



Jonathon Porritt: Peak Oil and Climate Change

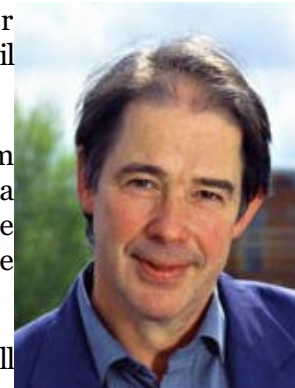
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Topic: [Environment/Sustainability](#)

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I attended the [Hay Festival](#) on Friday (02/06/06) where amongst other speakers I heard [Jonathon Porritt](#) speak on the twin challenges of peak oil and climate change.

Porritt could be described as a career environmentalist, his curriculum vitae includes chair of the UK Ecology Party (now the [Green Party](#)), a director of [Friends of the Earth](#), founder of [Forum for the Future](#) and he currently chairs the [Sustainable Development Commission](#), the Government's independent advisory body on sustainable development.



Speaking to approximately 1000 people his message was powerful and well received, here's what he had to say.

In his opening comments Porritt described climate change and peak oil as “*two riders of the apocalypse*” yet also made clear that rather than crushing any vestige of optimism left over after Al Gore’s previous speech on climate change he would try and focus on the more positive things that might happen.

Spending little time on outlining climate change Porritt suggested that amongst this audience at least there can be little remaining doubt either of the urgency or severity of the climate change challenge. Tipping his hat to the recent statements from Sir David Attenborough on the subject, he noted that “*The ranks of those still trying to tell us this is not serious is thinning, diminishing, all the time*”.

Porritt outlined four key points on what the science is actually telling us about climate change:

- Everything is moving a great deal faster than they thought it was moving, even two years ago. When you talk to scientists in the science community they will tell you the last two years have been deeply shocking, in terms of the volume and the authority of the data that has come forward on a number of different climate phenomenon.
- We shouldn't think about climate change as a gradually unfolding set of phenomena, all gradually increasing within our midst. The climate record tells us very clearly this is as much about sharp discontinuities in patterns of climate as gently rising changes.
- We should be thinking about systems not symptoms. We still focus on individual symptoms, we focus on the permafrost, disappearing sea-ice, melting glaciers or increased intensity of hurricanes. We keep looking at these individual phenomena, epiphenomena, and what we're not looking at is the big systems stuff.
- This means nothing less than a radical break in the way we create and distribute wealth in the world today. I still hear people talk about climate change as

something which can be managed in the dominant orthodox economic paradigm. I don't believe them, I just don't believe that is the case, I don't see how we're going to be able to manipulate those conventional aspects of growth bound consumer driven economy and cope with climate change in the way that we actually need to.

Since it is clear that something absolutely has to change, something has to done, the question of whether we have enough time to enact the necessary changes must be addressed. There must after all come a time when it is too late to mitigate disaster. Whilst some, including James Lovelock would say it is now too late, Porritt said he was "*not in the all too late category*". However I was left wondering whether this statement was his true belief or whether it was just what someone in his position has to say since to suggest it is too late also abandons all hopes of being able to "*empower people, give them a sense of agency, a sense that there really is a set of actions, individual, communal, national, global, that we can take*". Without that the situation really is without hope.

Porritt went on to say we needed to "*shock this still, complacent, inert system into a state of radical response rather than grudging incrementalism, which is what we have to day*". He explained this as meaning "*we need a hurricane season like last years for the next three years with each one worse that the year before*" whilst noting the "*moral horror*" of wishing down on people utter calamity and misery to get the required change.

Peak oil was described thus:

People are asking the question, in which year will we take more oil and gas out of the surface of the Earth than any preceding year and in any year after that. So what is the year that we literally take more of that precious asset, our oil and gas supplies than any other year, because from that point on you're into a very different set of resource depletion issues.

Porritt reported that a lively debate was now joined with the likes of Jeremy Leggett on one side suggesting 2008-09 and on the other 'economists' relying on the laws of supply any demand to bring the situation back into balance and suggesting supplies will be fine until 2030. What's the answer then? He was unsure, admitting Leggett's argument was perhaps the more convincing but the economists weren't without merit either. Uncertainly reigns. Nobody knows how much oil is left, the Saudi Arabian government say they have 268 billion barrels yet a credible, independent expert on the region suggest just 78 billion barrels.

