



What Al Gore Hasn't Told You About Global Warming

By David Morris, AlterNet

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Al Gore is our generation's Paul Revere. Riding hard through the country, he warns us of the impending arrival of climatic disaster. He's proven an astonishingly effective messenger. *An Inconvenient Truth* may receive an Oscar for Best Documentary. Overflow crowds greet his presentations with standing ovations.

Which, come to think of it, is odd. When has someone ever delivered such an ominous message to such tumultuous applause? (Aside from those who insist we are in the end times and the rapture is near.)

In a recent speech to a standing-room-only audience at the New York University School of Law, Gore declared, "We are moving closer to several 'tipping points' that could -- within as little as 10 years -- make it impossible for us to avoid irretrievable damage to the planet's habitability for human civilization." The audience cheered wildly. Presumably audiences are not cheered by the prospect of imminent catastrophe. So what is going on here?

British journalist George Monbiot, author of *Heat: How to Stop the Planet from Burning* (Doubleday, 2006) has a theory.

"We wish our governments to pretend to act," he writes. "We get the moral satisfaction of saying what we know to be right, without the discomfort of doing it. My fear is that the political parties in most rich nations have already recognized this. They know that we want tough targets, but that we also want those targets to be missed. They know that we will grumble about their failure to curb climate change, but that we will not take to the streets. They know that nobody ever rioted for austerity."

Austerity? Hold on. Al Gore and the rest of the U.S. environmental movement never utter the word "austerity." Their word of choice is "opportunity." The prospect of global warming, they maintain, can serve as a much-needed catalyst to spur us to action. A large dose of political will may be required, but we need not anticipate

economic pain. We can stop global warming in its tracks, expand our economy and improve our quality of life. We can, in other words, do good and do quite well. A leading environmentalist, for whom I have a great deal of admiration, summed up his position to an interviewer, "I can't stand it when people say, 'Taking action on climate change is going to be extremely difficult.'"

And there's the rub, as dear Hamlet would say. By claiming we can solve the problem of climate change painlessly, environmentalists confuse us. They offer stark and rigorous presentations terrifying us about the near-term, dire consequences of global warming. And then they offer generalized, almost blithe assurances about how we can avoid these dire consequences without great sacrifice. We are horrified and soothed at the same time. It's a dangerous strategy. Many who focus on the catastrophic present-day images of *An Inconvenient Truth* believe we have gone beyond the point of no return, which leads to cynicism and passivity. Those who are spurred to action believe that buying a hybrid car or taking an eco-vacation will address the problem.

Indeed, the "take action" section of Al Gore's website, www.climatecrisis.net recommends the following steps. Put on a sweater. Use more efficient light bulbs. Turn the thermostat down 2 degrees. Drive less.

I'm sure Al Gore knows that even if millions of individuals were to adopt such actions, the pace of ecological disaster would not slow one whit. I presume he views these actions as a way for us to demonstrate our willingness accept responsibility for our consumption habits. The next, and far more important, step is to persuade us to work collectively and aggressively for bold new policies. A recent letter from Al Gore, emailed from MoveOn.org asked us to do just that by signing a petition to push Congress to action.

Gore declared, "I'm ready to push for real solutions, but I need your help ..." The email offered no policy solutions. Nor does Al Gore's web site or speeches, except for his recommendation that America immediately freeze its greenhouse gas emissions and then reduce them.

George Monbiot, a reporter for the British newspaper, *Guardian* takes up where Al Gore and many others leave off. *Heat* is a remarkable book. For it is not written to convince the unconvinced global warming, but to educate the already-persuaded, those who exited the theater after watching *An Inconvenient Truth* with fire in their bellies, ready to fight the incoming menace about what must be done, and ready to face the significant sacrifices that will have to be made along the way.

Monbiot's assumptions differ only modestly from those of Al Gore. Both believe the

window of opportunity is short, and closing. Both believe we must immediately freeze greenhouse gas emissions and then reduce them by up to 60 percent below current levels by about 2030. (Gore may use the 2050 time frame). Monbiot recommends more rapid reductions than others, but he argues persuasively that an ounce of reduction in the early years can avoid the need for a pound of reduction in the later years.

A key contribution by Monbiot is that he addresses the question Al Gore asks, but doesn't answer. "(W)hat would a responsible approach to the climate crisis look like if we had one in America?" Monbiot asks the question of his home country, United Kingdom.

Monbiot launches his investigation by asking a crucial question rarely discussed by Al Gore and other U.S. environmentalists: How does the responsibility of the world's largest polluters differ from that of the rest of the world? The average American generates more than 10 times the greenhouse gas emissions as does the average Chinese, and perhaps 30 times more than the average citizen of Bangladesh. (The gluttony of the average citizen of the UK is not far below that of the average American).

When Al Gore says he wants to freeze emissions, presumably he's talking about planetary emissions, not U.S. emissions. Otherwise, he's asking humanity to freeze the current stark disparity in resource use in place. That's politically impossible and morally disagreeable. Since the U.S. and UK generate a disproportionate amount of global greenhouse gases, a responsible approach presumably would require them to disproportionately reduce their emissions.

Monbiot argues for a global carbon emissions cap allocated on a per capita basis. Since all of humanity shares the biosphere, which has only a limited absorptive and cleansing capacity and all humans are created equal, then each should have equal use of that capacity.

