

## CLIMATE CHANGE CONFERENCE APRIL 2021

‘We can all make our voices heard’

How do we do a workshop on Zoom? What I will try to do in the time that we have is consider why we all have a responsibility to make our voices heard and suggest ways in which this can be achieved, opening out into questions and discussions.

Before we look at how we can contribute it is reasonable to ask the question why do we need to contribute in the first place. Soothing words from the government and ambitious targets might make us feel that everything is in hand and we have no need to worry. Hopefully this conference so far will have shattered that illusion. Make no mistake our government in particular and governments in general are going to have to put very unpalatable options to their people. We might take government promises of a reduction of greenhouse gasses more seriously had we not witnessed it making contrary actions in the year that they are made. The list is long, Here are a few examples, a new coal mine in Cumbria, eventually called in for review by ministers but only after a ticking off from the Americans. The granting of new oil and gas exploration licenses and permits for the North Sea. The abandonment of a £1.5 billion ‘green homes scheme’ at a time when all experts are agreed that one of the key elements of any serious carbon reduction plan is to refit the housing stock. Fifteen years ago Gordon Brown announced plans to make all new homes carbon neutral by 2016. A scheme that was scrapped by David Cameron and has never

been replaced. Airport expansion, here in Yorkshire at Leeds Bradford and in spite of promises by the PM to lie down in front of bulldozers, at Heathrow. Billions to be spent on road building schemes at a time when vehicles should be being taken off our roads not encouraged, electric or otherwise. Climate change is a World problem in which the poorer countries have to be helped by the richer, yet we see the overseas aid budget cut by 2%. Huge faith being put in technology, such as carbon capture. This technology hardly exists. Carbon capture has been talked about for twenty years. So far only 26 plants are making use of it and 22 of those are rigs pumping the CO<sub>2</sub> underground to drive out more oil, a process known as enhanced oil recovery. We have not even considered the oil companies who have known about the effect of their industry on the planet for decades but still invest billions. In 2018 Shell invested \$25 billion in oil and gas but produced no figures for the much trumpeted investment in low carbon technologies. A paper published in nature in 2019 showed that the oil industry plans to spend nearly \$5trillion by 2029 on developing new reserves.

We are left with no choice but to make our voices heard in whatever way we can and the reality is that everything that you or I do to reduce the consumption of fossil fuel, raise awareness or put pressure on the authorities is not an option it is a necessity. Nothing we do is too small. In his book 'Soil and Soul' Alistair McIntosh described the process by which the isle of Eigg was bought by the locals in the face of ferocious opposition from the establishment. It is a deeply

spiritual book but at the same time a blueprint for protest. He writes in the conclusion:

‘The purchase of Eigg eventually came about because a millionaire was inspired by the struggle; but some 10,000 lesser contributors paved the way for that inspiration and many dozens of people beavered away behind the scenes putting their hearts into the campaign. Each individual was a link in the chain; a step of faith’

It was not the story of a global crisis but a testament to the work that we all can do.

So let us turn to practical action. Protest is the word that springs to mind. It is an interesting word, it literally means putting forward (pro) your statement or testament (test) If you have ideas or knowledge on a subject you project them in any way you can. This can be done by individual acts of protest. We saw this locally during the anti fracking campaign as protestors locked themselves together, climbed on to lorries, built towers, locked themselves to gates and refused to move when ordered to by police. Such action is often seen as illegal and is projected as such by the authorities. As long as it amounted to peaceful protest it was not illegal, witness the lack of successful prosecutions by the authorities. What it does require however is a considerable degree of courage and often physical stamina. There were also demonstrations involving hundreds of people which not only raised awareness but created a sense of community and support amongst those who took part. Then in 2020 Extinction Rebellion embarked on a series of protests which not only

worried the authorities but raised unprecedented awareness of the issue of climate change. Using the technique of enlisting hundreds if not thousands of protestors in well planned events there was considerable disruption of life both in the capital and other places. The authorities were shaken by these events and they sought to down play them down and emphasise the disruption to everyday life. However this year has seen the 'police, crime, sentencing and courts bill' brought before parliament as the government's response to these events. It is worth spending a little time considering this bill in the context of what we are talking about today.

The bill represents an attack on the right to protest through several different means. It amends existing legislation to extend the police's already extensive powers. This is unnecessary as in the words of the former attorney general, Dominic Grieve QC "No new laws were required if the police used the substantial powers they already have". It creates new offences. It targets the manner, the method and even the volume of noise of demonstrations. It strikes at the right to protest by limiting the areas in which it may take place, increasing criminal penalties for people who fall foul of police imposed conditions and establishes new offences and criminal penalties altogether. Previously police powers to impose conditions on a protest were extensive but essentially limited. In the new bill the senior police officer can impose any condition "as appear to him necessary". The bill expands the reasons why the police may wish to intervene one of which is "noise generated by persons taking part .....(if that noise ) may have a relevant impact on persons in the

