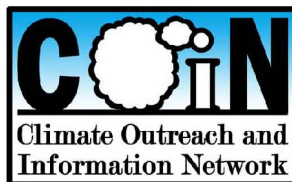


Sleepwalking into disaster – Are we in a state of denial about climate change?

“we need to recognise and face up to the fact that when it comes to this issue, we are not dealing with it rationally”

George Marshall – COIN



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The following paper is based on a talk given in Oxford by George Marshall on 22nd September 2005.

For the past four years a British national newspaper, *The Independent*, has led the way in its championing of climate change as a major issue. A typical issue this year¹ dedicates its entire front cover to a devastating new analysis of climate change by an international task force of scientists. Under the banner "*Countdown to global catastrophe*" it says:

"A report warns a point of no return may be reached in ten years, beyond which the world would be irretrievably committed to disastrous changes. These could include widespread agricultural failure, water shortages and major droughts, increased disease, sea level rise and the death of forests- with the added possibility of abrupt catastrophic events such as 'runaway' greenhouse global warming, the melting of the Greenland ice sheet, or the switching-off of the Gulf Stream."

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News stories don't come much more apocalyptic than that.

And yet there's something strange and hollow-sounding about this, for once inside the front cover we find that the paper is largely given over to the enthusiastic promotion of the very activities and companies which cause climate change. On page 11 we find that: "*the British Airways sale is now on. Only £89 from Heathrow to Warsaw*". Another full page advert on page 15 tells us that British European is offering two million seats on flights "*from as little as £10.*" The main graphic in the advert is a map of flight destinations in Western Europe, every one of which is within easy rail access.

Further on, an entire page is given over to assuring us that BASF (whose oil and gas operations grossed Euro 5.2 billion in 2004) is "*dedicated to a better life for us all.*" Alongside it an advertisement for the lastminute.com flights sale urges us to "*long- haul your ass outta here*" to Buenos Aires and Auckland.

We are left in no doubt that a long haul lifestyle is the acme of personal achievement. The diary

¹ The Independent, January 24th 2005

pages tell us that Jade Jagger's has started up a new business partnership to develop luxury apartments in New York, Miami, Phuket and Buenos Aires. On the job pages an advert for a new business account manager brags "we have just been snowboarding in the Sierra Nevada- do you want to share in our success!".

And on it goes. The coup de grace is the entire page that the Independent dedicates to its own contribution to global warming- a promotion for its readers to 'Win return flights to America for £10'. The Independent - the same newspaper that's telling us readers of the 'countdown to global catastrophe' - is offering its readers the chance at cut price tickets to one of the ten American destinations- all of which are further promoted in the free full colour pull-out in the coming of Saturday's edition: '*Start spreading the news - our fantastic American travel guide-the guide to the five best West Coast hotels*'.

Although we expect newspapers to indulge in exaggeration, inconsistency and commercial compromise, this disconnection between a newspaper's editorial line and the advertising and promotions it carries is surely

without precedent.

On no previous occasion have we ever witnessed such internal contradictions in the media as we see every day on climate change. In 1939 the Daily Telegraph was not routinely promoting two for the price of one special deal holidays in Bavaria to its readers, any more than it would now provide a handy pull-out guide for claiming illegal benefits. We would be astonished if a liberal newspaper such as the Independent - or, indeed, a national newspaper of any political orientation - accepted advertisements or copy that promoted interracial violence. So why do we see no contradiction when the Independent actively promotes the activities that are, in its own words '*a countdown to global catastrophe*'?

This is a minor reflection of a far wider, more profound and sustained disconnection at all levels of society between the seriousness of the threat of climate change and the action that we take in response.

Our Prime Minister tells us that climate change is 'a challenge so far-reaching in its impact and irreversible in its destructive power,

"This is a minor reflection of a far wider, more profound and sustained disconnection"

that it alters radically human existence². His chief scientific advisor, Sir David King says this is the most severe problem we face, far more serious than terrorism³. And yet, nothing in the government's response reflects this rhetoric. Its work on climate change is incoherent, underfunded, and constantly undermined by the support that it continues to give to the polluting industries.

In repeated polls over 80 % of people identify climate change as a serious problem⁴. Yet there is no evidence of any change in people's personal behaviour or in their voting preferences. People buy ever larger cars and homes, fly ever further for holidays, and vote for the parties that promise to do the most to support their expansive lifestyles.

This disconnection is all the more remarkable when individuals stand

2 Tony Blair, Prime Minister, 14 September 2004. Speech to the Prince of Wales Business and the Environment Programme on its 10th anniversary.

