

# Why action on the climate crisis is all hot air

**Capitalism's endless growth paradigm can't be squared with sustainability. But no one – from politicians to the protest movement – is willing to admit the truth**



[JONATHAN COOK](#)

12 AOÛT 2023

[First published by [Middle East Eye](#)]

**NOTE TO THOSE READING VIA EMAIL: This article may exceed the length that can be sent by Substack. In which case, please click on the headline and it will take you directly to the Substack article.**

The debate about the climate crisis should have been settled in the early 1990s. And yet, three decades later, the extent, imminence and even existence of a looming catastrophe are still hotly disputed. That is not by accident.

David Attenborough is [on social media pleading](#), once more, for mankind to do something before tipping points are surpassed that cannot be reversed and temperatures begin to rise inexorably, whatever we do.

In the same vein, Antonio Guterres, the United Nations' secretary general, warned late last month that humanity has shifted from the era of global warming to “[global boiling](#)”. Record temperatures [keep being broken](#), while [wildfires and floods](#) have become a news staple.

Scientists’ updated models now predict the first breach of the limit of 1.5C mean temperature rise for the globe, set by the 2015 Paris Agreement, in a matter of a few years, rather than decades. This week it was announced that July had been the hottest month globally on record, a jump of [0.33C](#) above the previous record.

The Middle East is likely to feel the [worst effects early](#), with large parts of the region least able to cope with the heavy costs of adapting.

Water scarcity, extreme heat, food insecurity and desertification will make life increasingly tough, triggering migration and conflict.

And yet inaction on curbing fossil fuel use continues.

‘Max out’ oil reserves

Recent figures show that the United States and China – responsible for the bulk of global emissions – are [burning more fossil fuel](#) than ever.

Oil industry executives [fearmonger the public](#) by claiming oil production cuts will intensify the cost of living crisis. Driven by the same apparent logic, western governments are rapidly walking back their green pledges.

In Britain, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak [vows to “max out”](#) the UK’s oil and gas reserves through new North Sea drilling, presumably believing it’s a vote winner. Fearing job losses, his business secretary, Kemi Badenoch, indicates that the Tories may [water down commitments](#) to mandate the switchover to electric vehicles.

Keir Starmer, the Labour opposition leader, has nothing but [vitriol for climate protesters](#), the only people publicly demanding something urgently be done. This week he called Just Stop Oil protesters “[contemptible](#)” as they demanded a future Labour government [revoke](#) Sunak’s new oil drilling licences.

The [European Union’s](#) proposed €620bn annual Green Deal budget is so far largely unfunded. Member states have [other financial priorities](#), it seems, not least arming Ukraine. Similarly, the UK is preparing to ditch its £11.6bn [climate pledge](#), made in 2019, to help developing countries.

And the Cop climate summit of world leaders later in the year – the 28th – is set to be [captured once more](#) in broad daylight by the oil lobby. The summit is to be hosted, and its agenda most likely controlled, by the [United Arab Emirates](#), whose economy is completely dependent on oil production.

## Reality slap in the face

So how did we reach this point of abject failure: where the greater the scientific consensus, and real-world evidence, the smaller the impact that consensus has on decision-making?

The astonishing disjunct between threat and response is possible only because the oil lobby has historically shaped, and continues to shape, popular understanding of the gravity of what lies ahead. Cognitive dissonance reigns.

It is true that the establishment media has, very belatedly, started to diagnose more unpredictable and [extreme weather patterns](#) as symptoms of a wider climate crisis. It is hard to deny reality when reality keeps slapping you in the face.

But otherwise, the media has been, and continues to be, the core of the problem. It still plays cover both for the oil lobby and for the global corporations whose bottom line depends on a continuing addiction to over-consumption and “economic growth”.

That should be no surprise, because media corporations, whose job it is to frame our understanding of the world, are themselves deeply embedded in corporate profiteering at the planet’s expense.

They have done sterling work obfuscating both our collective fate and their own role in perpetuating the deception.

The truth is that scientists knew at [least 70 years ago](#) that a warming world would be a major concern down the road if the human economy continued to grow through the [burning of carbon](#).

That understanding [only deepened](#) through the late 1960s into the 1980s, as modellers developed more sophisticated ways of measuring and predicting the effects of greenhouse gas emissions.