vicinity.....and that impact is significant”. Basically this shields those in power from public criticism. A new offence has been created where someone breaches an imposed condition when they “ought to have known” it had been created. Not only does this potentially make criminal an action which would not normally be regarded as such, but puts pressure on organisers to ensure everyone is aware. These broad new offences are complemented by increased sanctions. For an organiser that strays from police imposed conditions the penalty has been increased from 3 months to 11 months imprisonment. If we think it unlikely that the full force of the law would be applied consider the case of the nurse earlier this year who organised a socially distanced protest at the 1% pay offer and was fined £10,000. Human rights law is breached by the imposition of bans on protest in certain areas around Westminster. As the court of appeal ruled in 2006, protest “becomes effectively worthless if the protestors choice of when and where to protest is not respected as far as possible.” A further deterrent to protest comes in the section that restates the offence of public nuisance. The wording of the bill makes public nuisance almost inevitable in a demonstration. It is defined as “any conduct which endangers the life, health, property or comfort of a section of the public” or “that obstructs them in their rights belonging to the public.” It is difficult to see any protest that does not obstruct the public in some way. For committing this offence protestors could face 10 years imprisonment. Further government concern over the

effectiveness of Black Lives Matter protests last year has led to increased sentences for defacing of monuments.

It remains to be seen how the bill will affect protest. We will still be able to meet and demonstrate but location, numbers and noise will be at the discretion of the police. Joining a demonstration must still be the introduction to many who wish to protest. It gives security of numbers and the chance to realise that you are not the only one with concerns. Direct action, such as we have seen in the past will become much more difficult but other avenues are still open. We can and should write to the press with our concerns. We can lobby our MP and local councillors. Response from the former is rare! We can join organisations committed fighting climate change both local and national. Other people in the conference today can give more detail but immediately we can consider Friends of the Earth and the Green party. We can and must educate ourselves on the topic. The late Ian Crane always ended his presentations with the words "Do your own research". There are websites easily accessible such as Double Down News and Open Democracy where up to date presentations are made on climate change. We can challenge false information or half truths as and when we come across them. On the day that the president of the United States issued a call for every country to tackle the crisis the BBC did a feature in its 1-00 pm news on the melting glaciers in the Antarctic. Instead of saying that this is caused by climate change they introduced an element of doubt by using the word "probably". This is not far short of climate change denial and must be challenged.

Our role goes beyond protest and in the time that remains we must give some consideration to changes that we can and need to make to our lives.

I have tried to think of ways that we can realistically make an impact on the overall carbon footprint, working from the premise that this has to be achievable by everyone, rich or poor. The first, and simplest would be to switch energy supplier to one that gives 100% renewable. These are not easy to find since a licensing system can mask the fact that suppliers are in fact offering a mix. Sometimes the tariff may be slightly higher. Whoever supplies energy a simple way to save energy is simply to turn the thermostat down a couple of degrees and increase the amount of clothing that you wear. We could take our holidays in this country, we can turn off lights when they are not needed, we can insulate our homes better( the cost of many kinds of insulation is minimal and in any case is often covered by government grants). So far I have tried to choose options that have an impact on the planet but have little impact on anyone else, apart from the issue of foreign holidays which would have a huge impact on the economy of Southern Spain. One of the problems is that things we do have an effect on someone else often thousands of miles away, often people who are desperately poor and dependent on our consumption of whatever it is that we know is contributing to climate change. This could be plantation workers in Malaysia or workers on the vast cattle ranches of the Amazon. An easy thing to do would be to cut down our purchase of clothing, the production of cotton for instance is very carbon and water intensive, but the effect on

workers in the Indian sub- continent could be devastating. We can eliminate or considerably reduce our consumption of meat, especially beef. The carbon footprint of beef is staggering. In the UK the Journal of Food Policy estimated that one kilo of beef produces 643 kilos of carbon, abroad it can be as high as 1,250 kilos. The carbon cost of beef is 73 times that of soya. Chicken is 6 times higher and milk 15 times higher Any reduction of beef consumption automatically affects farmers either here or abroad. In this country the land released by freeing it from grazing to growing crops for human, as opposed to animal consumption would offset this. It is estimated that 55% of cropping land in the UK is used to grow animal feed. In the Amazon where much of the tree felling is to clear land for beef production this would help to preserve a rapidly dwindling carbon sink. Where there is an adverse effect on poor populations this would have to be off set by government or private industry providing employment through green initiatives.

We hear of many other. Electric cars, air sourced heat pumps, complete house insulation to name but three. These are crucial and will have to come but I consider that for many people are outside their financial ability to pay for and I am leaving them out as options for today's meeting. What is needed is continued technical development to bring down prices, huge government incentives and education to shift minds, massive investment in affordable public transport and large sticks for those who are not tempted by these carrots.

This has been a long presentation but I hope that I have suggested some ways in which we can make our voices heard and make a meaningful contribution towards reducing the pressure on our planet. I think if I was asked to choose one thing that is important above all the rest it would be to educate ourselves and hold the authorities to account by whatever means we can. To 'protest' in the true meaning of the word.