

Report of HICAN Book Group Meeting (draft 1)

A group of us met on Wednesday 30 October to discuss **The Burning Question** (Mike Berners-Lee and Duncan Clark, Profile Books, 2013). This was a new venture for HICAN, and provided an opportunity to engage with climate issues on a global, rather than local or metropolitan, scale. We found this exercise a challenging and somewhat alarming experience, one that prompted us seriously to re-focus our ideas on identifying further actions that could be within our scope to take.

The Burning Question comes adorned with praise from distinguished climate activists, from Al Gore to George Monbiot and many others. It is a lucid and compelling analysis of the global climate predicament, with its main focus, as the title implies, on the burning of fossil fuels. The book is tightly argued and supported with statistical analysis, so no attempt will be made here to give a detailed summary of its content. Certain crucial points can, however, readily be set out.

The agenda is set by Bill McKibben's introduction, which identifies 3 key numbers:

- The 2° Celsius average we need to keep the increase in temperature down to.
- The 565 gigatonnes of CO₂ we can emit before 'disaster' – an irreversible tipping point - strikes. At current levels of emissions we'll reach that in 16 years' time.
- The 2,795 gigatonnes of fossil fuel we're planning to burn. We'd have to keep 80% of those reserves in the ground if we're to have any chance of turning the tide back.

The authors' central argument follows from these statistics. In a series of clear, concise and forceful (though completely un-rhetorical) chapters, they develop the thesis that fossil fuel burning, the emissions of which constitute by far the greatest threat to our climate, must be tackled and stopped head on. Pussy-footing around the issue needs to stop and to be replaced with honest open debate. Promoting mitigating activities such as fuel efficiency and renewable energy, however desirable in itself, will not touch the central problem. This requires a global, international concerted effort, and political leadership of a magnitude not so far remotely visible. For mankind to challenge the vast power of the industrial energy giants is a David vs. Goliath scenario which so far lacks a David. Or perhaps more exactly, there are too many mini-Davids out there who urgently need to pull together as one.

The implications of the problem for ordinary citizens in a democracy are formidable indeed. The political, economic and social consequences of abandoning fossil fuels are potentially so alarming, and the prospects of the

climate disasters that would follow from no action being taken so unimaginable, that for most people it is easier to bury the head in the sand and at best take refuge in small token actions (recycling and replacing light bulbs) in the mistaken sense that they are doing their bit. At worst, the default position is for ordinary citizens, encouraged by a populist and ignorant media, to join the deadly chorus of climate denial. Yet, the power of public opinion to put pressure on world leaders could, if awakened and harnessed, be significant. We were reminded by one of our group of Churchill's eloquent warnings of the threat of war – though today, faced with a threat of even greater magnitude, there is a 'conspicuous absence of a war-time sense of alarm'.

Having analysed the enormous nature of the problem facing us all, the authors are not short of ideas as to needful changes. These are primarily economic/industrial (leaving fuel reserves in the ground, transforming global food systems and land use, capping carbon), technological (CCS, renewables, nuclear, geoengineering), and psychosocial - above all, leadership. Any systemic technological measures are fraught with the risk of dangerous unintended consequences. On the psychosocial front, the authors offer a broad definition of the leadership requirement under the heading What Can I Do?: 'there's a vacuum to be filled and here all of us can help fill it – not just politicians and business leaders.' All of us, in whatever capacity - citizen, voter, employee, union member, customer, investor, or business leader, have a part to play and influence to bring to bear on the powerful. Local actions can cause ripple effects. The authors end their book with a challenge: '...we could keep on as we are: ignoring or playing down the risks and putting responsibility for action elsewhere. But that would mean taking a monumental gamble with our children's future, and a species as intelligent as ours surely wouldn't do that. Would it?'

Discussion in the group – each member taking their turn to present and comment on a section of the argument - yielded many individual insights as well as a shared sense of profound anguish at the intractable nature of the issues. Experience had shown that trying to communicate climate concerns head-on to those in denial was counterproductive; more subtle, insinuating methods of persuasion were to be preferred, and no immediate quick wins expected. Our own personal efforts to lead a relatively frugal life in the face of the clamour of consumer society were limited, not least by our own unwillingness to face giving up the comfortable lifestyles to which we have become accustomed. Would it help if we were all in prison in Russia? Is there a new Greenham Common for direct action to be found in our local environments? Indeed there are hundreds of Greenham Commons. Immediate ideas that were proposed for further consideration:

- to write and sign a group letter variously directed to the 4 party political leaders plus Caroline Lucas, our local MPs, councillors, and religious leaders as appropriate, and the local press;

- to support the divestment movement, originated by Bill McKibben, which is beginning to gain traction in the US and now in Europe. A number of organizations have already begun to withdraw their investments in fossil fuel industries, and this course of action has the potential to send an important message.

More ideas will surely come. There was a general sense that the pioneering book group experience had been worth the effort, though some mulling over of its future direction will surely take place in coming days. The group welcomes new members.

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