



SEARCH



1. We can only make policies that have the consent of the power brokers
 - a. In a democracy such as the UK, power lies with those who win votes.
 - b. The Brexit debate has shown how voters disregard expert views but accept uncritically populist statements from pressure groups.
2. The need to reduce fossil fuel use implies unwanted changes in lifestyles.
 - a. The public response is likely to be fashioned by pressure groups who offer 'easy' options – anti-austerity for example.
 - b. The use of direct regulation to secure an immediate reduction in fossil fuel use would affect many people adversely. It would impact most severely on poor households who, despite spending a larger share of their income on food and energy, depend on older and less efficient apparatus for heating homes, cooking and washing. A government that sought to enforce such a regime would reduce its own chances of survival.
 - c. We already tax some fossil fuels so that the price to the user is above the cost of supply. This brings pressure for long run shifts in the way in which energy is priced and used. If such taxation is to result in a very large reduction in fuel use, it would

need to be sufficiently high to outweigh the cost and inconvenience of more energy efficient systems. Again, it is the poor who are most at risk. (even at current prices a winter fuel payment is seen as necessary).

d. The implication is that policy action is not likely to bring about the level of change needed in fossil fuel consumption.

3. This discussion implies we seek means to provide what people actually want with less dependence upon fossil fuel. Such technologies may either sustain current consumption patterns by greater efficiency, the use of non-fossil sources of energy or offer opportunities that lead to a change in what people want to consume.

a. An attractive approach is to capture solar energy either by solar panels or by using plants to deliver a variety of forms of energy – including liquid fuel. These technologies have potential but the probable scale of substitution for fossil fuel is limited.

a.i. A shift of farm land from food to energy production would lead to – higher food prices, resulting in hardship for the poorest people.

a.ii. Solar energy depends on hours of sunlight and the capacity to store and transmit electricity from where and when it is available to places where it will be consumed.

b. A different approach is to change the pattern of consumer preferences. For example by substituting virtual experience for actual. We already see some examples of this where meetings are held via electronic conferencing rather than physical encounter.

b.i. The field is open for the development of artistic and artisan skills of all sorts. Never before has society encountered a situation in which most of its people do not have to work most of their time in order to survive. At the same time modern computer systems offer new ways to be creative at relatively modest levels of skill.

b.ii. Electronic tourism already exists in the form of many natural history programs. 'Discovery' type television may replace the need for physical movement to explore distant places.

4. How do we know if we are making progress?

a. Traditionally our approach to the environment has been defensive not pro-active. Environmental goods are often recognised only when some exogenous change reduces supply or leads to a novel market. Thus we become concerned about flower rich meadows only when most have disappeared, we are anxious about rural villages when outside money prices their houses beyond the purse of local communities.

b. Because we do not need to devote so much of our time to physical production the opportunities for creating socially valuable 'goods' at the personal level has never been greater. Many of these non-market roles add real value to community

life but are often ignored in calculations of welfare. The examples are numerous, for example :

b.i. Amateur dramatics and choirs,

b.ii. Concerned groups that seek to keep villages tidy,

b.iii. Networking among residents that brings aid to people in need,

b.iv. Village sporting teams and

b.v. Activities for children that help them discover and identify talents and interests.

c. Measurements of national income are made in money terms. For items that do not have a price but have value, such as the stream of benefits house owners receive from living in their own properties, estimates in money terms are made. Similarly environmental economists have sought means of providing surrogate money values for environmental services. This is difficult and controversial but at least represents an important stream of real benefit to society that is missed in market estimates.

d. The valuation of social non-market benefits, such as those described above is even more difficult. They have to be identified, a particular activity or commitment may lead to positive benefits – and be regarded as a cost to be endured. However, in valuing a lifestyle that is consistent with much lower dependence on fossil fuels they will become of growing importance.

e. To change our pattern of consumption to one which is consistent with a reduced level of fossil fuel consumption we need to free ourselves from the idea that the quality of life depends upon the abundance of possessions. Such a traditional approach is too often dismissed as unrealistic. In fact it is much more realistic than 'business as usual' if we take seriously the threat to the world community from the unconstrained exploitation of fossil fuels.

5. Conclusion.

a. Not unsurprisingly the issue of changing lifestyles takes us into the territory of religion. To make progress politicians have to articulate what it is that is truly valuable. This is a leadership challenge missing from a political system that is professionally neutral about religion. It delivers power to those who guess what the voters would like to hear and reflect that to them as policy intention. It is wholly irresponsible about the impact of such populist policies upon the real welfare of society.

b. It is also a challenge to religious leaders whose energies too often seem to be devoted to the defence of historical dogma and structures. What is urgently needed is to articulate values that others adopt as forming the basis of a lifestyle that is both more fulfilling and more sustainable.

c. It is the nature of research that those who participate develop their own language and their own view of the world. Confronted by problems each group seeks and sometimes identifies solutions within that framework. This note argues that because global warming affects all the elements that underpin the lifestyles we seek and enjoy we need a shared responsibility that includes natural sciences, socio-economic analysis, political and religious conversation and communicators at all levels. Parallel debates among experts are not enough, it has to involve the whole community in ways that offer not just a continuation of current consumption patterns but a lifestyle that is more rewarding and sustainable.

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 [Professor Sir John Marsh](#)

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Comments

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