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Running Amoc

7–9 minutes

It's because the climate crisis is now visible to everyone that governments are giving the fossil fuel industry everything it demands.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 1st August 2023

To understand this moment, we have to recognise that there is an existential struggle on both sides. While environmental scientists and activists fight for the very survival of the habitable planet, the fossil fuel, meat and internal combustion industries are fighting for their economic survival. Either they are regulated out of existence or human society across much of the world will fail. We cannot all win: either these industries survive or we do. But we can all lose, because, eventually, they will go down with the rest of us.

But “eventually” counts for nothing in their spreadsheets and annual reports. “Eventually” has no effect on share prices and dividends. “Eventually” has little traction in a four- or five-year political cycle. So, as the evidence of climate breakdown becomes undeniable to all but the most deluded, the pollutocrats must fight as never before. There was once a widespread belief (which some of us cautioned against) that governments would step up when – and only when – disaster struck. But it is precisely because

disaster has struck, visibly and undeniably, that they are stepping down.

To buy himself a few more months of political survival, Rishi Sunak, representing a party that has recently [taken £3.5m from major polluters and climate deniers](#), is threatening the welfare of the human species. He has switched, over the past fortnight, from doing a [grand total of nothing](#) to prevent climate chaos to actively sabotaging both the climate programmes he inherited and the [efforts of other public bodies](#).

How can you tell when a politician is doing the work of the oil and gas companies? When they start promoting [carbon capture and storage](#) (CCS). CCS has been the magic fix for climate breakdown promised by successive UK governments for 20 years – and never delivered. Most of the very few projects brought to fruition around the world have been [abject failures](#).

The sole purpose of CCS is to justify the granting of more oil and gas licences, on the grounds that one day someone might be able to capture and bury the CO₂ they produce. It's no coincidence that Sunak announced both policies – more licences and CCS – in the [same statement](#). It would be wrong to say the technology doesn't work. It works precisely as intended, even if it never materialises: it is a highly successful method of buying more time for the fossil fuel industry.

But the worst thing Sunak has done is something few people have noticed. Underpinning the UK's climate programme, weak and contradictory as it has always been, was the carbon market. The promise of successive governments, in and out of the EU, was that, by putting a price on carbon pollution, they would ensure that

industries had no option but to switch to greener technologies. A further promise by the Conservatives was that, after Brexit, there would be [no decline in environmental standards](#). But Sunak's government has quietly been flooding the UK market with pollution permits, triggering a [collapse in the price of carbon](#). While the carbon price in the EU emissions trading scheme stands at €88 (£75) a tonne, in the UK it has fallen to £47.

In the US, Donald Trump's team [plans to go much further](#). A programme devised for him by fossil fuel-funded junktanks intends to rip down just about every effective law and agency protecting the living world. If he gets in again, it seems as if he doesn't intend to leave.

All this is happening against a backdrop of the most dire events and warnings. Last week, as Sunak's team was preparing his announcement of new oil and gas licences, [research published in the journal Nature Communications](#) suggested that the Atlantic meridional overturning circulation (AMOC) could collapse around mid-century. Amoc is a vast movement of water around the Atlantic, driven by the downward flow of cold, salty water (which is denser than warmer, less salty water) in the far north of the ocean. It [plays a major role](#) in transferring heat from the tropics to the north, especially to northern Europe. Without it, the average temperature in this region would be [between 3C and 8C cooler](#). The difference between the average temperature today and that of the Last Glacial Maximum 20,000 years ago (the point during the last ice age when the ice sheets were at their largest) is [approximately 6C](#).

AMOC has tipped between the "on" state and the "off" state [many times in prehistory](#). As seawater in the northern Atlantic region

warms and is diluted by meltwater running off ice and snow on land, the system reaches a critical threshold, beyond which the circulation shuts down. Scientists [have been warning](#) that, thanks to global heating, the system is [weaker than it has been for 1,000 years](#), but a tipping was deemed [unlikely this century](#). The new assessment suggests this might be optimistic.

AMOC is also a crucial regulator of global weather. We should be cautious about projecting its impacts far beyond Europe. But an [analysis for the OECD](#) suggests that, in combination with 2.5C of global heating, possible implications of a shutdown could include a profound drying of parts of Africa and India, including a major disruption to the summer monsoon, a severe decline in global food production and cascading dieback in the Amazon rainforest, through loss of rainfall. These effects remain quite speculative.

Sunak, Trump and others know what they are doing. They cannot be unaware of the heat domes and fires, the [sea surface temperature anomalies](#) and the [shocking news from Antarctica](#). Their economic and security advisers must have briefed them about the likely civilisational risks presented by the [closing of the human climate niche](#). In response, they double down on their support for the forces causing this destruction.

People seem mystified by this apparent perversity. But it's a clear manifestation of the [pollution paradox](#), which I see as essential to understanding modern politics. The most damaging companies have the greatest incentive to invest money in politics (by making donations to political parties, funding lobbyists and junktanks, hiring troll farms and microtargeters and all the other overt or covert techniques). So politics, in our money-driven system, comes to be dominated by the most damaging companies.

Sunak, Trump and many others like them are not just desperate politicians who will try anything to retain or regain power (though they are that). Nor are they simply representatives of capital. They are representatives of the dirtiest, most destructive varieties of capital, the varieties engaged in a war against humanity. In the conflict between the two existential crises, they know which side they're on.

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