3 Sir David King, interviewed in Science, January 2004

4 For a good summary of public opinions by DEFRA, see: <http://coinet.org.uk/go/4>

to lose their livelihoods to climate change. A case in point is the international tourism industry. If climate change continues unabated it will destroy many of the world's most valuable tourist destinations and bankrupt those who have invested in them. In some cases these places will be

literally wiped from the map. However, any substantial action to inhibit climate change will entail aggressive policies to inhibit long distance flights, the lifeblood of international tourism. Either way, the

message is clear: there is no long term future in an industry that flies tourists long distances for short holiday breaks.

Last year, researching an article on the connection between tourism and climate change, I did a series of short interviews at the World Luxury Tourism Convention in London. I was not expecting sophisticated policy analysis from people whose working lives are dedicated to giving rich people a good time, but I was taken aback by the near total lack of awareness. Mention of climate change drew blank stares from hotel managers or tour operators working in the Maldives. This is a

“The government's work on climate change is incoherent, underfunded, and constantly undermined by the support that it continues to give to the polluting industries”

country where 80% of land is less than one metre above sea level and is likely to be rendered uninhabitable within 100 years by sea level rise and storm surges. Whilst their Prime Minister, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, tells anyone who will listen that his is a nation in peril, the tourism industry prepares for an endless expansion of profits and a party that will keep going on forever.

One person I spoke to did at least have some understanding of the wider environmental issues. For the past six years Jacques Rayon has been a manager of a chain of luxury hotels in Mauritius - another low lying island state that will be severely affected by increased storms and sea level rise. Rayon seemed to have fully embraced environmental issues – indeed at times his speech was as loaded with environmental truisms as Chief Seattle's. 'Yes, yes' he said 'we do have very serious changes in our weather, so many changes- it is very worrying'. 'Yes indeed', he said, 'we are living in an age when we are becoming profoundly disconnected from our environment. We have lost contact with nature and the natural forces which guide us.'

Then he leant forwards for the sales pitch. 'In my company we take these environmental problems very seriously. And that's why we are the first company in Mauritius to open a Feng Shui hotel- a place

where troubled people, anxious and worn out from the day-to-day exertions of life, can reconnect with the natural environment. Our rooms are themed around the five main elements. There's metal. There's water. There's wood. There's fire. All the natural elements. And in the evening our Chef prepares special Feng Shui themed meals by the poolside'.

He was especially proud of the attention to detail. Everything in the restaurant – the tables, the glassware, the cutlery – is specially rounded to facilitate the movement of the natural Chi energy forces. 'The plates', he confided, 'are round. Very round'.

At last, solutions for the problems of the world which are simple, practical and attractive. When I look over the chaos of our family breakfast table, I can take solace from the thought of how much worse it could be if we had square plates.

Jacques Rayon is an intelligent man and is sympathetic to environmental arguments. His business is on the front line of both the causes and the impacts of climate change, yet it responds by enthusiastically embracing a meaningless simulacrum of environmentalism. We can presume that so too do the tourists who identify with the new age marketing and will pay a premium for the eco-theming of their air

conditioned room.

Here's another example of the same phenomenon. My home town of Oxford probably has more books per square mile than any other city on earth. The stocks of the University's Bodleian library are so vast that it has built a network of tunnels to hold them and move them around. This is a city built on books.

Among the major bookshops in the center of Oxford is a two storey branch of Borders which occupies half a block. It would be fair to assume that the book market is a reasonable reflection of public concern and that Borders, a hugely successful international corporation, would understand this market well. Borders stocks six books on climate change. Just six books on -let's quote Tony Blair again- 'a challenge that alters radically human existence'. Of these six, two were written for academic specialists and two were written for the general public by charlatans arguing that that the scientists are wrong.

The row of shelves behind the environment section contains 26 books on Feng Shui, including 'Feng Shui for the Perfect Marriage' and Feng Shui for your Cat'. Considering that there is not one book in the store dedicated to energy efficiency on the home we can assume that vastly more people wish to control the

movement of chi energy around their house than the real energy going out through their windows.

It is easy to laugh at Feng shui, which is an amusing parlour game after all. But is this not also symptomatic of a wider phenomenon? Why is it that people appear to be much more motivated and concerned about something that is safe and containable, rather than the actual reality of what is happening?

Feng Shui is the ideological equivalent of those persistent biological poisons or like dioxins or trans fats which occupy key receptors in the body and block the absorption of nutrients. We chose to replace the daunting and terrifying environmental problems which threaten us with manageable and entertaining pseudo-environmentalism. We want it there.

