

Dr Duncan Nimmo – Written Evidence (LBC0051)

Modest Outline Blueprint for a Sustainable Global Future

Based on Lessons from the Covid-19 Pandemic

Preface

I am an "ordinary member of the public", retired, broadly on the left in politics, and without specialist expertise on the questions at issue (my title references a Ph.D in medieval religious history). I had however been thinking about these questions intermittently for several years, when the advent of Covid-19 gave the matter a new focus and immediacy. In pursuing it I have been struck, first, by the difficulty in finding any logically argued, comprehensive view of the whole global issue intended to provide a blueprint for global action; secondly, by commentators' – and especially politicians'- apparent reluctance to grasp, let alone engage with, the extreme changes in thought and lifestyle the unprecedented situation facing us demands. My "Blueprint" is a layman's modest attempt to remedy these two defects. My fervent hope is that the Committee's Inquiry will do the same in full professional fashion.

I have previously sent my "Blueprint" to my (Tory) MP Stuart Anderson, from whom I have received a positive and informative reply; and am in the process of submitting it to the Labour Party Policy Forum and the Reset Inquiry launched by the APPG on a Green New Deal. As the document is slightly under 3000 words, I have not included a summary.

THE COVID-19 EMERGENCY OFFERS ONE GREAT BENEFIT : A TEST-BED FOR HOW TO DEAL WITH THAT GREATER THREAT, THE ENVIRONMENTAL EMERGENCY.

1. On top of and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic, the world faces an even greater challenge, which unchecked could wipe out humanity: the interlinked threats of climate emergency, environmental emergency and global inequality. Their combined challenge may often seem insurmountable. Yet there is some hope from the Covid-19 pandemic itself: the ways governments have responded to it, both in the UK and globally, offer pointers, even indeed a springboard, to a solution to the emergency. Such a solution involves major changes to current human behaviour and expectations, and to social / political organisation, which would often be unpopular and would be difficult to achieve. But achieve them we must, or the planet will become incapable of sustaining human life as we know it.

2. The essence of the triple threat identified above is humanity's over-consumption of the earth's natural resources, combined with their unequal distribution, both between countries and within individual countries. It follows that the global response must be a reduction in the overall use of natural resources to a sustainable level, and a fairer distribution of the remaining reduced resources between and within societies.

3. The implications are stark, for both societies and individuals. As many now argue, there can be no question of a "return to the status quo" after the pandemic; on the contrary, we need nothing less than a new style of human living. Individuals in the richer countries will be required to reduce their consumption by

foregoing some, perhaps many of the comforts and luxuries to which they have become accustomed, and feel entitled; this will appear as a reduction in their wealth and standard of living – though that is not necessarily the same as their quality of life (see no. 4 below). To achieve a more equal distribution of the reduced overall wealth of society, the richest individuals will have to accept a significant transfer of their riches to the less well off. All, but the more so the better off they are, will have to accept orders from government, and limits on their freedoms, which would have been unthinkable prior to the pandemic, but which that has shown can be imposed in the face of dire necessity. For their part governments will be required to accept a reduction of their GDP to the extent that it consumes an unsustainable amount of natural resources; they will also have to bring about that fairer distribution of the lower GDP among the population referred to above; at the same time, to achieve greater equality and hopefully harmony among nations, the richer ones will be called upon to share a greater part of their diminished GDP with the poorer ones than at present. To bring about such transformations, governments will have to be steadfast and use all their authority to resist any opposition from a myriad vested interests among their citizens who will be materially, though not necessarily in a moral or spiritual sense, the poorer for them. In the endlessly repeated phrase of the UK lockdown – only magnified many times – it will be imperative for them to “take unpopular decisions”.

4. The scenario is daunting.. What steps can be suggested, including those based on the Covid-19 experience, to achieve it?

5. The imminent threat to the human future is tantamount to a situation of war, and it requires in effect a wartime response. This reality must be stamped into the public consciousness. Something analogous was achieved with considerable success regarding Covid-19 in the UK and many other countries, particularly in the early stages. A visibly rising death toll was of course persuasive, but the key to driving the message home was clear and repeated communication by government (in those countries which stifled the message, the outcome remains to be seen). The task of embedding the triple climate-ecological-inequality threat in public awareness is however greater than with the Covid-19 threat. There is not the same clear prospect of imminent death to concentrate minds, and the number and political clout of “deniers” is much larger. So what is required is a massive and constant campaign of public education. This should begin with a declaration of emergency at the global institutional level, and involve major funding and a leading role for the relevant science, and an unrelenting campaign against the deniers. Since these include some powerful political individuals and forces, that campaign would likely involve political action at international level. The overall message must be that the triple emergency, though less clear and immediate, is no less a matter of life and death than Covid-19.

