

Climate justice – what’s required of us?

Talk by Chris Walker, QPSW Sustainability Programme Manager, to Bristol Area Quakers

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My role within Quakers in Britain is to manage our central climate justice work – alongside my colleague Livvy Hanks. Our work focuses on system change – working for the economic and political changes that are needed to avert climate breakdown and build a fundamentally more just and sustainable economy. We speak out on behalf of Friends, and support Friends in their own witness too.

Whilst quite a bit of my work focuses on climate policy and what’s going on, or not going on in political institutions on climate change. I could talk about the UK’s current climate targets, what Brexit means for climate policy.

I want to step back a bit and reflect on our role as Quakers, as people of faith, as citizens, confronting this vast, interconnected, deep rooted crisis of climate change.

We’ve never averted climate breakdown before. We’ve never halved global emissions in ten years. We’ve never – to the scale required, concurrently and with big deadline - restructured our economy, contained the power of multinational companies, changed hearts and minds, put ourselves in the way of oppression and violence, and transformed ourselves.

With this in mind, I want merely to talk about 5 things I think I know about climate justice- and what’s required of us. I’m not going to neatly connect them all up. I’ll leave gaps and maybe contradictions. And I am definitely not claiming that I, or the work of Quakers in Britain, live up to them yet.

I’m going to start with our testimony: our faith is rooted in a commitment Peace, Equality, Simplicity, Truth. But we know that these are not neat tools in a box. They are perhaps, four dimensions, entangled ways of imagining what’s required of us in a world that presents crises that are also entangled, with many dimensions. Inequality and environmental plunder sows the seeds of war. Our high consumption lifestyles not only distract us from what really nourishes us, but fuels extraction, exploitation and injustice and so the cycle continues. And Friends, we need to confront these entangled truths. I’ll come back to this later.

So what’s required of us? This brings me to the first thing I think I know about climate change.

Thing 1: Well we certainly need to be raising the alarms, demanding urgent, emergency action on climate change – through direct action, divesting our money from fossil fuels, mass campaigning, lobbying.

They are all needed, none of them are the magic key alone. And Friends across the country are providing inspiration:

Many many young Quakers have joined the school strikes, and many older ones have joined in solidarity. BYM staff joined the global climate strike to show our support, with the backing of our managers. It’s why when Greta Thunberg came to the UK in April, she visited Friends House where she met with Young Friends and spoke to 900 mostly young climate activists.

Many Friends have been involved in Extinction Rebellion. We still don’t know how many Friends were arrested in the Autumn rebellion, and just as key, playing supporting roles. Meeting Houses have been offered as meeting space.

Friends have been central to resisting fracking – especially at Preston New Road in Lancashire. Friends have convened interfaith protests and vigil and taken part in direct action. We believe Cuadrilla may be on the verge of pulling out of that site, and that protests have been a huge problem to the economic viability of the project.

Many Friends and Meetings are involved in demanding their local authorities declare a climate emergency – At least 79 city, county or borough councils, and around 30 town or parish councils have declared one. And many and then saying – so what’s next? Friends in Birmingham have been central to convening other faith groups to engage with the council about how they will enact an action plan in response.

Most Quaker meetings have divested their money from fossil fuels, like Britain Yearly Meeting has, and this has been really important in lobby councils and pension funds to divest too.

Yet, at the same time as raising the alarm, committing to urgent action, our movement needs to confront a deeper, more complex truth.

And that’s Thing 2: Climate change is a symptom of a way of running our global economy that depends on exploitation of people and the planet. Its roots are long and deep.

Even if we can convince ourselves that we’ve only just realized the importance of climate breakdown, we’ve certainly known that the things that drive it were always unjust.

An increasingly globalized economy driven by profit for the few has not only left a global majority behind, its relied on systems of extraction, displacement and marginalization. Those hardest hit globally, like with climate change, like with housing inequality, with insecure work, are poorer, they are people of colour. Women nearly always suffer from these injustices more than men.

Our global economic system has not only led to inequality. Inequality has enabled our system.

Take fossil fuels, for example. The writer and activist Naomi Klein has written that “The thing about fossil fuels is that they are so inherently dirty and toxic that they require sacrificial places and sacrificial people. People whose lungs and bodies can be sacrificed to work in coal mines and refineries, people who lands and water can be sacrificed to pollution. In fact, in the 1970s, officials in the US were openly referring to certain part of the country as ‘national sacrifice zones.’”

