



Population Growth and the Climate Emergency: Ensuring a Just Transition

Transcript of JONATHAN PORRITT's TALK at BYM 2021

MARTIN SCHWEIGER, Committee Member

Hello and welcome. On behalf of Quaker Concern Over Population, thank you very much for tuning in and coming along to this session, when we want to consider population growth and the climate emergency. And then ensuring a just transition.

We're very fortunate to have Jonathan Porritt. He's going to be leading us. I think most people don't need very much of an introduction. But for those who haven't come across Jonathan before (and I'm sure you will think "Why haven't I haven't read or heard about him before?") :

Environmentalist and writer. Heavily involved at the time of the Ecology Party and its transition to the Green Party; wrote a book that I think was very influential, 'Seeing Green: The Politics of Ecology Explained' in 1984. And a very nice phrase, a very important phrase: "The future is green, or not at all!"

He's been Director of Friends of the Earth and he has promoted practical solutions to local environmental campaigns, encouraging us to think globally and internationally.

He's president of Population Matters and his more recent book is 'The World We Made'. And he's heavily involved with an organization 'Forum For The Future'.

So, everyone, very welcome. I should just say, after we've heard from Jonathan I hope you'll hear a little bit from the special advisor to QCOP, Radika, who's with us. So that'll be good.

We hope everybody will be thinking two things: What are you going to take away from this session to share with other Quakers and other friends – what are you going to take away? And secondly, what are you actually going to do?

So two things for people to think about as you're listening to Jonathan: "What are you gonna share?" and "What are you gonna do?". And we'll make sure there's time for questions. When we get to the question time, you've got two options; we will try to take questions from both. There's a Q&A function; you can put in questions there as they occur to you. And later when we start the questions, you can use the raised hand function, and

we will try to select more or less at random who we're going to take because there's no way we'll know your question. But we'll try to share them out, then ask Jonathan and where appropriate, Radika, to comment.

But I think you've heard enough from me. Now it's time to hand over to Jonathan and say welcome and thanks for coming. We're listening.

JONATHON

Martin, thank you very much indeed and thanks to everybody involved in QCOP for joining the session this afternoon.

I really appreciate the opportunity to share some thoughts about what is a critical dimension of today's climate emergency. And to try and answer any questions that you might have about the nature of the linkage between population growth and the climate emergency, which is so important.

And just, obviously to start with, the basics: I don't think anybody any longer disputes the fact that we are already in this emergency. It's not something on the horizon or something for tomorrow or something for the next generation, as has been argued by politicians for a long time. We're in it, right now, feeling the impact of accelerating climate change, feeling the impact of what has been over the last 200 years or so a little more than a one degree centigrade rise since the start of the Industrial Revolution.

Just bear that in mind, because we're already seeing mayhem in some of our climate systems as a consequence of a 1.1 degrees centigrade rise in a couple of hundred years. Now we're contemplating the possibility of a total of a 3 degrees centigrade rise by the end of the century.

So already this year, 2021, has been a completely nightmarish year. I'm not going to run down the list of all the disasters that we've already seen, but they are completely shocking. When Angela Merkel visited the scene of the extraordinary flooding in the western half of Germany, she said something which I thought was quite fascinating; she said that there is no word in our language to describe the horror of what I see all around me.

And for me that was a fascinating insight into the way politicians approach this. They find it impossible to imagine what intense, accelerating climate impacts look like in their lifetime. They haven't been able to summon up the creative and imaginative resources to work out what this really means, even though millions of people around the world, particularly in some of the world's poorest countries, have been feeling these impacts for the best part of 20 years.

So what we know is that we've got a window of time in which we need to do things we haven't been able to do up till now, which is to radically decarbonise our economy, to start healing the wounds that we've inflicted on planet Earth, and to think about a very different way of creating and distributing wealth. So the justice bit comes in, obviously of such critical importance to all Quakers: to think of different ways of creating and distributing that wealth.

The scientists are meeting; in fact over the next two weeks a lot of the scientists involved in the intergovernmental panel on climate change are meeting and that's to provide some

preliminary input into this big climate conference at the end of the year, the so-called Conference Of the Parties, COP 26, in Glasgow.

The full report from the IPCC, its full assessment report, won't actually be out until next year. But they're gathering now to do some preliminary analysis and come forward with some preliminary findings. And I seriously hope that the language they use when they present [them] to the politicians in Glasgow will provide whatever final encouragement is needed to get those politicians to really focus on the nature of the challenge ahead.