## Forecasts kept secret

Sadly for humanity, most of the early research on this subject was financed by the oil corporations.

In 1968, a research institute at [Stanford concluded](#): “There seems to be no doubt that the potential damage to our environment could be severe.” Its findings, however, were delivered in private to the American Petroleum Institute.

According to recent revelations, in 1978 researchers working for the Italian oil major Eni [predicted accurately](#) global emission trends and their likely impact. Eni’s in-house magazine made repeated references to climate change even as the company publicly championed its fuels as “clean”.

By 1982, the best minds on climate science had plotted the future course of global warming [for ExxonMobil](#).

They predicted the critical moment would arrive [37 years hence](#) – in 2019 – when carbon dioxide levels would reach 415 parts per million (ppm) in the atmosphere. That would result in a dangerous rise in mean global temperatures of 0.9C.

Within a year, [by 2020](#), they warned, it would no longer be possible for the oil corporations to dissimulate by dismissing climate change as simply normal weather fluctuations.

As we now know, their predictions were bang on target. The threshold of 415ppm was breached in May 2019. And in the past few years it has become ever harder to ignore the unprecedented nature of weather events.

The scientists’ only error was to be slightly conservative about when the resulting temperature rise would cross the threshold of 0.9C: it occurred two years earlier than they had forecast.

Responding to a draft of the report in 1981, Roger Cohen, head of strategic planning at ExxonMobil until his retirement in 2003, proposed that it might be more accurate to describe the likely effects of fossil fuel burning as “[catastrophic](#)” by 2030 rather than the intended text of “well short of catastrophic”.

Once again, ExxonMobil’s scientists were contractually obliged to keep [their terrifying forecasts](#) from the public.

## Return to dark ages?

The accuracy of these predictions is hard to explain for those arguing that the man-made climate emergency is a hoax, a conspiracy either to return us to [the dark ages](#) or to advance a globalist agenda of “[authoritarian eco-socialism](#)”, supposedly led by Amazon and Elon Musk.

Why did western corporations work so hard to hide this critically important information about climate change from the public for so long, if they were always intending to use it to take away our liberties and deprive us of our mobile phones?

The real answer is to be found in what happened over the past 30 years.

Scientists who weren't in the pocket of the oil industry eventually caught up with their captured colleagues. That culminated in a [scientific report](#) to the United Nations in 1990, which warned in stark language of the dangers posed by man-made climate change. The climate threat finally went mainstream.

For a brief while, Big Oil seemed to fear that the game was up. It assumed that there would be a popular and political backlash as the data leaked out.

In 1989, Shell plotted [two future scenarios](#). In one, which it termed "Sustainable World", carbon burning would peak in 2000 and then drop off, leading to a manageable 1C rise in temperatures. The other, what it called continued "Global Mercantilism" – or business as usual – would lead to disastrous outcomes.

"There would be more violent weather – more storms, more droughts, more deluges. The mean sea level would rise at least 30cm. Agricultural patterns would be most dramatically changed," Shell's [1989 report concluded](#).

A worldwide refugee problem would be unleashed too, as people fled hotspots where famine and drought hit first. "Conflicts would abound. Civilisation could prove a fragile thing."

In response, public relations campaigns were organised to show how seriously the oil industry was taking the problem. In 1991, for example, Shell funded [a half-hour video](#) on the dangers of climate change for screening in schools and colleges.

## Irrational faith in eternal growth

Averting a crisis for all mankind that the industry knew was coming may have been a moral duty, but it was not a legal one.

In fact, as explained previously [by Middle East Eye](#), the exact reverse happened. Throughout the 1990s, Big Oil successfully sabotaged meaningful climate action by pressuring western states to sign an energy treaty tying their hands on cuts to fossil-fuel use.

That was for a good reason. Under the capitalist system, the primary duty of oil corporations – like other corporations – is to maintain profitability and guarantee value for investors and stockholders. Ethics never got a look-in.

So the fossil-fuel industry spent part of its vast profits pursuing a twin-track: first, [muddying the waters](#) about [the climate science](#), then channelling attention towards largely meaningless, small-scale fixes that fell to the public to implement.

For the critical years when urgent, state-backed action was needed on a massive scale, climate denial, [funded by dark money](#) from Big Business, was given [regular airtime](#) on influential media channels [like the BBC](#). Ordinary people were left, as they were supposed to be, confused and unsure.