6. Once a real and imminent threat to human life, equivalent to wartime, is securely lodged in public consciousness, the Covid-19 experience shows that governments can demand quite radical changes in public behaviour and expectations, enforced if need be by coercive state power. For Covid-19 in the UK the changes were summed up as “lockdown”. Many elements of lockdown can be transferred directly to the handling of our triple existential threat; with further measures added, the outline of a blueprint to control it emerges. We may start with a clear, specific element from the lockdown; very rapidly it branches out into many others.

1. Travel Restrictions. In this context air travel, with all its associated elements, from aircraft manufacture to a worldwide tourism industry, has been to the fore; but transport by road, rail and sea are close behind. The

measures required are many and various, and provide an object lesson in how peoples' lifestyle expectations will have to change. Examples might be:

- a) Rationing of flights, particularly for leisure / tourism purposes; fair taxation of air travel; improved aircraft fuel efficiency and fuels; development of home working and video- rather than in-person meetings.
- b) For ground transport: a much more rapid phasing out of petrol and diesel power, and their replacement by electric, than currently planned, along with measures to develop public and discourage private transport; plus encouragement of cycling and walking instead of wheeled travel, with possible implications for the location of housing in relation to work-places and schools.
- c) For sea transport: the development of cleaner and quieter propulsion; an overall reduction in freight carried, achieved by a reduction in the carriage of non-essential goods, plus the maximum sourcing of goods from local rather than distant markets; drastic reduction in the cruise ship industry, possibly involving strict rationing; a ban on the discharge of all waste and rubbish into the sea. This topic introduces the issue of the fishing industry; this needs to retreat from current environmentally destructive practices to sustainable ones, in the many ways that environmental groups have discussed.

2. **Diet.** The references to sourcing goods, which would include food, from local markets, and to the fishing industry, raise the issue of diet in general. On this the scientific evidence demands, for the sake of a sustainable future, a major reduction in the consumption of meat, also some dairy products. That involves for many a major change in lifestyle, and would doubtless be deeply unpopular in many quarters, individual and corporate.
3. **Measuring and Costing Emissions.** The main goal of the steps just outlined is a reduction in the emission of greenhouse gases. This points to a general principle: it should become normal, indeed second nature, to measure and take account of the emissions, in shorthand the carbon footprint, of our actions – and to pay for them. The principle should be applied particularly to all large-scale greenhouse-gas emitting industry. This would be a revolutionary undertaking; but it is worth recalling that, on a much smaller scale, local government Councils in the UK have learnt to consider as a matter of course whether their decisions have implications for finance, legal or equality issues. On this topic it goes without saying that an essential contribution to the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions will come from the switch from fossil-fuel to renewable-source energy.
4. **Economic Growth: GDP vs. GDH .** The principle of measuring and taxing, so as to reduce, environmentally damaging activity raises the issue of economic growth as a goal of public policy. Hitherto this has seemed sacrosanct. No longer. Henceforth there must be a new principle, required by the need to reduce global consumption of the earth's resources: economic growth, at both national and global level, is desirable only within the limits of sustainability. This will be a major issue for economists, and, at the global level, for international relations. There are already pointers to the new way of thinking and measuring political success required in the concept of "Gross Domestic Happiness" in place of "Gross Domestic Product". This is the point at which to anchor the brief comment above that a reduction in (economic) standard of living is not necessarily the same as a reduction in quality of life. In particular the richer nations will need to move towards a simpler, more frugal lifestyle, partly because they will be called on for economic support to the poorer ones. The result will be a trend towards the equalisation of

resources among nations; this should benefit both historically richer and poorer through a damping of tensions between them, a reduction of uncontrollable international migration driven by inequality, and a lessening of overexploitation of natural resources by the poorer in an effort to catch up with the richer.

