

10 October 2021

Rt Hon Prime Minister Ardern and the Hon James Shaw, Minister of Climate Change
Parliament
Wellington, 6160
Emails: j.ardern@ministers.govt.nz, j.shaw@ministers.govt.nz

Dear Rt Hon Prime Minister Ardern and Minister of Climate Change, Hon James Shaw

THE MOST IMPORTANT MESSAGE FOR NZ TO DELIVER AT COP-26

Summary and Recommendations

COP-26 is destined to fail us if the real issue of society's priorities, assumptions and in key circles, wilful denial of the limits to endless economic expansion are not confronted. This will only happen if a party calls out this elephant in the room. We therefore ask that the New Zealand delegation be that party and propose the following motions for adoption.

Motion 1:

Recognising anthropogenic climate change and related ecosystem decline results from economic growth, this Conference commits to restructure of the global economy to no longer depend on exponential growth for its stability. Thereafter, its primary purpose becomes delivering well-being and justice to all peoples, and when setting economic levers, operating well within earth's ecological and resource limits. This should be in effect by 2025, to help ensure meeting 2030 emissions reduction targets.

Motion 2:

In addition to securing the required NDCs from all countries, this Conference commits to a strategic targeting of those countries, sectors, companies and individuals with an intensive emissions footprint and who thus offer the least painful, expeditious and just emissions reduction response, including:

- a. *Countries with the highest per capita use of fossil fuel and associated emissions*
- b. *Sectors having high impact emission profiles due to the quantity or type of GHG they emit¹*
- c. *The 100 companies that are responsible for 70% of all global emissions*
- d. *The 10% of the global population who cause 50% of global emissions.*

Context

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, in their public consultation document ask "What negotiation outcomes should New Zealand prioritise at COP26?" and reassure that "feedback will be considered by our negotiators and summarised for Minister for Climate Change, Hon James Shaw"².

That Conference is rapidly approaching and is again being described by climate scientists as yet another "last chance" to avoid outright and irreversible climate breakdown. Many of the same scientists are also pointing out that there is no guarantee that we have not already passed an

¹ Such as through the Global Methane Pledge

² <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/Environment/Climate-change/COP26-background.pdf>

irreversible tipping point. The latest IPCC climate models show a cluster of such abrupt shifts between 1.5°C and 2°C³.

Of course, climate warming is already hurting many ecosystems and peoples across the globe and with each passing year, the odds of our being able to avoid unimaginable suffering for future generations become longer. We need to act effectively now. To rely on yet-to-be developed negative emissions technologies to extract massive quantities of GHG from the atmosphere is irresponsible. Lag effects from warming mean the sea level will continue to rise well into the next century, swamping settlements and alluvial farm land around the world.

To pick but one recent assessment that supports the urgency of our situation, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House⁴ states:

If emissions do not come down drastically before 2030, then by 2040 some 3.9 billion people are likely to experience major heatwaves, 12 times more than the historic average. By the 2030s, 400 million people globally each year are likely to be exposed to temperatures exceeding the workability threshold. Also, by the 2030s, the number of people on the planet exposed to heat stress exceeding the survivability threshold is likely to surpass 10 million a year.

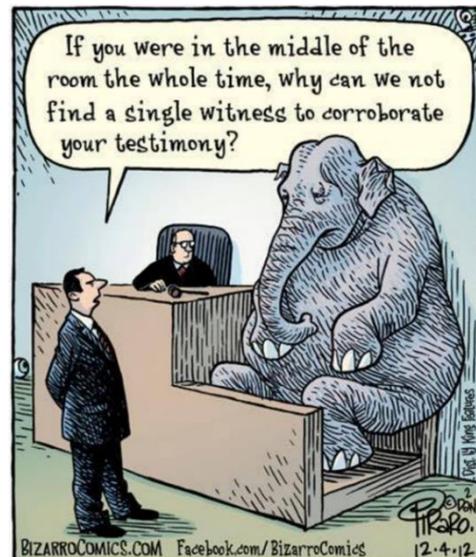
In short, we are in a precarious situation with huge challenges and must make the very most of this COP opportunity. The analogies with COVID are obvious.

