

WHO IS FUELLING OUR DESTRUCTION?

Tim Rickman ponders recent campaigns to tackle climate change by harnessing the power of people and institutions.

How green we've all become! The hills have sprouted slender wind turbines and our roofs sport photovoltaic panels. There are a few electric cars and even ordinary diesel fuel is now made partly from plant oil. It is environmentalists who encouraged us to make these changes. Admittedly, because of their intermittency, engineers say those turbines and panels add not a single Watt to the capacity of the grid and have used up funds that could have been spent on dependable and scalable nuclear, while electric cars use energy which is largely fossil in origin, and plant-based diesel presumably displaces production of food. Nevertheless, that's what we were encouraged to do to tackle climate change. Now, environmentalists, supported by church and similar organisations, are pursuing a new initiative. It aims to focus attention on the people popularly regarded as still most culpable for climate change. Those of us not in that group will certainly feel tempted to identify with the campaign, so some support is pretty much guaranteed. Still, we need to know whether the right people are being accused. Will the campaign reduce fossil carbon emissions, or just distract attention from real villains, true causes and proper solutions?

Imagine this. In a dark alley, after nervously glancing about to check that no one is watching, a junior oil company executive quickly passes a suitcase stuffed with used banknotes to the climate change campaigner of some leading environmental organisation. In this scenario, such regular clandestine payments are incentives by the oil industry to buy a huge and continuing favour. The global fossil fuel industry wants a particular course of campaign action to be taken by the environmentalists – one that will not damage that industry's financial interests by reducing their sales. The notional campaign group is happy with this trade, and accordingly sets up a campaign to encourage its members and the public as a whole to take action against the entity they have chosen to attack. Public support comes freely. Everyone is happy. Astonishingly, even the beleaguered object of this campaign is happy, although they work hard to conceal the fact. So what on Earth is going on?

The suitcase of bribe money from the oil industry is a fiction. I made it up. Although climate change campaigners are doing exactly as the oil industry desires, and oil industries surely must wish to support their efforts, campaigners have never (I assume) directly received oil money as an incentive. At least, they have not received oil money direct from the oil companies. Instead, the money they receive comes from their supporters. But the moral corruption is no less real. The choice of campaigns is no less bizarre. The oil companies are just as delighted with them. The businesses under fire remain remarkably content, and they still keep very quiet about it.

The campaign in question calls for divestment – individuals or institutions with investments in fossil fuel industries are now being asked to sell those shares and invest in something different instead. Economists are clear that this does no harm to the fossil fuel industry's interests and does nothing at all to reduce consumption and hence nothing to slow climate change. The campaigners have now responded that they know this, but wish to withdraw the "social licence" from the fossil fuel

producers. In other words, they want to blame the fossil fuel industry for climate change. All this, just to apportion blame. So is the industry to blame? Does it matter? More important, can the fossil fuel industry do anything to stop climate change? If not, who can stop it, and how? Environmentalists appear not to bother to ask economists about oil economics and then campaign accordingly, any more than they learn about grid engineering before demanding public money for wind turbines and solar panels, or seriously consult geologists before demonising hydraulic fracturing, or ask knowledgeable people about radiation hazard.

In fact it is consumers, and pretty much no one else, who control how much fossil fuel is bought and burned. If democratic governments were to try to obstruct their electorate's access to fossil fuels, they would risk rapidly ceasing to be democratically elected governments. Unelected governments risk even more quickly ceasing to be governments at all. Producers can alter the price a little, which certainly influences consumption, but there are obvious financial constraints against doing so. And, if an oil company decides to completely stop selling oil, it effectively ceases to exist in terms of influence. A replacement oil company can be created in seconds out of thin air by the signing of an incorporation document, and there will never be any shortage of investors provided the new venture is financially sound with plenty of potential customers. Always, in almost every field of commercial endeavour, it is customers who tend to be in short supply, not suppliers. There are normally almost unlimited numbers of people keen to make money by selling something, but seldom are there too many buyers who want to exchange their versatile cash for that particular product. As a result, the decisions of potential buyers to either buy or not buy becomes the limiting factor in determining how much of any product is traded. For the moment, that rule also applies even to fossil fuel.

