

## **Why humanists should act together on climate change – and why we need another humanist interest group**

***Marilyn Mason***

"Global warming" might not sound too bad right now as we approach the end of one of the coldest winters in recent years. But, counter-intuitively perhaps, global warming and the melting of the polar ice-caps, which cause changes to ocean and air currents, appear as likely to cause freezing winters in Britain as they are to intensify desertification in hotter parts of the world and to bring other unpredictable extremes of weather<sup>1</sup>. Globally, we seem to be seeing more of these extremes: not just our unusually snowy winter, but more floods, more droughts, more forest fires.

"Climate chaos" is in fact a more apt description of our future, and the chaos is unlikely to stop at climate. We can expect increasing conflicts over diminishing resources such as oil, land and water, escalating extinctions of wildlife, more frequent humanitarian disasters, and mass migrations of refugees from areas where food crops no longer grow. The end of this century, when most of us will be safely dead, is often given as the time when a 2 or 4 degree rise in the Earth's temperature will cause this chaos, but of course it won't suddenly start then – it will surely be a gradual process and may already have begun in Africa and Australia and even closer to home. If future humanity and the planet's ecosystems are to survive in anything like good shape, radical action is needed now.

Organised Humanism in the UK has been surprisingly slow to take on the ethical challenges of reducing carbon emissions and mitigating climate change. Individual humanists are doubtless doing their bit, convinced by the scientific consensus that things will go very ill for our children and grandchildren, perhaps even for some of us, if we do not change our wasteful life-styles. I'm sure many of us switch off our lights and computers, eat less or no meat, avoid unnecessary travel, cycle, recycle, buy less stuff and local stuff, go on climate change marches, join environmental groups and campaigns, write to our MPs... but, unlike, for example, Anglicans, so far we have done little collectively. Why is this?

I can think of several reasons. Firstly, existing humanist organisations have their hands more than full with the day-to-day concerns of their members and the wider non-religious public: the provision of advice and ceremonies for the non-religious, campaigns for recognition and equality, and other domestic issues. The BHA can campaign against faith schools securely supported by its membership, but there is possibly less consensus about human responsibility for climate chaos, the best ways to tackle it, whether it is really happening, and whether it is the business of the BHA.

Associated with this is our lack of (or freedom from) leadership – Humanism brings together individual free-thinkers, and has no system, democratic, autocratic or sacred, for choosing, or following, leaders. Pronouncements from religious leaders on the environment and what their followers should do about it have been coming thick and fast recently (on the coat-tails of science, of course), but humanists have no equivalent. Many of us would resent being told what to think or do, even about something on which there is overwhelming agreement, including, remarkably, amongst the world's politicians. Despite their failure to achieve fair and legally binding agreements at Copenhagen in December 2009 and at Cancun in December 2010, disagreements between world leaders seem to be about how best to mitigate climate change and who should bear the financial burden, not about whether to bother.

For humanists, whether or not to bother about climate change remains a personal choice. Some may in fact prefer the line of "skeptical environmentalist" Bjørn Lomborg<sup>2</sup> that we should focus first on the problems that we can overcome, problems such as poverty, education and hunger, and that the resulting growth in prosperity will then produce environmental solutions, for example, less deforestation, stable populations, and technological advances. The new humanist interest group Humanists for a Better World (H4BW) recognises that these global problems are indeed interrelated: for example, poverty can exacerbate deforestation and thus increase carbon emissions; education, particularly of girls, can help to stabilise population and thus reduce demands on land and water. But working and campaigning on these issues does not preclude

working and campaigning on environmental sustainability, and the environment cannot necessarily wait while we solve these other problems: forests may not recover from the damage we inflict while, say, extending agriculture or growing bio-fuels; extinctions tend to be irreversible; and as developing nations develop out of poverty they pump yet more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, thus accelerating climate chaos. We need to act on all fronts, though not necessarily all of us on all fronts all the time, though H4BW intends to enable and encourage collective and individual humanist action on many of them.

Being a humanist should not involve ignoring the fate of people who live far away or who will exist in the future, or indeed the fate of other species; neither should it entail the Pollyanna-ish belief in human perfectibility and inevitable progress that some accuse us of. Progress is certainly not inevitable on most of the issues that H4BW is concerned about, and there are far too many vested interests and too much short-termism around to feel great confidence about solutions emerging in time without considerable pressure for change. Human beings can choose to act for the common good or not, but I hope that enough humanists are concerned enough to be a real presence in environmental campaigns and to add a strong collective voice to the pressure for change.

Humanists can offer something distinctive and constructive to the debates about sustainability, climate change, renewable energy and peak oil. We may well be more rational and far-sighted than most politicians about the economic and human costs of global warming and the investment and actions necessary to mitigate and perhaps ultimately adapt to it. Unlike some "deep greens", we will not dismiss out of hand the technological solutions that are probably our best hope if we are to have enough food, clean energy and water. Unlike some commentators, we will tend to accept the scientific consensus rather than denying that there is a problem or hoping that it is just part of a natural cycle that will sort itself out or about which we can do nothing. Unlike a few of the more misanthropic environmentalists, we are unlikely to gloat over the mess that humanity has got itself into and rejoice that at least the planet and cockroaches and rats will survive even if we don't. Unlike some religious believers, we will not oppose family planning or look forward to "end times" and eternal paradise or anticipate rescue by a deity if this life fails.

We know it's up to us, we surely hope that our children and grandchildren and people in the most vulnerable parts of the world are not going to have lives immeasurably worse than ours, and we know that humanist ethics require us to consider the consequences of our actions – or inaction.

"Four out of five people think that the number of cars in use is having a serious effect on climate and two thirds agree that everyone should reduce their car journeys. These figures apply as much to car drivers as to anyone else. However, the figures suddenly drop when people are asked whether they are willing and able to match words with actions. Less than half said yes to reducing car journeys. Another 12 per cent admitted that they could use the car less, but did not seem willing to. And 23 per cent say that people should be allowed to use their cars as much as they like." (*British Social Attitudes, published January 2008*)

I believe that committed humanists are more willing than most to match words with actions, and that together we can help to bring about much needed change and counter the perception that humanists believe that the Earth exists just for us to exploit, that there is a "great gap at the heart of ...liberal secular humanism"<sup>3</sup>. To do so, humanists need to be more vocal and more visible, and I hope that the new website [www.H4BW.org.uk](http://www.H4BW.org.uk) will enable many more of us to be so, and to work together on climate chaos and the other linked global issues. Though Humanists for a Better World will be mainly a virtual community sharing news, ideas and actions, we hope it will occasionally have a physical presence too, as there is always considerable positive interest when humanists appear at demonstrations and meetings. Do please have a look at the website and take action as and when you can.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example "[British floods 'were the result of climate change' in \*The Independent\* \(17/2/11\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Skeptical\\_Environmentalist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Skeptical_Environmentalist)

<sup>3</sup> From [http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/nature/nature\\_studies/nature-studies-by-michael-mccarthy-its-time-man-stopped-to-consider-earths-health-2218134.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/nature/nature_studies/nature-studies-by-michael-mccarthy-its-time-man-stopped-to-consider-earths-health-2218134.html)