Meanwhile, the burden of doing something was intentionally shifted away from governments to western publics. Small, private actions, we were told, would have big impacts.

Ordinary people were encouraged, for example, to convert, very gradually, from using wasteful, [short-life lightbulbs](#) to more efficient, long-lasting versions - lightbulbs that had been around for decades but kept out of production because they were [far less profitable](#).

Now the cost-benefit analysis had changed for Big Business: the humble lightbulb was a weapon in the fight to placate a public and policymakers keen to do something about climate change.

Similarly, responsible citizens were advised to commute to work [on a bike](#), even as governments exclusively prioritised road infrastructure improvements for motorists, not cyclists, and a wider culture was fostered [vilifying bike riders](#), one that persists to this day.

It did not end there. The fossil-fuel lobby intensified its capture of the public space.

[Corporate money in politics](#) meant the political class was in no mood to take on the oil industry, whatever the scientists were saying. In any case, politicians, desperate for re-election, were not about to start questioning the precepts of capitalism in a two-party system in which both parties were expected to worship the model of [endless economic growth](#).

The establishment media was embedded in the same network of interconnected corporations that profited from an oil-based economy. Their own short-termist goals depended on shoring up an irrational faith among the public in eternal economic growth on a finite planet.

## Giant psyop

The bottom line was that no one with a public platform had any interest in warning the public that advanced societies were structured in a way that was hurtling us towards extinction. The profit-driven, over-consumption model of capitalism was never in question.

Instead, the fossil-fuel companies set themselves a deadline of the 2010s - the point at which, as their scientists had warned, climate disruptions would be hard to conceal from the public. By that time, the oil industry would need to have ready a [new script](#) that the [oil industry was integral](#) to [saving the planet](#).

Which is exactly what it did. Recent reports show that ethical and green investment funds [have poured money](#) into fossil-fuel companies after those firms rebranded themselves. The oil giants' profits have again [hit record levels](#).

Under the so-called Green New Deals, nothing fundamentally changes. We still drive our own cars in pretty, individualised colours. We still holiday abroad. We still shop in large supermarkets with everything – including year-round exotic fruit flown in from abroad – wrapped and protected in oil-based plastics.

We are still encouraged through advertising to consume as much as possible and throw away items of new technology – from personal computers to phones – every few years through planned obsolescence.

But this individualised, competitive, wasteful way of life is being given a makeover. Cars are now [hybrids or electric](#). Holidays are “[carbon offset](#)” somehow. Plastic on our food is described as recyclable. Advertising now explains to us how all the stuff we buy [is saving the planet](#).

Living ever more of our lives online supposedly helps too, because it reduces our carbon footprint. It is a green revolution in which everything stays pretty much the same – including the ability of giant corporations to [make massive profits](#).

Armed with warnings – decades in advance – from their own scientists, the oil industry had enough of a head-start to invent a self-serving narrative. It's one in which ordinary people are encouraged to consume as much as before, while being persuaded either that they are making a difference or that the damage they are causing will be reversed by imminent technologies.

The new watchword is “net zero”. But in truth, it is a giant [psyop](#), as climate scientists have gradually started to appreciate.

In 2021 a group of three leading academics admitted that for years they had been duped into championing the promises of the Green New Deal.

Technological fixes, such as carbon capture, offsetting and geoengineering, were “no [more than fairy tales](#)”, they warned. Net zero policies “were and still are driven by a need to protect business as usual, not the climate”.

One, James Dyke, an expert in global systems at Exeter University, observed: “It’s astonishing how the continual absence of any credible carbon removal technology seems to never affect net zero policies. Whatever is thrown at it, net zero carries on without a dent in the fender... I've now realised that we have all been subject to a form of gaslighting.”

## Unhealthy cynicism

This has turned out – whether intentionally or not – as a win-win-win for Big Business.

Much of the public is wrongly persuaded that the climate crisis is still some way off, and that the action necessary to avert it is in hand through technological advances like carbon capture. As a consequence, they [have little truck](#) with an [increasingly noisy climate protest movement](#).

Significant sections of the protest movement itself have been hoodwinked into believing the Green New Deal offers good-faith solutions – despite the fact that it has been hijacked to disguise business as normal.

