

George Monbiot

Payday

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It's not decarbonisation that's unaffordable. It's climate breakdown.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 23rd March 2022

While all eyes were on another horror, our war against the living world went nuclear. Over the weekend, temperatures at some weather stations in the Arctic [rose to 30C above normal](#). Simultaneously, at certain weather stations in the Antarctic they hit 40C above normal. Two events, albeit off the scale, do not make a trend. But as part of a gathering record of extreme and chaotic weather, these unprecedented, simultaneous anomalies are terrifying.

On their heels came news of another horrific event: mass coral bleaching on the Great Barrier Reef during [a La Niña year](#). La Niña is the cool phase of the Pacific cycle. Until now, widespread bleaching had happened only during the warmer El Niño years. The likely impacts of the next [El Niño](#) are too awful to contemplate.

We knew that climate breakdown would happen abruptly. Earth systems that seemed stable, lives that seemed safe, would slip from under us. All that we took for granted would suddenly be in play. It could be happening now.

A characteristic of complex systems is that it's hard to tell how close to their critical thresholds they may be until they have been crossed. Are we now passing the tipping points? The only rational response is to act as if it's not too late, and as if we have the briefest of opportunities to stabilise the system before it slides.

Instead, as if to announce its intention to push us past the point of no return, the

UK government floated [plans to cut fuel duty this week](#). Since the COP26 climate summit last November, it has approved [one new oil and gas field in the North Sea](#) and proposes to approve [six more](#). A paper published [yesterday](#) by Dr Dan Calverley and Prof Kevin Anderson at the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research shows that to permit just a 50% chance of staying within 1.5C of heating, rich nations need to end all oil and gas production by 2034. In other words, just as these new concessions start to deliver, they will need to be closed down.

But perversity is the norm. The government discourages energy efficiency improvements by [subjecting them](#) to the highest rate of VAT (20%). When it slashed green renovation grants in 2013, the number of loft insulations fell from 1.6m a year [to 126,000](#), and the rate has never recovered. We could see this as an experiment: what happens when you remove government incentives and leave it to “the market”? Ah yes, we discover that energy transition is entirely dependent on effective state policy.

As the government’s own Climate Change Committee [observed this month](#), though, the UK’s strategy for decarbonising buildings relies on “voluntary targets” and “an untested market-based approach”. There are massive funding gaps, missing plans and a shocking absence of regulatory levers: it’s impossible to see on the basis of current policy how the government could meet even its own pathetic targets, let alone contribute meaningfully to preventing climate breakdown.

Climate denial comes in waves. The current variety, endlessly recited by rightwing Tory MPs, is to insist that the energy transition is “unaffordable”. But as the committee’s report shows, the average total cost of decarbonising homes is under £10,000. Even if every home in the UK were fully renovated, it would cost less, on these figures, than the government’s spending on either the pandemic or the 2008 financial crisis. The jobs created would ensure that it recouped at least some of the money. Yet again, we must ask ourselves why governments bail out banks but not the planet.

Some have begun to step up. In Italy, the government provides [a remarkable 110%](#) of the cost of home energy improvements, which it pays as a five-year tax credit (the 10% covers financial and transaction costs). This superbonus scheme [pays for everything](#): insulation, ventilation, new windows and doors, solar panels, heat pumps. It has design flaws – for example, it creates no incentive for builders to [limit their costs](#) and was, at first, [open to fraud](#) – but these issues could be easily addressed.

Finland has equipped roughly one-third of its homes with [heat pumps](#). It installs about twice as many every year as the UK does, though it has only about one tenth of the number of homes. Almost every day, I hear professional ignoramuses announce that “heat pumps wouldn’t work in our cold climate”. But they work just fine in Finland, which is much colder.

The Netherlands proposes to disconnect all its homes from [the gas grid](#). In Estonia, the capital city, Tallinn, and most other counties offer [free public transport](#). If Italy and Estonia can afford it, so can we.

As the Climate Change Committee [points out](#), if gas prices remain as high as they are at the moment, decarbonising the whole economy would save money (0.5% of GDP). It would also lift people out of fuel poverty, which is [greatly exacerbated](#) by leaky homes and a reliance on fossil fuels. It would ensure that we were [no longer beholden](#) to Vladimir Putin and other fossil-fuelled autocrats.

The truth is that [we can’t afford not to](#) transform our economies. It’s not decarbonisation that’s unaffordable; it’s climate breakdown. If climate systems tip, our money will be as worthless as Boris Johnson’s promises. Yet this government values it above life itself.

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