

## Mr Titus Alexander – Written Evidence (LBC0055)

### Submission to the House of Lords COVID-19 Committee on the long- term implications of the pandemic for our economy and our society

Written evidence from Titus Alexander, co-founder of Democracy Matters, Parenting Education & Support Forum, Charter 99, Action for a Global Climate Community, and Britain After Covid, in personal capacity

This is a most welcome inquiry. I hope the Committee can bring the many discussions about how to 'Build Back Better', 'Build Bridges to the Future', the BBC's Rethink podcast, etc., into Parliament, because I fear many people believe Parliament and the Government do not listening and are unable to address the many issues raised by the pandemic. Please show that people are heard.

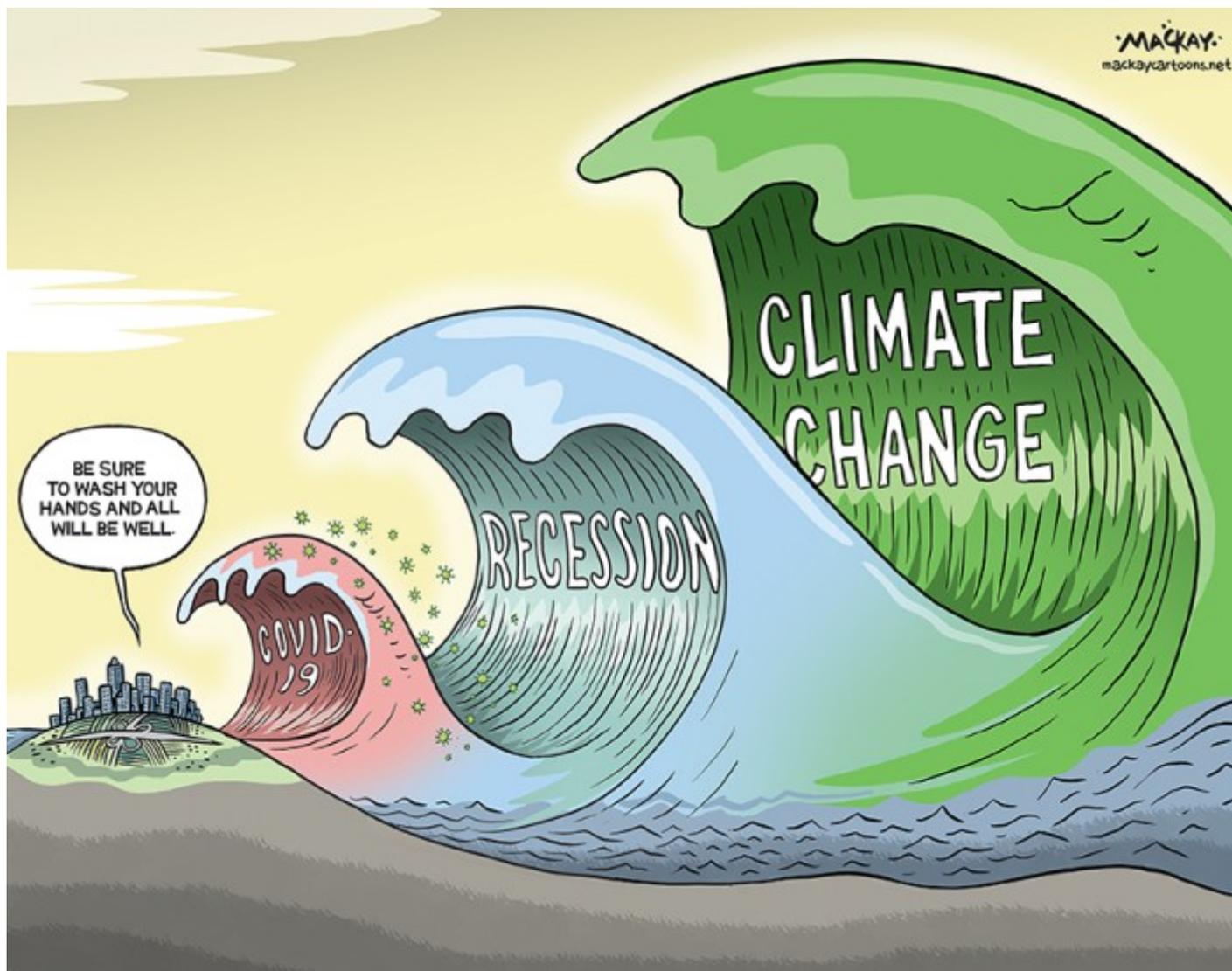
#### 1. Are there any positives from this pandemic?

