

Paul Mountfort: March 15 changed NZ in another way... our children found their voice on climate action

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Students crammed onto Parliament's front lawn during their climate change protest on March 15. Photo / Mark Mitchell

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Comment:

As our nation continues to mourn March 15's loss of life, and Christchurch's bereaved return to their private, permanent griefs, perhaps there is a chance to offer further tribute to their passing.

March 15 was significant for another event which the tragic massacre eclipsed both locally and globally, but which will not go away. This was the first of what will doubtless be many strikes by school students demanding immediate climate action globally.

Following Greta Thunberg's solitary lead, thousands of our children made their voices heard on our main streets and town squares. In lieu of action by our political and business leaders they would be the "adults in the room" and march to reclaim their future.

As well they must. A recent scientific meta-study concluded that the chances of the science of anthropocentric global warming (AGW) being incorrect has reached 5-Sigma level – or 3×10^7 .

For laymen betting against climate change, the odds are literally 3.5 million to one. Denialists are effectively like someone whose retirement plan consists of buying a lotto ticket. Are you feeling lucky?

But it is worse than this because of the moral failing involved. These are our children's and our grandchildren's, our tamariki and our mokopuna's futures we are gambling on.

If an expert panel of engineers told you that the chances of the plane you were about to pack your kids on to of reaching its destination were millions to one, would you listen to the sole contrarian in the room who assures you that jet engines are too complex to troubleshoot?

We must stop humouring these denialist cranks. We need instead to heed the stark warnings issued to us and our governments by the world's foremost climate experts.

For ecological and civilisational crash is what we face under business as usual: "best" estimates of 3-5C temperature rises this century, likely to unleash such chaos as to end the conditions necessary for organised human existence.

Even the 2C target of the Paris Accord threatens horrors we've become absurdly inured to. A death spiral for coral and thus the ocean food chain. Collapse of the glaciation systems in the Himalayas that feed the vast populations of India, China and neighbouring countries. The inexorable inundation of coastal cities. Cascading species crashes. Droughts, deserts, superstorms. In short, hell on earth.

It may seem that New Zealand can do little to avert these absolute catastrophes. Strictly speaking this is true. Our contribution to global carbon emissions is miniscule. But the capacity for inspiring symbolism is huge.

Witness the aftermath of the dreadful tragedy in Christchurch. Without wishing to paper over the fault lines that exist in our nation, the world saw us rise to the occasion with compassion, liberality and tolerance. And steely resolve: semi-automatic weapons are now banned where other countries have prevaricated for decades.

Jacinda Ardern has called climate change our "nuclear-free moment", albeit one that is even more challenging. We call on the PM to continue the leadership for which she has been praised globally in progressing the passage of New Zealand's Zero Carbon Act.



Paul Mountfort. Photo / Supplied

Dr Paul Mountfort is a founding member of the science, industry and communications climate-action group Claxon NZ, and chair of the AUT Centre for Creative Writing. Claxon co-founders and co-signatories to this piece are Biomatters past director Gray Treadwell and Professors Alexei Drummond and Quentin Atkinson of the University of Auckland.