The elephant in the Room (re Motion 1)

Some are of the view that the outcome of this COP-26 is likely to be little different from the previous 25 COPs, because it too will fail to acknowledge and address the elephant in the room, which is essentially our assumption that the climate crisis can be addressed while preserving a global growth and development agenda⁵.

Professor Emeritus William Rees eloquently expands on this view in a recent article⁶:

Most countries adhere to economic growth policies - which create ecological



³ The latest IPCC climate models show a cluster of such abrupt shifts between 1.5°C and 2°C Drijfhout, S., Bathiany, S., Beaulieu, C., Brovkin, V., Claussen, M., Huntingford, C., Scheffer, M., Sgubin, G. and Swingedouw, D. (2015), 'Catalogue of abrupt shifts in Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change climate models', Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 112(43): pp. E5777–E5786, doi:10.1073/pnas.1511451112 (accessed 13 Aug. 2021)

⁴ Research Paper: Climate Change Risk Assessment 2021, Daniel Quiggin, Kris De Meyer, Lucy Hubble-Rose and Antony Froggatt, Environment and Society Programme, Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, September 2021

⁵ MFAT list as "key issues for COP-26, Transparency, International global markets, climate finance, loss and damage, agriculture, gender action plan and local communities and indigenous peoples platform.

⁶ COP-26: Stopping Climate Change and Other Illusions, William E. Rees (Professor Emeritus, University of British Columbia, CA <https://www.buildingsandcities.org/insights/commentaries/cop26-illusions.html>)

overshoot. Unless and until we accept that we must live within ecological limits, then climate change will not be adequately tackled. Energy and resource consumption must be addressed through controlled economic contraction.

....

There are two fundamental barriers. **First**, participants in the COP meetings — government negotiators, political and scientific advisors, etc. — constitute a self-referencing cabal whose 'solutions' to climate change draw on the same set of beliefs, values, assumptions and facts that created the problem in the first place. In particular, they are dedicated to unconstrained economic growth propelled by continuous technological development, the beating heart and lungs of capitalism and neoliberal economics. Acceptable approaches to emissions reductions therefore include wind turbines, solar photovoltaic panels, hydrogen technologies, electric vehicles and as yet unproved carbon capture and storage technologies — i.e., any solution that involves the massive capital investment and profit-making potential necessary to sustain growth and the current socio-economic system.

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Second, climate change is not even the real problem; ecological overshoot is⁷ (Rees, 2020). 'Overshoot' occurs when humanity consumes bio-resources faster than ecosystems can regenerate and waste production exceeds nature's assimilative capacity⁸. In effect, the growing human enterprise is literally consuming and polluting the biophysical basis of its own existence.

....

We cannot solve any major symptom of overshoot in isolation. Indeed, the mainstream approach to emissions reductions will not only fail to subdue climate change but, by promoting material growth, will exacerbate overshoot (Seibert and Rees, 2021). On the other hand, if we eliminate overshoot, we simultaneously relieve its various symptoms. The problem is, the only way to eliminate overshoot is, by definition, through some combination of absolute reductions in energy and material consumption and smaller populations, i.e., through controlled economic contraction.

Wise Response considers that a prerequisite for this Conference to be successful is to agree to shift our fundamental economic goal from one of exponential growth, consumption and development to a platform of human and planetary wellbeing. A number of studies demonstrate that above a certain level of income wellbeing does not increase. New Zealand has of course already introduced such an overarching policy to its fiscal management so is an ideal party to propose such a motion be adopted globally and once again show courage and leadership.

Strategic targeting of high emitters (re Motion 2)

As exemplified by the Chatham House report above, the rate at which we need to cut our emissions to avoid the worst effects of the climate crisis is such now that additional more strategic means of reducing emissions need to also be found.

