

# Fighting back for the Earth

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In these darkening times, it is all too possible to surrender to despair. But there are actually some positive things we can do, ideally working together, that might halt, or at least slow down, the ecological catastrophe currently underway. Here are a few suggestions.

First, convince a critical mass of people (we'll never persuade everybody!) to accept two things: that we cannot go on like this, for the costs will be too great – as Herman Daly (2019: 18n) put it, “so-called ‘economic’ growth has become uneconomic”; and that there is a better way.

That ‘better way’ might be leaner, smaller, slower and darker (*i.e.* less light pollution), with some current conveniences absent. But, on the plus side, there would be many gains – such as better personal health, more satisfying work, a stronger sense of community, less loneliness, more tranquillity, all the mental and physical benefits of contact with ‘green spaces’, pride in doing the right thing, and so on. But we cannot offer some Big Rock Candy Mountain, where the handouts grow on bushes and the hens lay soft-boiled eggs. Things may be very hard in some ways (for one fictional imagining of such a world, see Kunstler [2009] and its sequels).

Thus there has to be alarm-bell ringing but also positive vision, including exemplars from here and now that show the practicability of an alternative way of living. The battle of ideas is absolutely central. The Mont Pèlerin Society really learned that lesson (*cf.* Mirowski and Plehwe, eds. 2009; Mirowski, 2013). Electoral campaigns have to be but a part of that struggle to challenge and change mindsets.

Comparatively speedy change can happen. For example, Pinker (2011) documents how that happened in only a few decades during the Enlightenment when lots of people began to think and see many things differently. Whether we have the luxury of decades to win hearts and minds is another matter! That said, the ‘woke’ revolution shows how fast things can change, not least institutional policies (for some analysis see, *e.g.* Doyle [2022] and <https://historyreclaimed.co.uk/podcast/how-woke-won/>). We have to learn from all sources!

Second, fashion a *transitional* programme. It would cover both personal lifestyle change and new public policies from government at all levels,

including new regulations for businesses and new tax frameworks. It would have to concentrate on essentials, dropping all else. It would have to search for ways of connecting to the *current* hopes and fears of significant layers of people. Many matters can, however, be left for expert commissions, referenda and other means of resolution. Other forces are getting organized for the breakdown of the *status quo* – consider, for example, the Heritage Foundation’s sinister Project 2025 (<https://www.project2025.org/>; discussed in Goodwin, 2024).

Third, deliver clever messaging tailored to target audiences – that is, ‘different strokes for different folks’. This will, to some extent, involve being a bit opportunistic. Thus, one can critique the WWF on several grounds, but its use of pandas and other such imagery has been effective in raising truckloads of cash, if nothing else. I doubt if scorpions and wasps would have had the same effect. There is nothing wrong with, *sometimes*, selective use of anthropocentric arguments for ecocentric ends (e.g. promoting the conservation of plants for future supplies of beneficial drugs). We have to use all sorts of arguments with those whose minds are mired in conventional thinking. But people often care about their children and grandchildren. Thus the most successful TV election broadcast ever in the UK in terms of responses was a short film for the Green Party by the famous photographer David Bailey in which buckets of something horrible were poured on the heads of children, along with a simple message about cutting pollution.

Fourth, form networks of people who agree with the ecocentric vision and who can work together as appropriate in particular circumstances. Even just two people going together to, say, a public lecture or rally will find it easier to stand up and voice ecocentric messages than someone all alone. A group of just three people can keep up a stream of letters to the media. It might be a faction in a political party, members of the same trade union, co-workers in local government, or members of an academic network. It all depends on what boots there are on the ground. Furthermore, just being in touch with like-minded people can keep one sane.

Fifth, use all channels of communication, from academic articles in learned journals to street theatre, art and music. Even ‘legacy’ media such as the press retain considerable influence over their newer digital forms, still playing a very significant role in shaping the public ‘agenda’, especially amongst elites. Good slogans will be particularly important. Language has to be chosen carefully. ‘Slimming’ sounds better than ‘cutting’; ‘post-growth’ better than ‘contraction’.

Sixth, join mass organizations where there might be receptive audiences.

Seventh, have lots and lots of luck since the cards are stacked against us. As Orwell (2000: 375) wrote, more than eight decades ago: “The actual outlook, so far as I can calculate the probabilities, is very dark, and any serious thought should start out from that fact.”

Actually there is no formula for success. There are so many contingent factors. All we can do is give up or keep trying, ideally learning from past failures and past successes in the experiences of other movements, political parties and other organizations. Many past ‘breakthroughs’ often took most

people at the time by surprise. Few contemporaries predicted, say, the English, French and Russian Revolutions. Similarly, Margaret Thatcher was widely dismissed in the 1970s yet she swept to power in 1979 and brought about extensive changes to the fabric of British society (not good ones!). Two years ago, it was widely assumed that the British Labour Party was finished as a political force but now it is in power (albeit helped by the warped workings of the ‘first-past-the-post’ electoral system and the intervention of Nigel Farage’s Reform Party).

There are also ‘objective’ forces, ones beyond human volition, that will compel many changes – for example, the relentless decline in reliable supplies of what are currently cheap resources, not least oil. The changing balance of EROEI (energy return on energy invested) will be a major driver of change. Of course, such factors may not go in a good direction but, instead, favour a new wave of autocratic demagogues who will promise seemingly easy fixes. They will demand “drill, baby drill” and/or scapegoat vulnerable minorities for any shortages.

But let’s be honest. If there were an *easy* answer to the ‘here to there’ question – from our current state, in the midst of what some call the “great unraveling” (Miller and Heinberg, 2023) to somewhere closer to the sustainable common good – the Earth would already be saved and we could all put up our feet.

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