Everything I've written of so far: the refusal to recognise a major issue when it threatens to destabilise our lives; our obsession with trivia; the compulsive over-consumption that sees us buying ever larger houses and ever larger cars; the open and active indulgence in activities we know to be destructive- all these behaviour patterns would, in a psychotherapy context, be seen as symptoms of denial.

Someone whose work I admire very much is Stanley Cohen, a sociologist working at the London School of Economics who has specialised in the study of the mass social denial in the case of human rights abuses⁵.

Professor Cohen argues that societies that are confronted with a collective moral responsibility for human rights abuses invariably adopt forms of collective denial, which he defines as a simultaneous state of knowing and not knowing. When asked, individuals will admit that they're aware of the disappearances in the night, that they heard the sounds of broken glass, that they're aware of cattle trucks passing by and the sounds of screams coming from inside. But there is a common compact amongst people not to discuss these things. Instead they indulge on diversionary activities- family, sport, frivolous entertainment or frantic consumption.

Our response to climate change has some similarities to such cases. Like the knowledge of

human rights abuses, our knowledge of climate change challenges our sense of personal and moral responsibility, and our identity as moral beings. Climate change, and the measures needed to contain it, are especially threatening to anyone whose world view embraces consumption as a fair reward for a lifetime's dedication to the growth economy.

We feel small and powerless in the face of this huge and daunting problem and we prefer not to mention it, especially when there are such powerful pressures to conform to the high consumption culture. It is true that there are no major penalties for mentioning climate change, but when your friend comes and shows you her holiday tan, you don't win many social points by raising the issue of how she got it.

Climate change also lends itself to another psychological phenomenon that Professor Cohen associates with human rights abuses- the diffusion of responsibility, or what psychologists call the 'bystander effect'.

This is a form of mass paralysis that occurs when people are

“societies that are confronted with a collective moral responsibility for human rights abuses invariably adopt forms of collective denial”

⁵ Stanley Cohen, States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering, Polity Press, 2000

confronted en masse with something that demands their intervention. A typical example of the bystander effect is when multiple witnesses to a crime all refuse to become involved in the belief that one of the others will take responsibility. A more prosaic example is when the film snaps during a showing in a cinema and the entire audience sits for minute after minute waiting for someone else to get up and tell the projectionist. Everyone is waiting for someone else to do something.

The evil twist to the bystander effect is that the more people who are witnesses, the less the chance that any of them will do anything. In the case of climate change, we are almost all bystanders- after all over 80% of people say that climate change is a major threat. That's a crowd of 40 million people in Britain alone waiting for someone to take responsibility.

So the more people who know about climate change, the more information we receive about it, the more newspaper headlines we see, the more bystanders there are to the unfolding catastrophe, and the greater our inclination to diffuse any responsibility for intervening. By and large people are conformist- they look to the wider values to set their own moral compass. People take the general lack of response to climate change as the norm and the basis for their own position. The individual

bystander sees a lack of action by the other bystanders and feels that their own decision not to become involved has become validated. And so we all sit around and wait.

However, this explanation only goes part of the way to explaining our core conundrum- the profound disconnection between information and action. Yes, there are many reasons, practical as well as psychological- why most people avoid engaging with external issues. Most people are weighed down by their day to day concerns with a life experience that has persuaded them that they are powerless to effect wider change. In the case of human rights abuses, there are excellent reasons why individuals may not want to be involved. It is clearly a very dangerous situation, in which you might want to be a very passive bystander.

But even under these exceptional circumstances there are always those who will put themselves on the line and take personal risks, to oppose what they believe to be wrong. Whether motivated by personal status, moral conviction or overwhelming urge to take a stance, there are people who will speak out however small and powerless they seem to be. On occasion they will even sacrifice their lives to break the cycle of denial. Historically such people have not stood alone. The social movements they have built have

been at the front line of questioning and challenging human rights abuses and social inequality.

By any objective assessment, climate change will be the world's greatest ever act of class and race violence. The high polluting lifestyles of a minority will destroy the crops, livelihoods and health of the majority. And yet there is a scarcely a handful of people speaking out and mobilising against it. The progressive movements who act as watchdogs are well and truly asleep in their kennels. When they do mention climate change, it is tagged on as an addendum to their other grievances. There are no mass movements against climate change, and the only people laying down their lives are the victims of it⁶.

