

"The Climate Clock is Ticking. Normal isn't working. What will you, and what should we all, do differently?"

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My day job is to translate the science of climate change into the everyday language we use to understand our lives. To chaperon policy-makers in the transition towards a low-carbon UK, and to help companies and civil society understand the mitigation challenge we all face. But this is not just a job – I'm as much a part of the problem as the solution. Many of my colleagues disagree with me on this – but as I work in the area I cannot excuse my profligate emissions through lack of knowledge. Surely it's incumbent on me to reduce my emissions to levels I'm both asking of others and proposing the government regulate for? This will not be easy, either for me or collectively for society, and we should not pretend otherwise. There are some win-win opportunities and occasional green-growth niches – but despite all the rhetoric we, the wealthy West, have left it far too late to grow ourselves out of the climate change problem.

In 2011, a year of economic upheaval for many industrialised nations, global carbon dioxide emissions rose by 3.2% on the 2010 figure, which itself was up almost 6% on 2009. Despite this reckless growth in emissions, we continue to respond as ill-behaved children quarrelling in the playground. The West points to the Chinese, the Chinese cry we didn't start it, the aviation sector claims it's victimised whilst the shipping industry dismisses flying as a luxury, disguising its own 4-fold emissions increase as a reduction. Wind farms are hounded for killing birds, the new Defra boss is endorsed by climate sceptic Nigel Lawson – and meanwhile persistent lobbying by VW and others have rendered the EU's flagship car-efficiency standards as ineffective.

But the future does not have to be so bleak. Whereas to the orthodox mind a steady state (no-growth) future can only ever be a land of torpor and desolation – those with a more enlightened

and creative outlook could yet see a low carbon Phoenix emerge from the fossil-fuelled flames. Uncomfortable as it may be, what we desperately need are top-down standards initiating an immediate transition to low-carbon practices – through radically more efficient demand-technologies (fridges, cars, etc.) and major changes in our lifestyle. But alongside and just as importantly, we need civil society to complement the top-down framing of our low-carbon future. When politicians falter, civil society needs to step in and offer support – and when civil society doesn't deliver its our politicians' job to provide the right legislation and facilitate a can-do mentality.

So returning to the question what does this mean for me. Undoubtedly I'm one of the few per cent of the 7 billion that is responsible for the lion's share of emissions. Living a low-carbon lifestyle is what most people around the planet do, including many in the UK. The high emitters are a small and elite group – they are my friends, family, those reading this and listening to Radio 4 – and of course my colleagues and I. Climate change is not a population issue – it is a consumption issue – it's about what we can do between now and around 2020. Consequently, the poor, even as they strive to buy fridges and drive cars, are not to blame. It is those already leading high-carbon lifestyles that need to instigate or be coerced into a radical transition to a low carbon future. This is the real challenge –Turkeys (high emitters) are going to have to vote for a low-carbon Christmas.

So what will I do differently? I haven't flown for almost eight years – and that will have to continue. I have halved the distance I drive each year and have significantly changed how I drive. I've done without a fridge for 12 years, but recently relented and joined the very small proportion of the world's population that has a fridge – this I may have to reverse! I've cut back on washing and showering – but only to levels that were the norm just a few years back. All this is a start but it is not enough. Certainly, if those of us working on climate change are a bellwether of society's response, the future looks bleak. Nevertheless until those intimately engaged in climate change, including the scientists, journalists, NGOs and ministers, put their own houses in order, I think it unlikely others will take our analysis seriously. As we pass the bus stop to jump in a taxi from the airport to another air-conditioned hotel room in Bali, Cancun or Rio – what message are we really disseminating?