices, this year's appalling weather in the UK has, according to the BBC's Countryfile programme, cost rural Britain at least £1 billion, hitting mainly farmers, tourist businesses and events organisers [7].

Globally, according to recent research, climate change is already costing the world more than \$1.2 trillion, wiping 1.6% annually from global GDP [8]. And, as famously predicted by Lord Stern, the longer we delay action the greater will be the economic cost.

This summer's deluge, following a series of poor summers, is beginning to persuade some of my more sceptical neighbours that "there might be something in this climate change thing after all". Drinking in a quiet West Wales pub the other day, a farmer and his wife told me, with worried faces, that they fear we could now be seeing a permanent change in weather patterns. They have good grounds for concern.

The melting of Arctic ice this summer to a record low, prompting some to assert it is in a death spiral, is a real game changer. Emerging research is showing that the warming Arctic is altering atmospheric circulation patterns, including the course of the jetstream, causing more wet and stormy summers [9] and more cold winters [10] across northern Europe.

Is this grim new reality striking home? Not yet, clearly.

The UK government has just incurred the wrath of the Committee on Climate Change for backing a major expansion in gas-fired power stations that would breach carbon dioxide emission targets [11]. It has also been chastised by the CBI for impeding the development of the green economy [12].

In the environmental sector, the National Trust has objected to the carbon-cutting job-creating Atlantic Array windfarm off the South Wales coast for landscape/seascape reasons. This is yet another example of the hosepipe being used to water the flowerbed while the house is burning down.

As the storm clouds gather and begin to spill over our land, will a 'green' Winston Churchill emerge to fearlessly spell out the threat we face and deliver the multiple benefits of a low carbon economy? Although some, such as Jane Davidson, Caroline Lucas and Alex Salmond, have made an important impact, this seems unlikely.

Really, much of the answer is down to us, all of us. We should be consciously and persistently reducing the environmental impact of our lifestyles, campaigning against polluting practices and for cleaner more efficient ones, demanding more green jobs, voicing our opinions in the media, and supporting nonviolent direct action.

But most of all, we should be leaving our political representatives at all levels in absolutely no doubt that we want effective action now. Our MPs could begin immediately by backing Early Day Motion 303 (Action on Climate Change), which is co-sponsored by Martin Caton MP (Gower) [13].

The politicians have the power but will only move in the right direction if we push them. If we fail to do so, our children and grandchildren might find it difficult to forgive us.

NOTES

1. 'English History 1914-1945' by A. J. P. Taylor, Chapter XII, 'Appeasement, 1936-9', page 408

2. Ibid

3. Ibid pages 392-393

4. DECC Public Attitudes Tracking Survey, March 2012

http://www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/statistics/public_att/public_att.aspx

5. 'Publish and be wrong: Daily Mail prints article even after scientist says it "misrepresents" his work', Carbon Brief, 2nd April 2012

<http://www.carbonbrief.org/blog/2012/04/medieval-warming-period>

6. 'An Influential Global Voice Warns of Runaway Emissions'

http://e360.yale.edu/feature/fatih_birol_iea_economist_on_risk_of_climate_change/2537/

7. 'Weather 'cost rural Britain £1bn', BBC News Science & Environment website, 9th September 2012

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-19521845>

8. 'Climate change is already damaging global economy, report finds', Guardian, 26 September 2012

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2012/sep/26/climate-change-damaging-global-economy>

9. 'Arctic ice is melting at amazing speed, scientists find', BBC News, 7th September 2012

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-19508906>

10. 'Record low for Arctic ice extent', Met Office News Blog, 29th August 2012

<http://metofficenews.wordpress.com/2012/08/29/record-low-for-arctic-sea-ice-extent/>

11. Letter to Ed Davey, 13th September 2012

<http://www.theccc.org.uk/news/latest-news/1215-ccc-writes-to-ed-davey-over-government-stance-on-unabated-gas-fired-generation>

12. The Colour of Growth: maximising the potential of green business by the CBI, July 2012

http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/1552876/energy_climatechangerpt_web.pdf

13. <http://www.parliament.uk/edm/2012-13/303>

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