And it’s not possible to sacrifice people and places without, what she calls “othering”. Imagining other people, other communities, other races, nations, as less valuable, as distant, as conveniently hidden.

It was, then, the relative ranking of humans that not only to set in train some our global histories darkest moments – slavery, colonialism – but also that made it possible to dig up and burn those fossil fuels in the first place.

So what does justice require of us?

I can’t fully answer that, but I do know that because just because I, in my context, waking up to climate emergency, and what it means for my family, my daughter, cannot talk about it in isolation from other, older emergencies. It doesn’t trump the emergencies of racism, poverty, forced migration. To persuade others to pause their struggles to help with this one continues to marginalise other people and their stories.

Rather, to make our climate movement as broad, we need to make the agenda broad too.

How do we do that?

Thing 3: We need to go beyond just talking about urgent action, and talk about deep change

As citizens, but I think particularly as people of faith, we can see ourselves as offering hope and vision for a just transition to a zero carbon economy, that also confronts some of these other emergencies of housing inequality, fuel poverty, unemployment, poor public services.

Some of this vision is laid out by Green New Deal models in the UK and US - making the case for zero carbon investment that puts poorest and most marginalized first.

So what we're working to do centrally, and many Friends are doing locally, is to say to government and parliament – tell us your economic plan – what's your strategy for green investment – for investing in green jobs, green housing, green land use, limiting the climate impact of investment overseas and trade? How will you make sure all this makes our economy more equal? And to do so alongside other people of faith lets politicians know that we won't just be happy with statements and commitments – we are all stakeholders in climate policy – we are watching what they are doing – we notice – we care. We don't have to be a policy think tank to hold government to account on this stuff.

We can support you to do that too – with training. Whilst direct action is essential – so is engagement. However slow, frustrating it is. Many MPs don't get the urgency – and many more don't understand enough about climate change. But the tone of their engagement has changed. And because a just transition covers so many areas of policy, there is nearly always a point of connection of shared values – which we have take advantage of. Maria Caulfield.

And many MPs are more responsive when you connect climate change to a broader agenda for change and justice. Young people, investing more in deprived regions, supporting healthier local rural economies.

And speaking of local economies:

The 4th thing I know:

The seeds of a new economy, a just sustainable economy, are all around us

Across the UK, and beyond of course, people are modelling how we can run our economy and society differently to transform it. It may be small or particular – a local veg box scheme – a project to teach people to cycle or connect with nature – enterprise doing business differently.

When we are overwhelmed by the scale of our transformation needed – we can look around us, be inspired by local leadership, and ask how we can help. This can help us connect with different kinds of people. And we can also point to these people when we speak to people in power to say look – people care- people are putting resources in to a better future. It's not just that politicians are failing to lead – they are failing to unleash the good will, the innovation, the creativity of local communities to build a sustainable economy.

That's the local, but let's think about the global

Thing 5: Another place we can look to support leadership and take courage, is to those communities taking action where the stakes are already much higher

There are people around the world, whose homes, livelihoods and communities are already on the brink. They might also have to work a lot harder to be heard – either because in their own countries,

democracy is even weaker than here, or when protest is met with oppression and violence. Or when at the UN, at international climate conference, they are repeatedly overlooked and ignored. Whether its people resisting Shell oil in the Niger Delta or coal mines in Indonesia, or young people on climate school strikes in Kabul, when we get despondent about my own power and activism, it's important to remember the context they are in.

In November next year, the UN climate talks will be in Glasgow. Many activists, with amazing stories from around the world, will be coming to the UK – or at least want their stories heard. It's a focus for us to think about how climate justice means solidarity- to help others be heard, to learn from their struggles, to take inspiration. We're going to be working to help those groups be heard at the climate talks and by UK citizens, and we'll be reaching out to make connections way beyond our own context and our own communities. I'd say watch this space- but don't. Think about what you can do locally to take inspiration.

And again it's about linking the struggles. Meetings across the UK have become Sanctuary meetings, places of Friends for migrants. Many are resisting war and militarism. This global gathering in the UK is a chance to connect our global struggles. We all need to work out how.

Chris Walker

chrisw@quaker.org.uk

www.quaker.org.uk/climatejustice