As a result, the elephant in the room – the inherent, self-destructive tendencies of capitalism – is pushed by protesters to the sidelines or out of sight completely. Protests are invariably restricted to [policy failures](#) or government U-turns.

Even the protest movement’s figurehead, Greta Thunberg, who last year finally came out against capitalism with the publication of [The Climate Book](#), has found it hard not to drift back into supporting business as normal.

In recent months she has become an increasingly [high-profile partisan](#) in the Ukraine war, effectively greenwashing the West’s cynical proxy fight against Russia on behalf of its war and energy industries.

[Share](#)

The Ukraine war, provoked all too [predictably by Nato expansion](#) to Russia's borders, has offered enormous profiteering opportunities for the West's military, weapons and oil industries.

That has served not just as a welcome distraction from the urgent need to tackle the climate crisis. The [war's collateral damage](#) – from the Nord Stream pipeline explosions to the Kakhovka dam rupture – is wreaking an enormous ecological toll. The war itself, and the refusal to consider peace talks, is fuelling the very forces most responsible for environmental destruction.

Trapped in the middle is a third camp. It has grown terminally cynical. [Some deny](#) any kind of climate emergency. Others [write off](#) the green agenda, arguing that the deadline to save the planet has been missed and any action is now futile.

Western publics are confused, embittered and divided – the ideal conditions in which inertia reigns and Big Oil can carry on as normal.

## Growth paradigm

With no one in the mainstream grappling with the reality of what lies ahead, leading financial institutions have been free to pretend that capitalism's relentless growth paradigm can be squared with sustainability.

[A 2017 report](#), for example, by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, a world trade body comprising the world's 38 most developed states, is titled simply: "Investing in Climate, Investing in Growth".

The [World Bank champions](#) continuing growth – for western corporations – under the deceptive rubric of "development" for the Global South.

The market cheerleaders of the British government [trumpet their green credentials](#). "Our transition to a green and sustainable future will provide new opportunities to grow and level up the UK economy," a 2023 policy paper says. Such claims are being made, as noted earlier, even as the government and opposition scramble to reverse policies that are the prerequisite for a sustainable future.

The European Commission, meanwhile, calls its Green Deal "[Europe's new growth strategy](#)", even as it fails to fund it.

The exclusive focus on climate change has served too as a kind of sinkhole, into which much wider problems of ecological degradation through human activity can be disappeared. While Big Business is busy promising fairytale tech fixes like carbon capture, attention is diverted from the things for which no fixes are being offered. They include a massive, global loss of biodiversity, shortages of fresh water, soil degradation, deforestation, air and water pollution, microplastics, ocean acidification, the over mining of rare minerals. [The list goes on](#).

Ecologist William Rees, professor emeritus at the University of British Columbia, has referred to modern techno-industrial culture as "fundamentally dysfunctional". It "is systematically – even enthusiastically – consuming the biophysical basis of its own existence." He describes humanity's relationship to the planet as analogous to a "[malignant parasite](#)".



# Heads in the sand

Behind the scenes, politicians and officials appear less sanguine than their public, simple-minded declarations.

Though they refuse to face up to the inherent contradictions between ecological and economic demands, they are recognising the heavy costs certain to be inflicted on each nation's finances by more extreme weather events and rising oceans.

In late 2021, a [US Treasury panel](#) concluded that the climate crisis was an “emerging threat” to the country's financial stability, with the potential to wipe out trillions of dollars of assets.

Nonetheless, when faced with a choice between addressing the climate emergency or pursuing growth, the economic imperative triumphs every time.

In January, at a meeting of central bank chiefs in Stockholm, the head of the US Federal Reserve, Jerome Powell, urged his western colleagues to prioritise short-term goals [like fighting inflation](#) rather than address the long-term need to fight climate change. “We are not, and will not be, a climate policymaker,” he said.

The climate emergency, and the wider ecological crisis, will put this kind of neoliberal orthodoxy under ever greater strain. Without a meaningful response, something will have to give. Already, the twin pillars of the West's liberal democratic order are starting to crumble: the [commitment to free speech](#) and the [right to protest](#).

Ahead lie ever more unaffordable energy bills, empty supermarket shelves, floods and heatwaves, wasted expenditure on resource wars, and the more general symptoms of ecological collapse.

Burying our heads in the sand a little longer won't make the coming battle go away. It will just make survival even less likely.