The story is: we're trying to stay below a 1.5 degrees centigrade increase – average increase – by 2100. If we can't do that, then the Paris Agreement in 2015 said we absolutely on no account must allow the temperature increase to go beyond 2 degrees centigrade. Beyond 2 degrees centigrade we know we're going to be affected by massive disruption, of every conceivable kind, in climate patterns all around the world, with a very very clear, stark risk of what are called tipping points in these climate systems, which means that a system tips from one state to another state and even if we then want to get it to tip back again, we may not be able to do so. And the case that the scientists refer to all the time, of course, is the melting of the Earth's residual ice, be that the sea ice in the Arctic, or the glaciers all around the world, or the Greenland ice cap and the huge store of ice in Antarctica. Once we see those huge reservoirs of ice start to disappear, we know that the prospect from an average sea level rise by the end of the century is very grim indeed.

So, really, we're not in any doubt about what's going on; we're not in any doubt actually about what we need to do. We shouldn't be in any doubt that we have pretty much all the solutions to this problem that we need, and really can get on and make them work now. We're not dependent on astonishing new technology breakthroughs which will materialize magically at some point in the future. Actually, we've got pretty much everything we need, already, if we get smart at deploying it at scale, and at speed.

So we're in a good place in that regard; we've gone through 20, 30 years of obfuscation and doubt and difficulty and controversy but we're in a reasonably good place. And that's important because where we are now is our physical reality. And that's a function both of the impact of our economy on natural systems, including the climate system, and of the number of people on planet Earth; you can't put it any other way. So world population in 1800 around a billion, world population today (2020) 7.8 billion, rising to somewhere between 9.5 and 10 billion by 2050.

That's the “baked-in projections” based on the number of young people in the world today. Those young people will themselves go on to have children.

So obviously we're looking at this story from both a consumption point view and from population, a human numbers, point of view. Which is why to us in Population Matters, it has always made obvious sense to talk about overconsumption – excessive levels of consumption, particularly in the rich world – and overpopulation – too many people on a planet to ensure a safe, just transition through to the kind of world in which we would all want to live. The two things go hand in hand. I've always described them as two sides of the same coin.

So when we talk about a just transition, we can very quickly begin to identify what that means. For most people preparing for COP26, a just transition means that the interests and rights of people in the poorest countries in the world are not just taken into account as

a kind of postscript to everything else, but are [at the] heart and centre of our deliberations about this.

And this all comes down to a continuing controversy around the sum of 100 billion dollars. This was the sum, agreed to by the rich world countries, that they would need to transfer to developing an emerging economy, not just to help them accelerate their own decarbonisation, investments in renewables and so on, but to help them adapt to the impacts that they're already suffering from.

It is utterly shameful that the rich world countries have made so little progress in producing that hundred billion dollars. And some people believe that COP26 will fail because there are now so many countries who are so incensed about this hypocrisy, around the 100 million dollars, that they won't allow the conference to proceed unless somehow these commitments are made good.

That's the essence of a just transition, if you like, and it goes to the heart of what the rich world owes as an obligation to the poorer countries in the world today. After all, those poorer countries have contributed very little historically to the overall problem we face today, which we in the rich world have an historical obligation to address.

So you can understand the anger that was felt here in the UK – and internationally, I might say – when Boris Johnson decided that one of the smartest things he could do in the run-up to COP26 was to cut the UK's aid budget from 0.7% of GDP to 0.5%, and it was only when we began to see what that looked like in practice that you began to understand that it was the very opposite of whatever a just transition might look like.

The instant consequence of that cut was, for instance (one of the consequences), an 85% reduction of support for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) – 85%! And, as the executive director of UNFPA pointed out at the time, if you want to translate this into numbers – and here I'm quoting directly from her speech – “What this means is 250,000 additional maternal and child deaths, 4.3 million additional unsafe abortions, and 14.6 million additional unintended pregnancies.”

So that withdrawal of support – that 85% reduction – translates immediately, as you see, into desperately tragic consequences for millions and millions of women and children around the world, coming on top of what we already know, and have lived with as a kind of reality for many women in the world today – upwards of 270 million women.

When the Executive Director of UNFPA, Natalia Kanem, was making a much broader statement about what this means for women in the world today, she said "The fact that nearly half of women still cannot make their own decisions about whether or not to have sex, use contraception or seek healthcare should outrage us all. In essence hundreds of millions of women and girls do not own their own bodies; their lives are governed by others. It's nothing less than an annihilation of the human spirit."

For me, that is a very, very powerful reminder of exactly what is going on here. We've always in Population Matters linked the whole concern about the climate crisis, or the biodiversity crisis, or the environmental crisis (one kind or another), pollution etc, to this issue about sexual and reproductive healthcare, to the human rights and in particular the rights of women to be able to manage their own fertility.

And this goes right back, as long as I can remember, in the population debate, to the core of the argument that we should put the emphasis on a Rights basis. That's what the Cairo conference in 1994 so successfully did.