5. **Work, Unemployment, State Support.** The Covid-19 pandemic has had a devastating effect on employment, and it seems possible that the disease, and this effect, may last in diluted form for years. On top of that the general principle of reducing global consumption, and its specific applications such as those outlined above, plus the predicted impact of the spread of AI, will cause further mass unemployment. There are hopes that this may be balanced by the growth of new jobs required by a sustainable world and furnished by digital technology; an example is the jobs expected from the development of renewable energy sources, and other "green" policy initiatives. Even so it seems unlikely that the new jobs will make up for all the old ones, and in any case it will take time for them to be created. Therefore governments will for the foreseeable future be confronted by widespread unemployment – potentially a disastrous state, psychologically as well as financially, for those affected. The experience of lockdown suggests some ways to deal with the problem.
 - a) Governments will be pressured from all sides, notably by both corporations and unions, to preserve all existing businesses and jobs. This would be the worst kind of that "return to the status quo" which was ruled out at the start of this discussion; governments must resist it.
 - b) Unemployment can be mitigated by new patterns of working, such as job sharing or reducing individuals' working hours.
 - c) Consequentially, but more radically, new concepts of work / life balance could be normalised, whereby individuals would derive satisfaction, a sense of purpose, and much of their identity, from many roles and activities other than work, including voluntary work.
 - d) A key contribution to such activities and roles could be made by many forms of educational, craft and artistic activity; their funding would be a high priority.
 - e) The essential underpinning for all these steps would be state funding for those individuals unable to support themselves from the limited work opportunities available – in effect an entirely new system of social security; together with the funding necessary for their increased educational and artistic activities. Both these types of funding already exist in striking ways in the UK under lockdown. In the longer term, the former seems to point towards that "universal basic income" which has been internationally the subject of considerable discussion, and a few trials. For the latter, a framework already exists, and could be readily enhanced; though the physical structures for educational, artistic and cultural activities encounter particular difficulties with the social distancing required by any dangerously active virus.
6. **Financing : Taxation.** Unless and until there emerge new forms of fully sustainable wealth creation, the above suggests that governments will have to take on increased financial responsibilities at the very moment that economic activity and income, for both the state and individuals, will decrease. At the same time one part of the triple threat we identified at the start was inequality between individuals. The only possible solution to the former difficulty also, happily, reduces the latter: serious taxation of the wealthiest, both individual and corporate, until the gap between rich and

poor reduces to a politically and morally acceptable level. The means to achieve this would be a matter of doubtless lively debate; but in principle the obvious approach would seem to be some kind of wealth tax or taxes. To put the matter another way, the finance essential for increased government responsibilities should be drawn from existing wealth, individual and corporate, rather than from wealth created anew by unacceptable environmentally destructive means.

7. **Population Restraint.** Since the essential problem before us is humans' over-consumption of natural resources, some constraint on human population growth seems highly desirable. How this should be effected is a difficult question, but it must be faced and answered.
8. **Arms Control.** This is flagged up here because it seems relevant to the issue of sustainability, but is almost never included in discussion of it – as though arms spending were somehow sacrosanct and beyond debate. The reasons are fairly obvious. Nevertheless it seems important to know how much all the world's armed forces of every kind contribute to global warming and environmental degradation. Relatively it may be little or much; but to formulate effective policy we need to know. If it is the latter, a boost will be given to the pursuit of arms control negotiations, which is surely desirable in its own right.

CONCLUSION

7. Stimulated by, and learning from the international, especially the UK response to the challenge of Covid-19, this is a sketch of a global response to the even greater challenge posed to humans by climate emergency, environmental emergency and global inequalities. The response amounts to forsaking many practices and ideas followed broadly since the industrial revolution, and adopting new ideas and practices, in sum a new way of human living: one characterised by lower wealth and consumption in currently rich societies, together with a reorientation to more frugal, less work-centred, more cultural activities; a stronger role for governments in defining, enforcing, and also financially supporting the new style of life; and more equal sharing of the (presumptively diminished) overall stock of wealth both within and between societies.

8. Such a reorientation of human life, such a transformation of traditional practices, expectations and aspirations, would demand great change on all sides, but particularly perhaps from those now wealthy, both individuals and societies – and most particularly from the advocates, whether society or individual, of global capitalism, the free market and minimum state intervention.

9. How might such a radical transformation be brought about? There could be no question of the use of force, hence the only possibility would be by persuasion. This implies a massive and sustained campaign of education, founded on a comprehensive and unassailable, and hence more generously funded, basis in science; plus a parallel campaign of unremitting argument and pressure exerted by individuals and states against the sceptics, whether states or individuals.

10. To conduct such campaigns probably requires new structures. The ideal would seem to be a global alliance of all "green" political parties, NGOs and pressure groups, and well-disposed governments and United Nations bodies, designed both to provide the campaigns' intellectual underpinning, and to exert social and political pressure on the sceptics at all levels of international society.

11. However effective the persuasion, we must recognise that, with the best will in the world, change of the magnitude suggested takes time. Yet it is also the conclusion of our existing science that dealing with our triple emergency is extremely urgent. Finding the right course between these two opposing imperatives will be one of the most difficult aspects of the whole undertaking.

12. Yet the attempt must be tried. If it succeeds, humanity may be set on a new, environmentally sustainable, more friendly, more individually fulfilling path. If not, the outlook for both humans and the life we share the planet with is dire. That is the fundamental threat that can be applied to change even the most sceptical minds and spur them to planet-saving action.

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