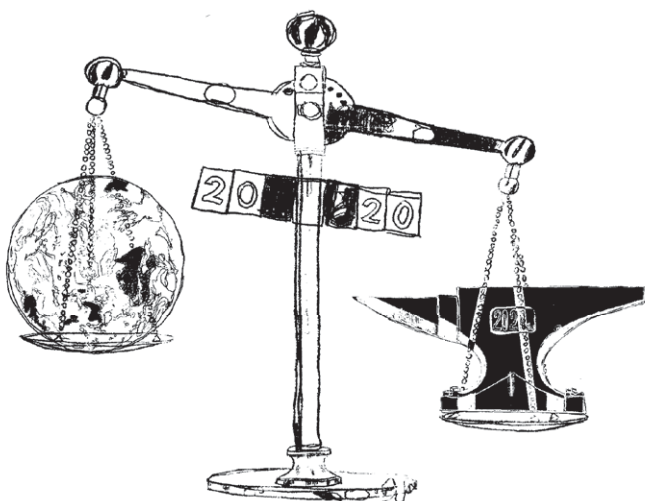


The Future We Choose

Overcoming Climate Inaction in Times of Denial

by Richard Catty



On 11th March 2020, The World Health Organization criticised the “alarming levels of inaction” in response to what has turned out to be a truly devastating pandemic. Untimely or poorly executed lockdowns, insufficient levels of testing and tracing and conflicting advice were all symptomatic of a less than adequate global response to a virus that has claimed over one million lives. As the fear over a second wave of coronavirus beds in beside the frustration at the best part of a year lost to lockdown, rifts are emerging between those backing sustained social distancing and lockdown restrictions, and others seeking a swift return to normality. With so much tension and anxiety centered around COVID-19, it may seem as though an issue of at least equal, but perhaps greater urgency has taken a back seat. Apart from the ensuing coronavirus pandemic, there are many barriers to responding appropriately to climate change. Environmental warnings from scientists and school strikes, while somewhere on the periphery of government radars, tend to be subordinate to the stabilisation of established systems of control, such as growth, employment and inflation. Then there is consumerism. Society must be willing to moderate what, and how much it consumes in order to affect real change. In fact, a similar degree of contemplation is needed for nearly all of life’s decisions; which foods to eat, how often to travel, who to vote for and what to study. And it is future graduates who will have the most important and difficult decisions to make.

Yet our meritocratic educational institutions focus not nearly enough attention on teaching the ability to critically analyse. A skill which empowers individuals to enact global change and sift through the layers upon layers of disinformation, propaganda and scientific debunking designed to mislead them. Even more vulnerable are the politically indoctrinated, with research from the Fourth National Climate Assessment showing that Republicans are far more likely to trust climate scepticism, with climate denialism actually increasing in line with the level of education a Republican receives.

Suppose you sit at the other end of the inaction spectrum, how do you overcome your climate anxiety? That feeling of powerlessness in a world that appears to be hurtling ever faster towards an environmental apocalypse? The goal of zero emissions or a zero waste economy seemingly too big for you to contribute anything valuable towards. Fortunately there is hope. A refreshing brand of climate optimism is emerging. Not to be confused with optimism bias, the kind of blindly irresponsible and passive attitude which led Brazil president Bolsonaro to publicly compare a global pandemic to “a little flu”. This new climate outlook is more realistic than that. It accepts that certain things will never be the same again. Species will go extinct, more rainforest will be cleared, islands and coastlines will be lost to the sea. Yet, it has faith in the ability of mankind to come together and create a bright future, with green cities, energy and thinking.

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It’s all about “The Future We Choose”, so goes the title of an inspiring book, which offers guidance on how to overcome the predominant, fatalistic climate narratives and replace them with something more progressive. Co-authored by Costa Rican diplomat and environmentalist Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac, climate lobbyist and former buddhist monk, the book follows on from their unprecedented achievement in brokering 2016’s Paris Climate Accord, when 195 nations agreed to limit future global warming to well below 2C, an unrivaled example of collaborative diplomacy. The sort mankind needs in abundance if it is to win the battle against rapid climate change.

Part I of the book offers two contrasting predictions for how the future might pan out, should we either continue on our current trajectory or begin making drastic changes to the way we treat the planet. Titled, *The World we Are Creating*, it vividly describes how, in just a few decades, our world will be completely ruined. In the run up to 2050, the year the scenario is based, no efforts were made to reduce emissions. The world is now on track to be three degrees warmer by the end of the century. Aridification is widespread. Summer air quality and temperatures are unbearable in places, making it impossible for many to go outside. Forests have either been chopped down or destroyed by wildfires, the arctic ice cap has melted and coral reefs can no longer bear the acidified seas. Extreme weather events have become the norm, causing the displacement of millions and outbreaks of epidemics. Due to a lack of snow, meltwater no longer feeds into rivers. There are only deluges or droughts in many parts of the world. Conflicts over

access to clean water have become commonplace, as has starvation, a consequence of the unreliability of agricultural yields. With the gap between rich and poor greater than ever before, the wealthy are able to buy their way out of trouble, for a while. Eventually society begins to crumble, unable to support the demand for food, water and farmable land. The bleak reality of mankind's plight begins to hit home, as the planet spirals into an irreversible chain reaction of warming and conflict.