Yes. The many local community initiatives, public services and organisations that mobilised support for people in response to the crisis are significant.

The rapid response of the Chancellor and Bank of England to protect livelihoods, as well as the construction of Nightingale hospitals, have been impressive, particularly when compared with slow and often confusing response by the Government as a whole.

#### 2. What are the things that you are most worried about?

Canadian [cartoonist Graeme Mackay](#) expressed my worries best on 11 March:



Covid is a blip compared with the climate crisis, for which we are even less prepared.

The Government appears to have abdicated responsibility for hosting the most important climate conference this century. Since the Prime Minister announced on 17 October 2019 that he will chair a new Cabinet Committee on Climate Change I gather he has only chaired one meeting, on 4 March.

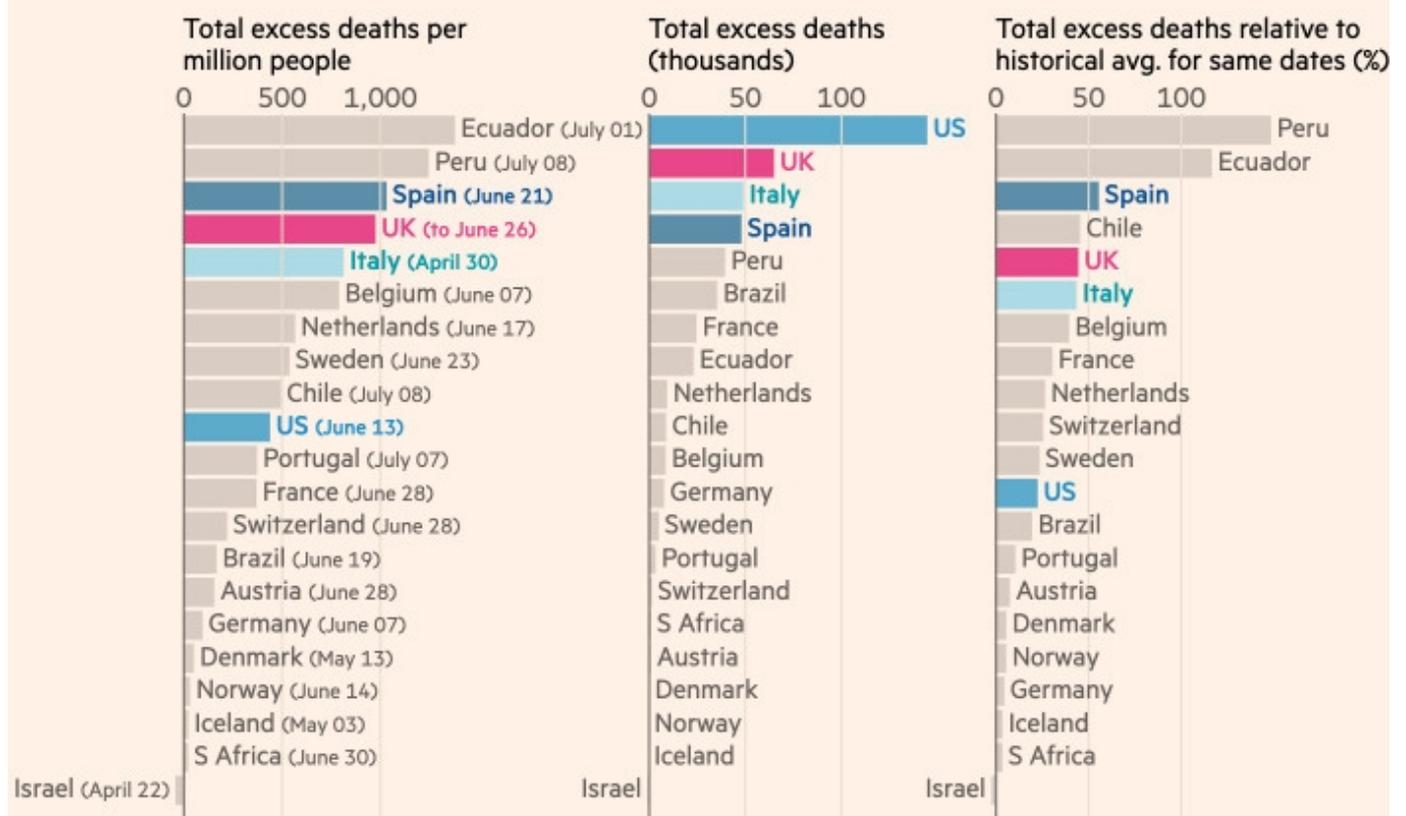
On 5 June I watched the UNFCCC launch its [Race to Zero](#) campaign for CoP26 online. Secretary of State Alok Sharma [gave an impressive speech](#), saying "COP26 can be a moment where the world unites behind a fairer, greener recovery from the effects of Covid-19. A recovery which delivers for both our people and our planet." But I have not heard any Minister mention it in the UK. There has been no public launch of a campaign to tackle the biggest, most serious issue facing the country and humanity.

