

Reference: Gnanapragasam, A., 2013. Practical hope for a warming world: a reflective essay. *Journal of Sustainability*, 1(1) 6–12. Retrieved from <http://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/30839/>

Originally published by the Journal of Sustainability at The University of St Andrews
<https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/jsus/article/view/595>

Practical hope for a warming world: *A reflective essay*

Alexander J. Gnanapragasam, 3rd Year PhD in Sustainable Development

“I wish it need not have happened in my time,” said Frodo.

“So do I,” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. *All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.*” (Tolkien, 2001: 67, *my italics*)

The despair expressed by Frodo in the passage above reflects how I sometimes feel about climate change. We stand in the eleventh hour of humanity (Orr, 2004a); amid the sixth mass extinction of life on our planet (Wake and Vredenburg, 2008). The Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2007) asserts that climate change is primarily driven by anthropogenic emissions; without international consensus and immediate action we will fail to avert dangerous climate change. Across the world, failure to address climate change is already contributing to rising sea levels, increased drought, soil erosion and agricultural collapse (Brown, 2009; FitzRoy and Papyrakis, 2010). The ensuing starvation and dispossession of the world’s ‘bottom billions’ will hasten the collapse of the semblance of international order we currently possess and in time erode away civilisation as we know it.

I argue there is nothing is to be gained from despairing about our situation. Despair is defined as the loss of hope (OED, 1989). On the rare occasions I despair about climate change, I fantasise about running away and going to live sustainably on a mountain isolated from the global chaos that will ensue if dangerous climate change is not averted. However, as Tim Jackson argued during a lecture at the University of

St Andrews, ‘the sea will eventually reach you; running away is not an option...’ (PWG Lecture Series, 27th January 2010).

In the face of overwhelming odds, I argue that we should concentrate on doing what we can in the time we have. These sentiments, expressed by the italicised sentence in Gandalf’s quote above reflect what I term ‘practical hope’. The Oxford English Dictionary defines hope as to look for something desired and to place trust in its coming (OED, 1989). David Orr describes practical hope as, ‘hope [that] comes from doing the things before us that need to be done in the spirit of thankfulness and celebration without worrying about whether we will win or lose’ (2004a: 297). Within this context of practical hope, my reflective essay discusses if I believe Scotland can meet its emissions reduction targets and what I feel about the probability that the world will fail to avert dangerous climate change.

Belief is a prerequisite for hope, in order to hope for something you must put your belief into it (OED, 1989). This part of my reflection examines if I believe the Scottish Government can meet its emissions reduction targets. I argue that it is important to believe that the Scottish Government can meet its targets, because without this belief we set ourselves up for failure. I evaluate the evidence, using it to illustrate why I believe Scotland can meet its targets.

The Climate Change (Scotland) Act commits the Scottish Government to a 42% reduction of carbon-dioxide (CO₂) equivalent emissions by 2020 on the 1900 baseline and an 80% reduction by 2050. The Sustainable Development Commission report, *I will if you will* (2006) outlines that in order for society to make the transition to a sustainable future, there needs to be cross-societal support from government, business and people. The Climate Change (Scotland) Act was passed unanimously by all Members of the Scottish Parliament (BBC News, 2009a), confirming that there is political will to meet the targets no matter who formed the administration after the elections in 2011. This enables the emissions reduction targets to outlast the electoral timeframe which normally scuppers environmental policies, as their benefits are often only realised beyond the five-year electoral cycle (Baker, 2006; Dresner, 2008). The emissions reduction targets also have necessary support beyond the political realm. Ian Marchant of Scottish and Southern Energy was instrumental in pushing the previous Scottish National Party minority

government for the more stringent 42% reduction by 2020¹ (BBC News, 2009b) and he was supported in this by societal groups such as the World Wildlife Fund (2010) and Stop Climate Chaos Scotland (Wilson, 2009). I believe it is possible for Scotland to meet its emissions reduction targets as it has the cross-societal support to do so.

However, I do concede that it is not going to be easy; writing in the Guardian Severin Carrell comments that, ‘Scottish ministers only directly control about 30% of Scotland's total annual emissions of 68[million] tonnes of CO₂ – which only equates to a 700th of the world's emissions’ (2009). This assertion was supported by the UK’s Department for Energy and Change who criticised Scotland for ‘jumping the gun’ with ambitious emissions reduction targets that would be unachievable without international consensus at Copenhagen (ibid). In February 2010, the UK Committee on Climate Change (CCC) reinforced this by reporting that without commitment from the international community to reduce emissions, the Scottish 42% commitment would be feasible but difficult (CCC, 2010). Nevertheless in May 2010, the Scottish Government laid statutory instruments in the parliament confirming they were keeping to the 42% target (The National Archives, 2012).

In light of the failure that was Copenhagen, I am proud to be living in a nation that takes its commitments to tackling climate change seriously. The Scottish targets are ambitious, but someone needs to take leadership and Scotland is well-placed to and has much to gain from doing so. I acknowledge that meeting the 2050 targets will be especially challenging, as there is a requirement for behaviour change and for the Scottish people to ‘learn to see the world anew’ (Einstein cited in Sterling, 2001: 12), however without belief and practical hope we set ourselves up to fail.

I close my reflection examining how I feel about the probability the world will fail to avert dangerous climate change. I acknowledge that as Scotland is only responsible for a 700th of global emissions (Carrell, 2009) if it manages to meet its reduction targets

¹ The original emissions reduction target proposed was 34% for 2020 (Carrell, 2009).

will be of little consequence; without significant movement from the international community it looks increasingly likely that we will fail to avert dangerous climate change (FitzRoy and Papyrakis, 2010).