⁷ Rees, W.E. (2020). Ecological economics for humanity's plague phase. *Ecological Economics*, 169 (March 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2019.106519>

⁸ GFN. (2021). *Media Backgrounder: Earth Overshoot Day*. Global Footprint Network, <https://www.overshootday.org/newsroom/media-backgrounder/>

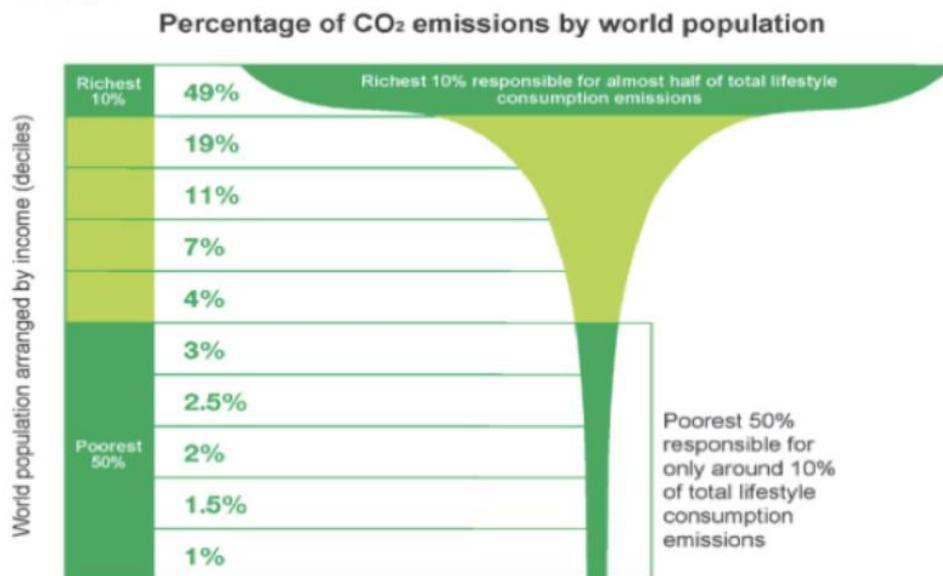
For example, Nathan Thanki points out that is a massive disparity in the proportion of emissions contributed by different companies and individuals⁹.

Fundamentally international climate politics is an argument about responsibility. The [arithmetic of this responsibility \(https://calculator.climateequityreference.org\)](https://calculator.climateequityreference.org) is relatively simple. 100 companies are responsible for 70% of all emissions, [10% of the world's population are responsible for 50% of emissions](#) – [overwhelmingly, living in the global North](#).

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Ultimately, a refusal by rich people and rich countries to reign themselves in even slightly is going to destroy the basis for life on earth. What makes refusal even sadder is that they wouldn't even have to live like the global majority to massively reduce their footprint: as climate scientist Kevin Anderson [often points out](#), if the richest 10% reduced their emissions to the levels of an average European (i.e., a totally comfortable lifestyle) global emissions would drop 30%. Or as an alliance of civil society groups [put it](#): "If they were obliged to deliver their fair share of climate action, this alone would amount to 67-87% of the total 2030 mitigation requirements for 1.5 °C".

Figure 1 shows the relative lifestyle consumption emissions associated with one tenth of the population as a percentage.

Figure 1: Global income deciles and associated lifestyle consumption emissions



Because the opportunity for a high emissions lifestyle closely correlates with wealth, the situation provides enormous opportunity to target the top emitters who could, by-and-large, downshift their lifestyle without undue inconvenience, and certainly not life-threatening implications.

Likewise, different countries¹⁰ and different sectors (e.g., certain protein-rich foods, aviation, transport etc) exhibit a wide range of emissions footprints that must now be strategically addressed.

⁹ Thanki, Nathan. A new chance for climate justice?
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/new-chance-climate-justice/>

¹⁰ <https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/each-countrys-share-co2-emissions>



At the start of this letter, we proposed two motions. We ask that the NZ Delegation to COP-26 respond to the above assessment by formally proposing them at Glasgow.

Yours sincerely,

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The Wise Response Society is a broad coalition of scientists, engineers, lawyers, artists, sportspeople etc. who are urging New Zealand to face up to the question "As demand for growth exceeds earth's physical limits, causing unprecedented risks, what knowledge and changes do we need to secure New Zealand's future wellbeing?" Our website - www.wiseresponse.org.nz - contains more information, including references to the case studies and Wise Response's other initiatives. Our Patrons are Sir Alan Mark and Sir Geoffrey Palmer.