

The pandemic is climate change on fast forward

 johnmenadue.com/the-pandemic-is-climate-change-on-fast-forward/

By Ian Dunlop

Feb 17, 2021

The think tank idea that the world can still make a gradual transition to a low-carbon world by tweaking neoliberalism is totally unrealistic. We need to undertake a massive risk management task, the first step of which must be a brutally frank assessment of the challenge we face. It is something that business, finance and politics continues to avoid. Achieving net zero emissions by 2050, is totally inadequate. It must be reached as soon as possible, ideally by 2030.

The downsides of neoliberalism have never been so obvious than in the irresponsible debate over climate and energy policy. For three decades, industry, particularly the fossil fuel industry, and its peak bodies, have maintained a steady drumbeat of climate denial.

Initially, it was hard denial that human-induced climate change even existed. As that stance became ever less credible in the light of burgeoning climate damage, it became soft denial, accepting that climate change was happening but using predatory delay to prevent implementation of any serious climate policy.

Even now after last year's bushfires, conservative thinktanks are on hand to "prove" that climate action will "destroy the economy and our international competitiveness", with nary a mention of the infinitely greater cost of doing nothing.

Covid-19 has again thrown neoliberal deficiencies into stark relief. Both the pandemic and climate change were created by the unconstrained economic growth that neoliberalism demands. The former from increased contact between humans and wildlife in previously pristine natural environments, leading to zoonotic disease transmission, compounded by species migration and increased temperature resulting from climate change.

Yet neoliberalism is incapable of tackling these problems because solutions require the common good to take precedence over the individual. Fortunately, in the Australian pandemic, politicians were forced to break with neoliberal principles, reverting to Keynesian stimulus and appropriate constraints on individual freedom, so far averting a domestic, Trumpian, Covid disaster.

The pandemic is climate change on fast forward, and there are many lessons to be learnt in planning for the far greater challenges of climate change that lie ahead. The threat of immediate, large-scale, pandemic mortality is credited with forcing a backdown from the excesses of neoliberalism, with the lack of a similar immediate threat cited as a primary reason climate action has been so slow. However, three decades of political inaction, leading to accelerating climate impact and mortality, have removed that excuse.

The emergence of a new line of thinktanks, such as the Coalition for Conservation and the Blueprint Institute, inter alia designed to encourage conservatives to become more attuned to environmental and climate change concerns, is a case in point.

It is refreshing to see new conservative thinking intent upon cutting through “tired ideologies” and dogma. However, if it refuses to understand and tackle the real challenges and risks we face, it is just trying to put a more palatable face on denial.

For example, Blueprint recently opined that meeting a net zero emissions by 2050 target could not be achieved by technology alone as proposed by Minister Angus Taylor. Rather, incentives in the form of some market mechanism were essential. Which completely ignores the inadequacy of the 2050 target itself.

It is high time economists in these thinktanks accepted Herman Daly’s observation that “the economy is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the environment, not the reverse”. And if the environment is in big trouble, as Graeme Samuel’s EPBC Review, the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Global Assessment and the Dasgupta Review on the Economics of Biodiversity confirm, so are we.

Scientists and institutional leaders globally, along with communities, are demanding emergency action on climate change and the environment more widely.

The thinktank idea that the world can still make an ordered, gradual transition to a low-carbon world by tweaking neoliberalism is totally unrealistic. We have left it too late, and neoliberal economic growth is incompatible with a sustainable future. In essence, addressing climate change and environmental decline means, akin to wartime, the suspension of business-as-usual to do whatever it takes to resolve these crises. There is no higher priority.

This does mean massive societal and cultural change, and fundamental reframing of virtually every policy arena; climate, environment, energy, foreign affairs, defence, health, immigration, agriculture to name but a few. That requires an all-encompassing commitment to an emergency transition. Certainly there will be costs, but the costs of ignoring climate change and wider environmental concerns will be far greater.

If the new thinktanks genuinely want to create a sustainable world, all to the good, but there must be fundamental change, away from their current magical thinking. Of that so far, there is little sign.

As Sir David King, former UK Chief Scientists said at the National Climate Emergency Summit in Melbourne last week:

“*What we do in the next 3-4 years will determine the future of humanity*”.

The latest climate science indicates that the lower Paris limit of 1.5°C global average temperature increase, relative to pre-industrial levels, will occur around 2030, irrespective of any action taken in the interim. The 2°C upper limit is now likely prior to 2050, absent

emergency action, with 3°C early in the second half of this Century. “Hothouse Earth”, non-linear, irreversible, self-sustaining warming may be triggered within the 1.5 – 2.0°C Paris range. There is a risk that such climate system tipping points may have already moved beyond our influence.

Global warming in 2020, at 1.3°C, is dangerous; 2°C would be extremely dangerous; 3°C would be catastrophic. Australia in 2020 was already 1.5°C. In these circumstances, the current fashion in business and finance, to achieve net zero emissions by 2050, is totally inadequate. It must be reached as soon as possible, ideally by 2030.

But in addition to rapid emission reduction, atmospheric carbon concentrations must be drawn down from the present level of 416 ppm CO₂, toward a more stable level of below 350 ppm CO₂. No technologies currently exist at scale to do that, further exacerbating our climate risk.

Hence the need for precautionary steps to avoid the worst outcomes, possibly including geoengineering to buy time, by cooling areas of the planet, before other initiatives take effect.

A massive risk management task, far beyond anything currently contemplated officially, the first step of which must be a brutally frank assessment of the challenge we face. Something business, finance and politics continue to avoid.

What matters is action in the next decade, for climate change is now an existential threat to civilisation as we know it. Aspirations for 2050 are nothing less than soft denial.