We need to ask why this issue, despite its scale and its prominence, so singularly fails to fire people's motivation? Or put another way, why does this issue - the mother of future environmental, social and economic crises- fail to generate as much concern or action as any of its constituent parts?

I believe that finding the answer requires that we recognise that

6 The World Health Organisation estimates that climate change is already leading to 154,000 additional deaths per year from disease alone.

climate change is unlike any problem that we have faced before in our 200,000 years as Homo Sapiens. The problem solving skills with which we approach climate change formed in response to the very different threats we encountered in what Evolutionary Psychologists call our 'environment of evolutionary adaptedness'.

Thus we find we tend to deal best with threats that are visible, immediate, a direct physical risk, and have a clearly identifiable cause. As a fundamentally social and tribal being, we respond especially well when we can work co-operatively to oppose a threat that is external to our own tribe - ideally another tribe. Every day brings proof of our skills against such threats, ranging from our 'fight or flight' response to the aggressive driver behind us on the road to our collective mobilisation against external threats such as terrorism.

If we accept this, then we must also accept the converse - that humans are less capable of dealing with threats that are invisible, in the future, with drawn out and uncertain impacts and with complex causality. We are especially poor at dealing with threats that do not have clear external cause, or a clear enemy, or are of our own making.

All of our most intractable problems combine these qualities.

Smoking and obesity are self-created problems which threaten invisible and uncertain damage in the future. Nuclear proliferation combines immense risk with immense uncertainty. Global economic structures are so complex and diffuse causality so effectively between actors and agencies that it becomes near impossible to establish direct responsibility for any problems they create. For example., is the impoverishment of small scale coffee farmers in Brazil the fault of the Brazilian government, international institutions, coffee buyers, traders, high street retailers, or consumers?

Climate change shares many qualities with these other immense problems. It is invisible and slow to develop, with its greatest impacts in the future. It has complex and diffuse causality and even more complex and uncertain impacts. Most people on earth contribute to it, and everyone will be affected by it, but there is no clear causal relationship between an agent and a victim.

However, the unique quality of climate change, and what makes it the most dangerous threat of all, is that it combines *every* single quality that we find it hardest to engage with. Just as some deadly diseases are perfectly formed to bypass our immune system, climate change is perfectly formed to confound our problem solving

skills.

We can soon see the proof of this when we isolate and alter the individual qualities of climate change that we find so challenging. For example let us consider a problem which, like climate change, is invisible, complex, highly uncertain in its impacts, and of our own making. If we insert one additional factor - an immediate and known deadline - then we respond very well. The Y2K computer bug is a good example. There was a high level of public concern (in some cases virtual panic) and a rapid global response involving the investment of \$60 billion in mitigation measures.

From this it would be tempting to conclude that the immediacy of a threat is a key determinant of a rapid response. However we can also anticipate a strong response for a threat set far in the future. Let us imagine that astronomers discover that we are due to collide in fifty years with a meteorite so large that an impact would provoke massive destruction and a permanent alteration in the world's weather patterns. I think we could be reasonably confident that there would be a sustained global mobilisation to knock it off course. There are a lot of rockets in the world, and a lot people who would very much like to play with them. In this case, even though the impacts would be the same as climate change, action was enabled by the

presence of a clear external cause.

If the external cause were an identifiable human enemy the response would be far, far stronger still. Let us imagine that we discovered that North Korea was releasing chemicals that would permanently alter the world's climate and had already led to a 50% increase in the formation of hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico. (This is incidentally one of the current impacts of climate change). I think we can safely assume that the response would be immediate and severe, and that the cost of that response would not be a concern.

And here's a particular case which I've been pondering. Jet planes, when they fly at high altitudes, produce vapour trails. On a clear day under the right conditions you can look up into the sky and you can see a mesh of high level clouds forming as those vapour trails spread out. These high level artificial cirrus clouds reflect heat back to the earth. They are climate-forcing, and powerfully so. They are one of the key reasons why the total climate impact of jet planes is nearly three times greater than the carbon dioxide produced by their engines.

If you go onto the internet, you will find hundreds and hundreds of websites where people are posting photographs of these high level cloud formations, sometimes with

detailed annotations about where and when they happened, and exactly what they saw. But these people are not talking about climate change. They are believers of a widespread paranoid conspiracy theory that governments and the international elite are pumping chemicals high into the atmosphere through plane exhausts- what they call 'chemtrails'. They claim that these chemtrails cause droughts, famine, and disease and many believe that this is part of a widespread conspiracy to alter the world's weather patterns.