And it means that we should be stressing not just access to contraception, but also the importance of wider reproductive healthcare and, of course, the education of young girls. These things are all intricately connected and they've been critical to the cause of population advocacy for as long as I can remember.

Now, having said that, I'm not going to pretend that this isn't still a controversial area of the debate to be involved in; there's nothing easy about this. And for a very good reason. An awful lot of people are so concerned about what has happened in the past in the name of population control, that very often which is the word they use? "Coercion," rather than involvement in voluntary, non-coercive family planning.

So many people are concerned about the past that they don't want to recognize the importance of what is going on today.

So, for me it has always been crucial to put that up front – to say that what happened in China and India and many other countries is absolutely repugnant to anybody who cares about these things. And we have to acknowledge that if you go right back to the start of the conservation movement, through the 20th century and into the 19th century, you can find very clear links between eugenics – wanting to control the nature of the makeup of races in the world – and some of the early conservation movements. You can't deny that stuff. It's just part of the history.

But the idea that we aren't now somehow permitted to be involved in this debate because of that record strikes me as really, absolutely extraordinary and cruel, to be honest, because we still need to be putting the emphasis on doing what we can do, through so many different mechanisms today, to start more effectively to address these massive needs. Around education for girls. Around access to reproductive healthcare – underground access to contraception. That has to be the starting point. And we know that's always going to be controversial.

A lot of environmental organizations with impeccable credentials have emphasized the linkage to continuing population growth – roughly 83 million additional human beings on this planet every year. We [Population Matters] have emphasized the link between that and the accelerating threats to the wellbeing of human species, climate, biodiversity, and so on.

This was really brought home to all of us through a fascinating initiative called Project Drawdown, and my organization Forum For The Future was a bit involved in Project Drawdown; we were one of the organizations that reviewed a lot of the data that they put together. They looked at 80 or so different solutions to the climate crisis – solutions, interpreted broadly, to the climate crisis. And they worked out exactly which mattered most, which we could make the biggest difference on, and roughly what it would cost. And how would we guarantee a cost-effective outcome from our promotion of that solution?

I think, to pretty much the astonishment of everybody, not just in the first iteration of Project Drawdown, but in the second iteration of Project Drawdown, it came out that this emphasis on *education, reproductive healthcare, and contraception and family planning*, put

together, make it the second most significant area for investment, if we wanted to address accelerating climate change, if we wanted to reduce emissions of greenhouse gas.

And that, I think, was a big shock to people, because we suddenly realized that we were talking here about billions of tonnes of CO² and other greenhouse gas emissions that could be avoided, if we took seriously this challenge to prioritize those three critical things. And that remains the case today; it's still absolutely critical. So when we talk about a just transition, when we talk about bringing together these two sets of concerns, you can see why we need to reprioritize differently.

Now I have no difficulty in understanding why NGOs need to push forward their own priorities if they're a biodiversity-based organization and climate-based organization, whatever it might be. But not even to acknowledge this linkage, not for instance to talk about projects that are an absolutely critical set of insights into the nature of solutions today When the government cut its aid budget – do you hear environmental organizations talking about this? Well yes, but why? Because it would undermine our credibility in the COP26 negotiations? That's not really the reason. The reason is that we would cease to be doing many of the things that we absolutely have to do to try and protect the world at this stage.

So it's difficult, and for you there, for Quakers; the level of controversy associated with this has often made it a very difficult area to engage in. And perhaps that is exacerbated but the fact is, a lot of people are concerned about this – people like me, white males, who perhaps might be seen to have less focus, less standing in this debate, especially when it comes to thinking about it through the eyes of millions, hundreds of millions of women in poorer and developing countries. It makes it a harder topic to deal with sensitively and to be fully aware of what is entailed in all of this.

But to use that controversy, that sensitivity, as a way of trying to shut people up, to stop people talking about this, that's to me morally unacceptable. So every time George Monbiot, for instance – a colleague of mine and someone I admire massively because of his campaigning passion and successful advocacy on behalf of so many causes – every time George Monbiot suggests that people like myself and the entire Population Matters organisation should just shut up because we are middle-class white males – which is true, by the way, about the makeup of Population Matters – I feel that's an inappropriate contribution at this particular point.

So, Martin, I think I'll stop there because what I've tried to do is to demonstrate that the link between population growth and accelerating climate change, today's climate emergency, is incontrovertible. We just can't get away from that.

Our commitment to making this a just transition, a just transition to an ultra-low carbon economy of the future, the one that I've argued, *is* available to us. I believe that the transition has to be negotiated in a just and inclusive way. And that we need to reflect those principles and values in every single aspect of our campaigning around climate change today.

It seems to me, to be honest, that those things are pretty much unarguable, but I've found to my continuing surprise that they actually cause more arguments than practically anything else that I do in my life as a sustainability campaigner.

So I will pause there, Martin. And over to you.