Lord Deben, chair of the Committee on Climate, said resuscitating the economy after Covid can only be done "by undertaking measures which also will work towards combating climate change." He said *all* governments have done far too little too late and the UK is set to miss its fourth and fifth carbon budgets. He also listed measures the Government could take ([The House](#) 22 June).

Failings in leadership in the global effort on climate will cost our future, not just the tens of thousands of excess deaths caused by multiple mistakes in managing the coronavirus (see [data from FT](#), updated daily).

## UK has one of the highest excess deaths rates among countries producing comparable data

Measures of excess mortality\* by country, during Covid outbreaks



\*Number of deaths observed in excess of historical average for same time of year. Numbers may not reflect latest situation due to lags in registration. Source: FT analysis of mortality data. Data updated July 13. Data is shown for all countries where all-cause mortality figures have been published

Comparative deaths are a rough indication of each countries' competence in responding to the pandemic. The UK has much to learn from others.

One important long-term implication of the pandemic is the urgent need to **improve our collective ability to assess and plan for risks.**

Scientists repeatedly warned governments to prepare for pandemics. In 2013 the [World Bank](#) estimated that a worldwide flu epidemic could cause over millions of deaths and \$3tr in economic losses. Bill Gates warned [We're not ready for the next outbreak](#), drawing lessons from Ebola. He contrasted military preparedness with the neglect of health risks. In the UK a 600 page [National Security Risk Assessment](#) in 2019 warned that a pandemic could cause 65,500 deaths and cost £2.35 trillion. It was not acted on and is close to being fulfilled.

Shortly after the outbreak of Covid-19 in China, [The Lancet](#) warned it "could be about to become a global epidemic ... preparedness plans should be readied for deployment at short notice, including securing supply chains of pharmaceuticals, personal protective equipment, hospital supplies, and the necessary human resources to deal with the consequences of a global outbreak of this magnitude."

This message did not get through, with tragic consequences. The UK only responded effectively after scientists called for action and Imperial College published a warning that intensive care units were likely to be overwhelmed.

I have worked on global issues, including climate change, for several decades, supporting NGOs at most UNFCCC conferences in Europe from the first CoP in Berlin in 1995 to the 14<sup>th</sup> in Poland, taking part in many meetings in between. I worked with Ministers and civil servants from the UK and elsewhere, including a high-level seminar with EU President Barroso and Indian Prime Minister Modi's scientific advisory team. I have seen the immense diplomatic and political effort it takes to get agreement. None of these were sufficient for the task, but they were more committed and capable than the present Government.

In 1988 hundreds of scientists warned that CO2 emissions are a "major threat to international security and are already having harmful consequences over many parts of the globe". They advised cutting emissions 20% below the 1988 level by 2005 ([Source](#)). Fossil fuel interests spent over \$2bn lobbying against action on climate between 2000 and 2016 in the US alone ([Nature](#)).

Global emissions have more than doubled since 1988 (graph from [Union of Concerned Scientists 2014](#)), putting our future at risk.

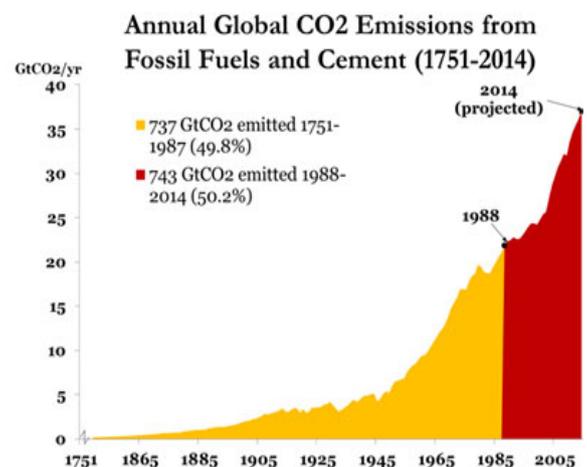
Coronavirus is a minor problem compared with climate. There is no active opposition and the level of international cooperation is relatively high. This makes the UK's track record in dealing with the virus an alarming omen for the greater challenges of creating a sustainable recovery, reducing domestic greenhouse gasses *and* achieving a successful international agreement.