Apart from the odd time that I despair of climate change, I rarely contemplate how I would feel if we failed to avert it. My reason for this is because by spending time thinking about it, I negate the agency I have here and now to do something about it, I have forfeit my practical hope. As I had great difficulty in reflecting upon this, I watched the apocalyptic film *The Road* (2009) to stimulate my thinking.

I found the following quote by the father to best describe how I would feel about the probability that we fail to avert dangerous climate change, ‘I don’t want to just survive, I want to live’ (ibid: 21:00). I feel it is living that sets humanity apart from all non-human life² in that we have the capacity to go beyond ‘mere’ survival to achieve arguably both great and terrible things. I enjoy wilderness survival as a form of vacation, however I dread the thought that our failure to avert dangerous climate change may mean it became my way of life.

I acknowledge that across the world many people must fight to survive and do not enjoy our standard of living; almost half the world population lives on less than \$2.50 a day (World Bank, 2008). To paraphrase Arthur from le Carré’s novel *The Constant Gardener* (2001), from the suffering of these bottom billions we derive the benefits of civilisation, which we are afforded so easily as they were bought so cheaply. What is more, it is the high social and ecological cost of our living (GFN, 2009) that is driving dangerous climate change and from this life of high consumption we derive little or no additional happiness (Easterlin, 1974; Frey, 2008). I am confronted by the worrying thought that our failure to avert dangerous climate change might deliver equity in the way we least expect it, in that all people on earth would have to fight for their survival.

² I acknowledge that Peter Singer (1975) would argue against this speciesism which is the privileging of human above non-human life.

As previously stated I do not wish to dwell on the prospect of humanity failing to avert dangerous climate change because doing so achieves nothing more than an overwhelming sense of disempowerment. Instead of concentrating on what I cannot do, I have taken the active decision to have a practical hope in achieving what I can in the time I have. I intend to use my talents to lead education reform drawing from the ideas of Sterling (2001) and Orr (2004b) that tackles climate change, addresses inequality and enables people to be happy with less material but increasingly richer lives. There may be ‘just a fool’s hope’ (Tolkien, 1999: 94) for humanity to avert dangerous climate change, but I’ll take it and do with it the best I can.

References

- Baker, S. (2006) *Sustainable Development*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- BBC News (2009a) “BBC NEWS | MSPs pass landmark climate laws” *BBC News Online* <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/8115597.stm> (accessed 07/12/12)
- BBC News (2009b) “Expert team to advise on Scottish climate targets” *BBC News Online* <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/8400377.stm> (accessed 07/12/12).
- Brown, L. (2009) *Plan B 4.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization*. Washington D.C: Earth Policy Institute.
- Carrell, S. (2009) “Scottish parliament agrees tougher 42% target to cut emissions” *The Guardian Online* <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/jun/24/scotland-climate-change-bill> (accessed 07/12/12)
- le Carré, J. (2001) *The Constant Gardener*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009. London: OPSI.
- Committee on Climate Change, (CCC). (2010) *Scotland’s pathway to a low-carbon economy*. London: CCC.
- Dresner, S. (2008) *The Principles of Sustainability*. 2nd ed. London: Earthscan.

- Easterlin, R.A. (1974) Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot? Some Empirical Evidence. In P.A.David, and M.W.Reeder, (eds.) *Nations and Households in Economic Growth: Essays in Honor of Moses Abramovitz*. New York, NY: Academic Press Inc.
- FitzRoy, F.R. and Papyrakis, E. (2010) *An Introduction to Climate Change Economics and Policy*. London: Earthscan Ltd.
- Frey, B. (2008) *Happiness, a revolution in economics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Global Footprint Network (GFN) (2009) “Ecological Footprint and Biocapacity, 2006” http://www.footprintnetwork.org/images/uploads/2009_Data_Tables_hectares.xls (accessed 07/12/12)
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, (IPCC). (2007) ‘Summary for Policymakers’. In: *Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge and New York, NY.
- Jackson, T. (2010) *Prosperity without Growth* (PwG). [Lecture] (Scottish Lecture Series: 27/01/10).
- The National Archives (2012) “legislation.gov.uk Scottish Draft Statutory Instruments from 2010” <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/sdsi/2010> (accessed 07/12/12)
- Orr, D.W. (2004a) ‘Hope in Hard Times’. *Conservation Biology*, 18: 295-298.
- Orr, D.W. (2004b) *Earth in Mind, On Education, Environment and the Human Prospect 10th Anniversary Edition*. Washington DC: First Island Press.
- Oxford English Dictionary (OED) (1989) “Home: Oxford English Dictionary” <http://www.oed.com/> (accessed 07/12/12).
- The Road*, 2009. [Film] directed by John Hillcoat. USA: 2929 Productions.
- Singer, P. (1995) *Animal Liberation*. 2nd Edition. London: Pimlico.

- Sterling, S. (2001) *Sustainable Education, Re-visioning Learning and Change*. Schumacher Briefings 6. Devon: Greenbooks Ltd.
- Sustainable Development Commission (SDC). (2006) *I will if you will, Towards sustainable consumption*. London: SDC.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1999) *The Return of the King*. Paperback 1999 edition. London: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (2001) *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Film tie-in edition. London: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Wake, D.B. and Vredenburg, V.T. (2008) 'Are we in the midst of the sixth mass extinction? A view from the world of amphibians'. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 105: 11466-11473.
- Wilson, G. (2009) *Stop Climate Chaos Scotland – How the Scottish Climate Change Bill can make a difference in Copenhagen*. Edinburgh: SCCS.
- World Bank. (2008) *World Bank Development Indicators*. Washington D.C: The World Bank.
- World Wildlife Fund (2010) "Tackling climate change"
http://scotland.wwf.org.uk/what_we_do/tackling_climate_change/ (accessed 07/12/12).