The second scenario, *The World We Must Create*, describes the outcome of a reprogrammed society, with systems that look after the planet and limit warming to no more than 1.5 degrees by 2100. Again it's 2050, but the scene is very different. Air is clean, moist and fresh thanks to huge corporate and public funded tree planting campaigns. Vines cover buildings, absorbing noise and keeping temperatures cooler in summer. There are fewer automobiles, which makes space for thriving urban agriculture. The cars that remain are both shared and electric, connecting to the decentralized smart grid in the same way as houses, which create their own renewable electricity - the source of all power nowadays. Away from cities, rewilding has become a mainstay of the conservation effort, with forest cover now standing at 50%. Regenerative farming practices are the norm, with society subsisting on a mainly plant based diet. People also fly less, video calling more often and using improved rail infrastructure, the building of which cre-

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ated millions of jobs. The world is still dealing with the after-effects of record levels of carbon dioxide. Extreme weather events are common, but less so than they would be had we not stopped burning fossil fuels. Desertification, melting polar ice and mass migration are still issues, but cooperative governments recognise climate change as the cause and work together to mitigate its effects and predict future crises. All of this would have been impossible without a shift in the global mindset. Once people began questioning “is it good for humanity whether profit is made or not” and became better stewards of the land they realised “humanity was only ever as doomed as it believed itself to be”.

To achieve the latter scenario, the book's authors outline ten key climate actions any individual can take, highlighting how our current, uncertain direction presents an opportunity to write a new, positive chapter in history. One which future generations may look back upon in appreciation of the difficult choices we had to make, once we realised that, “when the eyes of our children. . . look straight into our eyes and they ask us 'What did you do?' Our answer cannot be that we did everything we could. It has to be. . . we did everything that was necessary.” We don't have to look very far for examples of doing what is necessary right now. After a slow start, efforts to deal with COVID-19 have been ramped up across the planet. They constitute not only governmental measures, in the form of lockdowns, school closures, testing and the opening of temporary medical centres, but also acts carried out by individuals for the greater good of society; social distancing, the wearing of masks, self-isolation, avoidance of travel, volunteering at food

banks and doctors and nurses coming out of retirement to treat the sick. All because it was necessary. Exactly what is considered necessary, however, is increasingly up for debate, with many right-wing actors calling for a reinstatement of individual freedom, while the left advocate stricter measures and more collective responsibility. Even more troubling than this political polarisation in the wake of the pandemic is the growing wave of denialism designed to distort public perception. Drawing direct parallels with climate denialism peddled by the petro-chemical industry and their associated political proponents, right wing think-tanks such as the Heartland Institute and conspiracy theorists, like Alex Jones have taken to cherry picking scientific data, highlighting worst case scenario predictions that don't come to pass in order to undermine scientific methodology and thus, garner public support for relaxing lockdowns and social distancing measures for the sake of the economy. Other than the virus itself, it is the politics of denial that poses the greatest threat to American health. The Trump administration's refusal to acknowledge the scale of the crisis while paradoxically blaming China for its existence is leading to a dangerous level of scepticism amongst the public. Mirroring the trend in which republicans are more likely to believe climate denialism, more and more Trump supporters are believing in COVID-19 related conspiracy theories, refusing to wear masks in public and putting others at risk.

Though, not every country experiences the same problems associated with political tribalism. In Germany, the relatively strict and punctually implemented measures have been largely adhered to by the public, resulting in one of the lowest rates of infection in Europe. Cooperation has been key, with individuals acting upon advice issued by their trusted government and based on recommendations from scientists. It is the kind of expert-led, collaborative approach humanity must adopt if it is to tackle the ever growing climate emergency.

Even if the world were to put aside its political ideologies and start listening to the scientists, the question remains, how do we uphold the vigilance the majority have shown during coronavirus in the face of environmental threats, without some external authority telling us exactly what to do? In the same way we reduced social contact to protect the most vulnerable in society, can we voluntarily limit flying for the benefit of those nations most vulnerable to rising sea levels? As careful as we have been in washing our hands and self-isolating, can we carry out similar due diligence on our finances, insisting pension funds, which are designed to protect our futures, do not invest in fossil fuels? As with efforts to develop a COVID-19 vaccine, which would immunise against the disease by implanting antibodies into our bloodstream, can we help safeguard against dangerous levels of atmospheric CO2 by planting more trees? Given the toxic shock caused by coronavirus, can we reevaluate our finance based economies, reorganising them so they are less susceptible to unforeseen circumstances and actively account for carbon output, health and happiness indices?

As a result of lockdowns, many of those fortunate enough to have been spared from grief, unemployment or illness have begun to question which things in life are essential, superfluous or in need of a rethink. For we can no longer stand idly by, speeding towards a climate catastrophe we know we are capable of avoiding, if only society could think more deeply, act faster and cooperate more. Of course, to turn thought into action, one benefits from certain tools and guidance, both of which can be found in the *The Future We Choose*, published by Manilla Press. A straight talking, game-changing read that will equip you with the know-how and optimism to overcome any degree of climate apathy, anxiety or inaction. ^{RC}