Here is a form of climate change in both cause and effect that has become highly motivating to people because there is an identifiable external enemy. It is hard to know how many people believe in this outlandish theory, but it is interesting to note that there is not one website where members of the public are posting photos of jet induced high level cirrus clouds as proof of climate change. Clearly the presence of an external enemy, however shadowy and uncertain, is sufficient to motivate people.

All of these examples lead me to the conclusion that there is *no one single component* of climate change that makes it hard for people to respond to. Rather it has a particular and unique quality, that every single one of its aspects, unfortunately and tragically, lines

up with the areas in which we are least psychologically enabled to take action.

I am also struck by the observation, drawn from my own emotional response to this issue, that climate change correlates uncomfortably well with the one area in which denial is a psychological strength; our response to our own mortality. Like death, climate change entails the permanent and irreversible loss. It means that the world as we currently experience it is no more than a passing dream and is doomed as surely as we are ourselves. When I look out of my window and I think all this will be gone- that if we don't stop this thing, then this world will never exist again except in fading memories or photographs- it touches the same part of me as the thought of my own passing.

The greatest danger of these problem solving weak spots is that we are not aware of them. They function like psychological blind spots that we have become adapted to ignore. Blind spots exist in the eye because of very poor evolutionary design: the optic nerve comes crashing through the back of the eye, and creates a hole in our vision. (Anyone who's tempted by the 'Great Designer' theory of evolution should consider that in this respect squid were given far more attention by God). The genius of the human brain is

that it takes information from all around the blind spot and patches it over the top. As a result we're not aware that there is anything missing from our vision. Blind spot? I see no blind spot.

We perform the same trick with these psychological blind spots. We patch over them and we do not see that we have a fundamental weakness in our rationality. The result is a sustained malfunction in our capacity to assess and evaluate risk. Thus we can simultaneously hold the view that this is a countdown to a global catastrophe – this speaks to the rhetorical part of our brain – without receiving any reliable warning from our intuitive risk assessment. We are like people with leprosy who can intellectually accept that putting their hands in a flame will cause them damage but are lacking the pain receptors that would trigger the reflex to withdraw their hand.

Given the plentiful evidence that we are in deep denial about climate change and are stumbling in the dark the question obviously arises about where this can take us? Personally I'm not pessimistic about this. I think we are very clever monkeys after all. We are quite capable of understanding and engaging with our own weaknesses. But I think that it does have ramifications for how we engage with climate change as an issue.

First of all we have to recognise that information alone is not going to shift this. As I've already shown, we're very capable of holding onto a high level of information on one hand, and failing to make it connect with our actions on the other. There's a risk that high levels of information can further feed that sense of denial and the belief that someone else must be doing something. The challenge for people who work on climate change and communicate it professionally is finding ways of communicating emotion and concern, along with immediacy and certainty.

Secondly in order to engage effectively we will need to convert the whole issue of climate change into smaller components that play better to our strengths, that are more immediate, that are more personal. We need to respect our main strength; our capacity to work together to develop collective solutions. Much as I favour lifestyle change, I suspect this means finding 'tool based' solutions.

We have to be very alert to the risk that the process of denial could lead to aberrant forms of mass behaviour as the catastrophe of climate change continues to unfold. We're already seeing signs of destructive consumptive behaviour, and we can probably expect an ever faster spiral into destructive consumptive behaviour as things get worse - what

psychoanalysts would call reaction formation.

There is also a danger that people will seek to convert their anxieties against a clearly identifiable enemy. This form of scapegoating is a very common psychological response to denial. We are especially capable of finding all kinds of displacement activities, of putting our concern on other issues that are not related to climate change but allow us the release of our concern. It is even arguable that this is what is happening at the moment. We have an administration in the United States that fails to take on board one major problem, whilst converting anxiety and concern onto another major problem.

Finally we need to recognise and face up to the fact that when it comes to this issue, we are not dealing with it rationally. We must recognise that our judgement is going to be unreliable, and is going to be compromised by virtue of the fact that it contains a number of components that we find it very hard to deal with. Now the first stage for personal recovery, is an admission that one has a problem. I think that the first step for dealing with climate change is admitting that we have fundamental problems with engaging with it and understanding it, and that this is indeed a great danger and unlike any other that we have faced before.

George Marshall is Co-Executive Director of the Climate Outreach Information Network. He is currently preparing a book on denial and climate change.

Climate Outreach Information Network is a charitable trust specialising in public education on climate change and its impacts. COIN works with individuals, households, small community organisations and progressive businesses to directly engage the public about climate change, and supply the means by which they can reduce their own emissions.

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