To sum up, I am most worried about the Government's ability to

1. Manage an environmentally sustainable economic recovery from Covid19
2. Engage the public and businesses in an effective 'Race to Zero'
3. Lead an international diplomatic effort to secure a robust agreement to cut global greenhouse gas emissions and transition to a zero-carbon economy.

We will live with the virus for many years. Our poorest communities will be even more disadvantaged as a result. Mistakes in managing the crisis, coupled with Brexit, are likely to lead to an independent Scotland, a united Ireland and a reduced role for England in the world. This will benefit citizens if governments pay more attention to their needs and opportunities.

But the climate crisis will create bigger disasters in the decades ahead, for which we are not prepared. The pandemic is (yet another) wake-up call.



### 3. What do you most hope changes for the better?

Despite shortcomings in the Government's response, there have been many positive steps that give hope for the future, including the fact that:

- ✓ Supplies of food and essential goods continued uninterrupted, despite much of the economy being put on hold, shows resilience. It also shows that we can pause the economy without causing too much harm. The transition to a zero-carbon economy could be managed much better and create new opportunities without closing or pausing the economy.
- ✓ Most people showed a high degree of social solidarity, through mutual aid groups, clapping for the NHS, and following guidelines to protect the common good. These are hopeful signs that the country can pull together in response to the challenges of recovery and climate emergency.
- ✓ Major issues such as social care, inequality, domestic violence and Black Lives Matter, have come to the fore and received more attention.
- ✓ The Government gave a central and visible role to scientific advisers, while maintaining a clear distinction between political responsibility. This gives hope that the Government could give more prominence to climate science.
- ✓ The Bank of England and Treasury developed Quantitative Easing as a form of monetary financing to fund people's livelihoods during the crisis, reducing the scale of unemployment and collapse of enterprises to a manageable level. Debt-free monetary financing ('New Monetary Theory') offers a constructive way to finance the recovery and transition to a zero-carbon economy.
- ✓ The Government mobilised immense resources to protect people's health and livelihoods. This showed that the state can play a constructive role in society and gives hope that it could choose to improve the capacity of the state, rather than treating it as a burden to be reduced.
- ✓ The Government responded positively to appeals for international aid and collaborated with the WHO, despite the US decision to withdraw from it.

It is easy to take these factors for granted, but comparison with the US, Brazil and a few other countries shows how important they are. I hope that the tens of thousands of personal tragedies and economic shock caused by the pandemic will lead the Government to develop a more constructive, collaborative and competent role for the state at a local, national and global level.

I hope the government will soon set up an independent inquiry to learn lessons in detail, rather than to allocate blame, in order to equip the country to deal with the greater challenges ahead.

### Conclusions and recommendations

In conclusion, I hope the Committee will seek evidence to explore these points and the following recommendations which arise from them:

1. Recognise and support the mutual aid provided by many community groups by **restoring funding and support for infrastructure local organisations**, such as Councils of Voluntary Services, Development Trusts, Family Centres, Women's Refuges, Community and Tenants' Associations, Settlements, etc., to create a resilient, independent community sector in every neighbourhood.
2. Set up a **National Recovery Council**, including representatives of civil society, business, trades unions, local governments, public services and scientists, to engage the public in a sustained conversation about priorities and projects to recover from the pandemic and 'build back better'.

3. Launch a national **Race to Zero** information campaign to drive action on the climate emergency and raise the profile of the Committee on Climate Change and its scientific advisers to match that of SAGE, with weekly press conferences by leading politicians, scientists and members of the National Recovery Council.
4. Ask the Chancellor to add a 'Net-Zero Rule' and Environmental Dimension to its '[Five Case Model](#)' in the [Treasury Green Book](#) to ensure that all financial decisions contribute to the Net-Zero target and our long-term sustainability as a country.
5. Establish a statutory requirement for firms to disclose and reduce their carbon footprint (as recommended by [Mark Carney](#), see [Joining the dots](#)) and impact accounting (see [GSG conference 9-11 September](#)).
6. Establish a transparent and accountable legal framework for direct monetary financing ('Quantitative Easing') as a new monetary policy, to finance the recovery and transition a zero-carbon economy.

The Government has committed a great deal of money for public information and infrastructure to leave the EU and manage the pandemic. The climate emergency has much bigger long-term implications for our economy and society than either of these events. Lessons from the pandemic should be used to equip the country transform the economy and lead the world in avoiding the worst

This cartoon described the problem in 2007. Since then public opinion in the UK has accepted the need for action on climate. Politicians have an opportunity to show real leadership. I hope your report will contribute lessons and a sense of urgency to this task.

23 July 2020

