

George Monbiot

How About Never?

23rd November 2022

Powerful governments have no intention of preventing climate breakdown.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 18th November 2022

The chances of any one person **being born** were calculated by the life coach Dr Ali Binazir. He multiplied the probability of your parents meeting, mating and conceiving by the chances of a particular sperm and egg fusing; of all your human and hominid ancestors reaching reproductive age; and of all them successfully reproducing. He arrived at a figure of one in 10 to the power of 2,640,000. In other words, a 10 followed by 2.6m zeros. It's an unimaginable, miraculous number. Yet here we are.

The chances of being alive right now, as a member of one of the first generations to know the path it is on, and one of the last that can change it, must add several more zeros to this crazy number. The chances of being the president or prime minister of your nation at this critical moment ... well you get the idea.

So how have heads of government chosen to use this miracle? To extend our time on Earth, earning the gratitude of all the improbable humans of the future? No. They have chosen to do nothing. Nothing that has a realistic chance, in this contest of probabilities, of changing our trajectory. They had a choice at the Cop27 meeting in Sharm el-Sheikh of defending the habitable planet or appeasing their sponsors. They went with the sponsors.

We know how way leads on to way, how the power amassed through corrupt decisions in previous generations drives the corrupt decisions of our time. We know that the licence granted to fossil fuel companies by 50 years of failure has enabled them to make stupendous profits – **\$2.8bn a day** on average across that entire period – and that they need invest only a fraction of this money in politics to buy every politician and every political decision they want.

We know that the easiest way for a politician to secure power is to appease those who

already possess it, those whose power transcends elections: the oil barons, the media barons, the corporations and financial markets. We know that this power appoints the worst possible people at the worst possible time. We know how, as elderly billionaires seek to grab ever more of the life that slips from them, they create a death cult.

Fifty years, you ask? Yes, the [first international summit](#) that claimed to address the environmental crisis took place in 1972. A handful of powerful nations, including the UK and US, convened what their secret minutes called an “informal and confidential” body at that summit, whose purpose, the notes show, was to ensure poorer countries did not get what they wanted, and that [no international standards would be agreed](#) on pollution or environmental quality.

They learned an important lesson there. You make the threats to your sponsors go away by nodding and smiling, saying the right things in public, then blocking effective measures behind closed doors. When they arrived at Cop27 this year, they had no intention even of paying the money [they had promised](#) to poorer nations to help them adapt – if such a thing is possible – to climate breakdown, let alone seeking to prevent that breakdown from happening.

So here we are, after 50 years of engineered failure, with not one of the 40 markers of climate action on track [to meet the targets](#) governments have agreed. In the first nine months of this year, the seven biggest private sector oil companies made around [\\$150bn in profits](#). Yet governments continue to supplement this loot by granting oil and gas companies [\\$64bn a year](#) in public subsidies.

There are no longer any feasible means of preventing more than [1.5C of global heating](#) if new oil and gas fields are developed. Yet fossil-fuel companies, with the encouragement of the governments that either own or license them, are planning a [major investment surge](#) between 2023 and 2025. The biggest planned expansions, by a long way, are in the US. The soft facts – the vague and unsecured promises at Sharm el-Sheikh about curbing consumption – count for nothing against the hard facts of extending production.

We no longer need to speculate about where this path might lead: we have stepped through the gates. The floods in Pakistan that [displaced 33 million people](#) and washed away 3 million acres of soil followed a [crop-shrivelling heatwave](#). This is the whipsaw effect predicted in scientific papers: of moderate weather giving way to a [violent cycle of extremes](#). It's hard to see how the country will ever recover from the economic shocks of these disasters: as it starts to pick itself up, it's likely to be knocked down by another one.

China this year, though this was sparsely reported in the western media, suffered not only the greatest heatwave in its instrumental record, but the [greatest heat anomaly](#) ever recorded anywhere. The [devastating drought](#) in the Horn of Africa, now in its fifth year, offers a glimpse of what “uninhabitable” may look like.

The rich world’s governments arrived at the conference in Egypt saying “it’s now or never”. They left saying “how about never?”. We sail through every target and objective, red line and promised restraint towards a future in which the possibility of anyone’s existence starts to dwindle towards zero. Every life is a madly improbable gift. For how much longer will we sit and watch while our governments throw it all away?

www.monbiot.com

POSTED IN [CLIMATE BREAKDOWN](#)

[Policies \(T&Cs, Privacy, Cookies\)](#)

[Follow George on Twitter](#)

[Get the latest articles by email](#)

© 2022 George Monbiot

Site by Rui Zhang

