

George Monbiot

Willing the End

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On both sides of the Atlantic, powerful interests seem determined to trigger the collapse of life on Earth. Why?

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 6th July 2022

It feels like the end game. In the US last week, the third perverse and highly partisan supreme court decision in a few days made American efforts to prevent climate breakdown almost impossible. Ruling in favour of the state of [West Virginia](#), the court decided that the Environmental Protection Agency is not entitled to restrict carbon dioxide emissions from power stations.

The day before, in the UK, the government's climate change committee reported a “[shocking](#)” [failure](#) by Boris Johnson's administration to meet its climate targets. So stupid and perverse are its policies on issues such as [energy saving](#) that it's hard to see this as anything other than failure by design. On the day of the supreme court ruling, the UK government also announced that it [intended to scrap](#) the law protecting the UK's most important wildlife sites.

But the final straw for me was a smaller decision. After two decades of disastrous policies that turned its rivers into [open sewers](#), Herefordshire county council, following a shift from Tory to independent control, finally did the right thing. It applied to the government to create a water protection zone, defending the River Wye against the pollution pushing it towards complete ecological collapse. But in a letter published last week, the UK's environment minister, Rebecca Pow, [refused permission](#), claiming it “would impose new and distinct

regulatory obligations on the farmers and businesses within the catchment”. This is, of course, the point.

It’s the pettiness of the decision that makes it so shocking. Even when the cost to the government is small, it seems determined to destroy everything good and valuable about this country. It’s as if, when ministers go to bed, they ask themselves, “What have I done to make the UK a worse place today?”

Just at the point at which we need a coordinated global effort to escape our existential crises – climate breakdown, ecological breakdown, the rising tide of [synthetic chemicals](#), a gathering global food emergency – those who wield power string razor wire across the exit.

When I began work as an environmental journalist in 1985, I knew I would struggle against people with a financial interest in destructive practices. But I never imagined that we would one day confront what appears to be an ideological commitment to destroying life on Earth. The UK government and the [US supreme court](#) look as if they are willing the destruction of our life support systems.

The supreme court’s ruling was neither random nor based on established legal principles. It arose from a concerted programme to replace democracy in the US with judicial dictatorship.

As Senator [Sheldon Whitehouse has documented](#), hundreds of millions of dollars in dark money (funds whose sources are unknown) were poured into the nomination and confirmation of the three judges appointed to the court by Donald Trump. Among the groups leading these campaigns was [Americans for Prosperity](#), set up by the Koch brothers: oil tycoons with a [long record](#) of funding radical rightwing causes. As an investigation by Earth Uprising shows, there’s a [strong correlation](#) between the amount of oil and gas money US senators have received, and their approval of Trump’s supreme court justice nominations.

Once the favoured justices were in place, the same networks started using their

financial power to steer their decisions. They do so through “amicus briefs”: advice notes to the court supporting a plaintiff’s position. The judicial process is meant to be unswayed by political pressure, but amicus briefs have become one of the most powerful of all lobbying tools. As Whitehouse points out, the funders of these briefs are “not just ‘friends of the court’ – in many cases, they are quite literally friends of the judges they have put on the court”.

While some oligarchs lobby within the judicial system, others operate to great effect outside it, distorting public perceptions about such rulings through a barrage of propaganda in the media. No one, arguably, has done more to stymie effective environmental action than Rupert Murdoch.

In this case, the supreme court has strayed [way beyond](#) its mandate of interpreting the law, into the territory of the executive and the legislature: making the law. It is imposing policies that would never survive democratic scrutiny, if they were put to the vote. By seizing control of [regulatory power](#), it sets a precedent that could stymie almost any democratic decision.

All this might seem incomprehensible. Why would anyone want to trash the living world? Surely even billionaires want a habitable and beautiful planet? Don’t they like snorkelling on coral reefs, salmon fishing in pristine rivers, skiing on snowy mountains? We suffer from a deep incomprehension of why such people act as they do. We fail to distinguish preferences from interests, and interests from power. It is hard for those of us who have no desire for power over others to understand people who do. So we are baffled by the decisions they make, and attribute them to other, improbable causes. Because we do not understand them, we are the more easily manipulated.

The media often represent politicians’ interests as if they were mere political preferences. Very rarely is the lobbying and political funding behind a decision explained in the news. The Conservatives don’t permit intensive livestock units and sewage treatment works to pour filth into rivers because they like pollution. They do so on behalf of the powerful interests to whom they feel obliged, such as the water companies and their shareholders, the farming lobbies and the

billionaire press.

But even financial interests fail fully to explain what's going on. The oligarchs seeking to stamp out US democracy have gone way beyond the point of attending only to their net worth. It's no longer about money for them. It's about brute power: about watching the world bow down before them. For this rush of power, they would forfeit the Earth.

All these cases expose the same political vulnerability: the ease with which democracy is crushed by the power of money. We cannot protect the living world, or women's reproductive rights, or anything else we value until we get the money out of politics, and break up the media empires that make a mockery of informed political consent.

Since 1985, I've been told we don't have time to change the system: we should concentrate only on single issues. But we've never had time not to change the system. In fact, because of the way in which [social attitudes can suddenly tip](#), system change can happen much faster than incrementalism. Until we change our political systems, making it impossible for the rich to buy the decisions they want, we will lose not only individual cases. We will lose everything.

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