So, why would fossil fuel companies be so (secretly) pleased to be blamed for climate change? The answer is that being blamed themselves is the desirable alternative to their customers being blamed. If it were acknowledged that the speed of climate change lies so completely and exclusively within the control of fossil fuel consumers, not suppliers or governments, and if there were a genuine widespread desire to deal with climate change, the market for fossil fuels would inexorably shrivel. Reducing fossil fuel prices could reclaim only a small proportion of that lost market, because continuing consumers would not need to buy any more than they did before. Nor, we hope, would they either wish or unthinkingly opt to do so. Ethical abstainers would continue to buy almost none. Today's oil and gas companies will, no doubt, eventually manage to source and sell non-fossil fuel alternatives made from nuclear energy or, less happily, biomass. But that change seems likely to take place only when precipitated by the unwelcome disappearance of much of the previously existing demand. This market-driven change to sustainability is something both producers and consumers still desire to delay, avoiding the truth that it must happen. Of all the messages the public might be exposed to, the one that holds most potential dread for oil companies is, fortunately for them, the same message the public also wishes never to hear, and thus the one that career environmentalists are most loath ever to utter. This vile logic gags supposedly outspoken and fearless environmental campaigners and causes them to invent cynical blame-transference initiatives like the fossil fuel divestment campaigns. There is no need for oil producers to pay off climate change campaigners with oil money, because environmental organisations are already being

paid off by their own supporters. Is this corruption? I would say so. Is it a conspiracy? You decide for yourself. Is it destroying the world? Of course.

Having identified the factor that will determine the continuation or halting of the global biological holocaust, it may now seem a bit trivial to continue pondering the psychology behind how our fossil fuel suppliers choose to publicly present themselves. Still, there is something entertaining to note about oil and gas companies' advances in public relations over the years. Several decades ago, one oil company representative did indeed, rather defensively, point out to the world that it is the consumer who is the limiting factor which determines how much oil is used. Clearly, he was trying to avoid his industry being blamed for increasingly obvious environmental damage, but it was a reckless thing to say. He was scorned, and his words were pretty much forgotten. That was lucky for him because, had the obvious sense in his point been acknowledged, those few words might have initiated the collapse of much of the industry he was attempting to defend. In reality, our determination as consumers and voters to reject every possible suggestion of our blame or agency in the destruction is so entrenched that it is difficult to imagine any mere truth prevailing against it. Still, the fossil fuel industry nowadays takes no chances. Their spokesmen now seem careful to avoid defending the industry. The giant oil and gas companies still hand out money to the arts, but the intention in doing so is not necessarily what might be expected. They do not, I suggest, wish to look good by doing this. Quite the opposite. Their interests are best served by looking venal and avaricious, and I think they now know that very well. High profile oil money handouts to art galleries and similar recipients are actually intended to look clumsy and self-seeking, supporting the public's idea that oil companies have a rotten soul away from which they need to distract attention.

Environmentalists know very well by now that the public will only support campaigns designed to allow consumers to consume fossil fuels unhindered. They obviously also must know, much as they pretend otherwise, that such an approach cannot be effective in tackling climate change. It is a simple physical impossibility for individuals to choose to consume fossil fuel, directly or otherwise, without the consequence being global mass extinction and widespread ecological collapse. Yet career campaigners choose to follow the path to income and social approval for them, and inevitable damnation for the world's future. We, the public, give them only the choice of either doing that or else being financially eroded and ignored. The media, also supported by our determination to only buy or hear news that avoids implicating us, ensures that anyone telling an unwelcome truth cannot become visible in the first place. So, I am no longer shocked when people who claim to be saving the world perpetuate the destruction by explicitly shifting the blame from ourselves (and them) to someone else who they must know will not resist. The current divestment campaigns are certainly grotesque, but nothing about them makes them unique. Over the last few decades there have been dozens of climate change related initiatives, all devised to provide ineffective alternatives to the one form of action, unwelcome but available to all, which we know would actually work. So far, nearly all those absurd campaigns have received some degree of public support. I therefore have no doubt it will be possible to continue inventing and supporting such ecocidal nonsense, if that is what we choose to do, until the fate of the world is sealed.

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