The implications of biospheric equity are so profound and so disturbing, that it is understandable why American environmentalists shy away from discussing the issue. Currently, global carbon emissions are about 7 billion tons, roughly, 1 ton per person. But the average American generates, directly and indirectly, some 10 tons per capita. Thus, to save the planet and cleanse our resource sins, Americans must go far beyond freezing greenhouse gas emissions. As a nation, we must reduce them by more than 90 percent, taking into account the sharp reductions in existing global emissions necessary to stabilize the world's climate.

Suddenly we realize that addressing the global warming problem will be very

difficult, not only politically but economically and institutionally. And it may well entail significant sacrifice.

Consider the following: California has received much well-deserved praise for enacting legislation that establishes a statewide carbon cap for 2020 equal to the state's 1990 emission level. Achieving this goal would mean reducing current emissions by about 13 percent. Another 80 percent reduction will be necessary if California is to achieve its fair share of the global emissions reductions necessary to stabilize climate change.

Monbiot recommends the per-capita carbon budgets be allocated nationally. Nations would decide how to parcel out these allocations. Ideally, these could be passed through to individuals. But Monbiot notes the administrative costs involved in having people spend their carbon allowances on tens of thousands of products and services, each one denominated in carbon credits as well as currency. To simplify the process, he recommends a strategy developed by two of his compatriots, Mayer Hillman and David Fleming. They argue that since 40 percent of the UK's carbon emissions result from the use of fuels and electricity and it is relatively simple to develop a method by which individuals pay for these energy sources with carbon credits, 40 percent of the nation's carbon allocations should be passed through to individuals. The remaining 60 percent would belong to the government, which might auction them off to generate revenue.

The bulk of *Heat* is an exhaustive sector-by-sector, hardheaded examination of the near-term technical and economic capacity for wealthy, industrialized nations to achieve the necessary reductions. The examination relies on an immense volume of technical studies and primary research. Monbiot concludes that the UK can indeed achieve sufficient reductions within the time frame, but just barely, and at a high cost.

Although none of the reductions will be easily achieved, Monbiot's analysis concludes that those related to transportation may be the hardest of all. To reduce ground transportation emissions sufficiently, he suggests the need to severely lessen individual shopping trips. To accomplish this, he proposes that goods be delivered. He cites a UK Department of Transportation study that notes, "a number of modeling exercises and other surveys suggest that the substitution of private cars by delivery vehicles could reduce traffic by 70 percent or more." Every van the stores dispatch, in other words, takes three cars off the road. Monbiot also proposes to transform out of town superstores into warehouses, to be visited only by vehicles that pick up supplies. That will save even more energy, because warehouses use only 35 percent as much heat and 29 percent as much electricity as do stores.

In only one sector does Monbiot fail to identify a technical solution at any cost: air travel. Flying generates about the same volume of greenhouse gases per passenger mile as a car. But, of course, flights are many miles longer than drives. Fly from New York to California and back and you will generate as much greenhouse gas emissions as you will by driving your Prius all year.

Monbiot reluctantly concludes, "(T)here is simply no way of tackling this issue other than reducing the number, length and speed of the journeys we make." Knowing the audience for whom the book is intended, he acerbically adds, this will mean the end of "shopping trips to New York, political meetings in Porto Alegre, long distance vacations."

He urges his readers "to remember that these privations affect a tiny proportion of the world's people. The reason they seem so harsh is that this tiny proportion almost certainly includes you."

Monbiot sums up his findings, "I have sought to demonstrate that the necessary reduction in carbon emissions is -- if difficult -- technically and economically possible. I have not demonstrated that it is politically possible."

Is it politically possible? The last paragraph of *Heat* is not hopeful. "(T)he campaign against climate change is an odd one. Unlike almost all the public protests which have preceded it, it is a campaign not for abundance but for austerity. It is a campaign not for more freedom but for less. Strangest of all, it is a campaign not just against other people, but also against ourselves."

Which may be why we hear so much talk about the problem but so little talk about sacrifice.

For those who favor aggressively expanding renewable energy, dramatically improving efficiency and abandoning our dependence on imported oil, but remain unconvinced about the timing and severity of climate change, the disconnect between rhetoric and reality doesn't matter. They can view the threat of global warming as a means to an end, a rhetorical device to stimulate people and governments to aggressively embrace these objectives. If we do get 25 percent of our expanded energy consumption from renewables by 2025, they will be satisfied. Indeed, they will be ecstatic.

But for those who truly believe that widespread and perhaps irreversible ecological disaster is imminent, for those who believe we have only a 10-year window of opportunity before disaster becomes inevitable, expanding renewable energy and improving efficiency is not sufficient unless it is done at a scale and on a pace that

dramatically reduces global carbon emissions by 2030, with emissions by nations like the United States and United Kingdom being reduced by upwards of 90 percent.

By not sugar coating the means, *Heat* provides an important public service. By clearly presenting his data, Monbiot lets us decide where we agree and where we disagree. He invites a conversation. I look forward to it. And I hope to soon see a U.S. environmentalist take up the Monbiot challenge and put together an equally thorough and rigorous examination of our own ability to tackle global warming.

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