On the Athabasca tar sands Porritt had this to say:

When you look at the amount of energy needed to get a barrel of oil out of those tar sands you suddenly realise that depletion rate and carbon are in a very intricate dance now and if we want to increase our supply of fossil fuels, unfortunately we have to increase the energy consumption required to deliver the same volume of energy. We are heading towards the point called the zero sum game, imagine a day when you need more than a barrel of oil to get a barrel of oil equivalent out of the ground. That would be pretty odd world to live in wouldn't it? We're not far off it.

Porritt recognised that the quality of debate on peak oil is currently very poor and you don't really hear politicians talking about it at all, he blamed this on no one actually wanting to even think about what would happen if we suddenly lost access to cheap oil. So what is going to be done? Porritt told us what's unlikely to be done, he doesn't believe there is a set of fixes that can simply be deployed and the problems mitigated. Well, the fixes might exist but the will to deploy

Not enough people are as yet persuaded that a very different way of life, in a carbon constrained, oil scarce world, they are not persuaded that their lives would be better in that world than the lives they have today.

He went on to describe this as a long term failing of the environmental movement. Where the movement has been successful is in identifying unsustainability, damage to the environment, the cost. However the failure has been in convincing people that a different way of life, with less environmental costs would not only be better for the planet and future generations but also better for us today. Without being able to convince people there are benefits in the here and now their allegiance to the cause won't be possible and the required actions to address peak oil and climate change will not be possible. Campaigning on potential future benefits doesn't get far, the paraphrased response being:

Fine, but what has the future ever done for me, what is the Green Party going to do for me now? And if you're not going to be able to persuade me that you've got something to offer me now, in my life, please do not expect me to vote for notional, potential benefits for my children at some distant stage in the future.

I think that sentiment has a lot of truth to it so addressing potential, here and now benefits of living in a carbon constrained, oil scarce world should be explored. Porritt went on to do just that, plucking the numbers of \$100 per barrel and \$60-70 per tonne of carbon out of the air. What would such a world be like to live in?

Distance suddenly becomes a reality in our lives again. This will impact on our devastatingly inactive lifestyle with improvement to the health problems that currently entails. In terms of farming we would see a renaissance in local production for local markets and farmers taking advantage of the need for alternative sources of fuel.

With carbon taking on a more significant role those who live relatively simple lives would find themselves carbon rich, extrapolated out globally this would provide one of the most effective ways of changing the balance of power between the rich and poor today. This, Porritt believes, will provide the motivation to work out how to live in a sustainable way, bringing in new technology at currently unbelievable rates.

I know there are some people in the green movement who hate this technological enthusiasm, who feel deeply depressed when they hear people like me getting enthusiastic about technology. But if you're not enthusiastic about technology **you're pretty much finished** when it comes to optimism because there's **no optimistic solution** to 6 billion people trying to live on this planet without a massive technological driver, no other solution available at all. So don't get snooty about technology, get the system to start using technology in the way that we need.

Porritt's closing point was on happiness and wellbeing, on the negative impacts, psychological and human costs, stress, depression of living the way we now do. What if the changes required to live in a more sustainable way also resulted in us living in a happier way?

On population in the Q&A session Porritt stated that *"the intensity of the problems we face now is largely a function of the size of the human population"* and said how it *"erked"* him that so many environmentalists won't recognise population as an issue.

When asked from the floor if one should think of peak oil not as a the point of despair but as the

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trigger to the solution, with oil prices exceeding the price of energy from alternatives oil would automatically be replaced. Porritt replied yes, he agreed, describing peak oil as:

Precisely the galvanising element we need to remind people that this is an unsustainable asset. We don't just want the peak oil bunch to be out there saying wooh this is coming a lot faster than you want, wooh it's going to be really tough, we want them to say YES, look at the magic moment, the peak oil moment from then on our lives are going to get better.

I did detect a slight hint of sarcasm at this point, as if that point of view was very limited in its validity!

Porritt's recent book is **Capitalism: As If the World Matters** ISBN: 1844071928 ([Amazon](#))



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