



SEPTEMBER 2023 NEWSLETTER



Welcome to our September newsletter, in which we look at various initiatives and approaches to tackle the climate and environmental crises – and make the case for humanist organisations to get involved.

HCA SUPPORTS 'NATURE 2030' CAMPAIGN



Humanist Climate Action has signed up to support the ['Nature 2030'](#) campaign launched in July by charities including the National Trust, The Wildlife Trusts, RSPB and Woodland Trust. The campaign puts forward a 5-point plan of measures to restore nature by 2030, and is calling on all

political parties to get behind these proposals in their general election manifestos. The five points are:

- **A pay rise for nature:** Farmers need greater support to help nature and manage over 70% of UK land - we want to see double the current budget for nature-friendly farming in future.
- **Make polluters pay:** Businesses - from companies working in finance to retail to energy - all contribute to nature's decline and should contribute to nature's recovery.
- **More space for nature:** Just 3% of the land and 8% of English waters are properly protected for nature. We want rapid action to expand and improve protected areas, and ensure public land and National Parks can contribute more to recovery.
- **A National Nature Service:** We want lots of helping hands if nature is to recover quickly and at scale: a 'National Nature Service' would create thousands of green jobs as well as a healthier society.
- **A right to a healthy environment:** Limited access to nature and pollution in the air and water affects everyone's health: An 'Environmental Rights' Bill would drive better decisions for nature and improve public health.

ZION LIGHTS ON CLEAN ENERGY

THE VIEW FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Our July newsletter included an [interview with Zion Lights](#), who has recently agreed to become a patron of Humanists UK and gave a talk at Humanists UK 2023 Convention in Liverpool. She has written this piece for us. Her advocacy of nuclear energy as part of a clean energy mix, about which she spoke at greater length at the Convention, is one on which there is of course disagreement in the environmental movement. As always, Humanist Climate Action welcomes considered and rational debate about this and other such contested issues. You can read more by Zion on this topic, among others, on her [website](#) and by subscribing to [her substack](#).



In the 1970s my parents left their home country of India to travel to England to start a new life. They lived in poverty as low caste rice farmers, but Britain was experiencing an industrial boom of sorts at the time and the country needed workers, so my parents were invited to migrate.

It took me a long time to understand why my parents chose to give up their large family, culture, and even their language to travel to a part of the world that they knew virtually nothing about. I now understand that they came to Britain to make a better life for themselves and any children they chose to have.

It was a major shock for me to visit India as a teenager and experience the place my parents had grown up (they'd taken me before, but I had hazy memories of those trips). We stayed in my dad's former village for a week, and for the first time I experienced life without electricity. The pitch black of the night listening to packs of dogs howl (they have rabies - best not to let them get near you). The harsh reality of having to wash clothes by hand in a bucket. The lack of air conditioning in over 40C degree heat.

Before we'd left England for the trip, my parents had filled their suitcases with books, pencils and paper. I helped my young cousins to hold pencils, which they initially gripped like they were hammers. There was no school nearby, and although my parents had tried to set one up in the village, even with a good salary, they could not entice an educated individual willing to live there to teach, since the village was 4 hours away from the nearest hospital.

It wasn't that I knew nothing about poverty before I went to India. It was the sheer scale of the problem that brought it home to me on that trip. The millions of people who live in this way. The fact that money alone cannot fix it. Watching women cook over stoves burning charcoal and coughing violently as they did so from the pollution. I realised, then, that I am one of the richest people in the world, and that what most enables my high quality of life is access to energy and the development it has enabled.

In my early days as a climate activist, I was arrested for protesting coal and tar sands. Climate change is a serious threat to the one known habitable planet in the universe, and the longer we take to act on bringing down our emissions, the more the global South especially will experience dire consequences. Yet clean energy projects are constantly blocked across the UK, from people who don't grasp the need to decarbonise or realise that they are outsourcing the cost of their reliance on fossil fuels to poorer nations.

As an environmentalist, my first book was about reducing your carbon footprint, and I argued for using less energy. I bucked the trend with this line of thinking when I realised that so many billions of people still need access to electricity. For many poorer nations this means burning fossil fuels, but wealthier nations do not need to keep polluting the atmosphere this way - we can instead build a lot of clean energy, allowing the global South to grow as they need to. The scientific consensus is that we need to decarbonise and we need a combination of renewables and nuclear energy to do it. Of course we shouldn't waste energy, but instead of making energy efficiency the only goal, we need to fight for clean energy abundance too.

Simple appliances that require reliable energy have been life-changing for billions of people, and have saved billions of women from household drudgery. Billions more still need access to them, as well as to lighting, heating, air conditioning, washing machines, and various life-saving technologies. We cannot expect them to live with less or to not develop. It was development

that gave us access to education and healthcare, and like my parents, those in poorer countries will give up everything to have it. The least we can do is hit our net zero targets as soon as possible, to make it easier for them.

Zion Lights

Zion Lights will be giving Humanists UK's Holyoake Lecture, with the title '[Can we Just Stop Oil? How?](#)', on Wednesday 1st November at 19.00. In-person and online [tickets are on sale now](#).

DO WE NEED A CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY FOR CLIMATE CHANGE?



Forms of democratic decision-making need not be limited to those where policy is only shaped by our parliamentary first-past-the-post system. For topics like adaptation to a rapidly changing climate, ways of finding consensus among many disparate interests are critical. Citizens' assemblies have shown that, through their process of meaningful dialogue, seemingly intractable problems that have rendered opposing government parties ineffectual can be resolved, as demonstrated in the [Republic of Ireland's abortion law reform](#).

Our MPs' work is varied and, with many things competing for their attention, one thing they often lack is the time to get into the detail. While the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) provides summaries for policy makers on the science of climate change and the push for urgent action, how policy shapes our actions is still up to a group of people who do not have time to question all the experts, and who are still looking for ways to appeal to their voters. The recommendations that come from a citizens' assembly have no pressure to win votes, and can form a strong guide on what is possible in changing the social contract we have with each other.

When France held an assembly to create a bill that promised a reduction in the country's carbon emissions by 40%, [fewer than half](#) the proposals made it to parliament for debate. For a [successful outcome from an assembly](#), it is important that the problem to be addressed is clearly formulated; and while our parliamentary process has the final say on how policy is actioned, a

commitment from the government to respond in detail, saying what it is taking from the recommendations and why some may be rejected, is imperative.

Charities such as [Involve](#) are working with policymakers, both [at local](#) and national levels, to make sure that democracy has people at the heart of the decision-making process. While we have already had a [Climate Assembly](#) in the UK, with their report being published in 2020 along with additional guidance on a net zero recovery from Covid, we are still lagging well behind in addressing the climate crisis. According to the Government's [Climate Change Committee report in July 2023](#), we are [missing climate targets on nearly every front](#). [Research found](#) that through the process of the Climate Assembly, the quality of the discussion improved over time. Opinions evolved, including those of the experts, on how achievable net zero was, and the conclusions which emerged have remained relevant in the years since the assembly.

Our elected politicians appear to struggle in taking action or showing leadership to meet our commitment to reach net zero by 2050. They are stymied by how their rhetoric might affect their election prospects, and public opinion as reported by the media or through social channels leads to a lack of action. With the acceleration of change as the climate responds to continued heating, a citizens' assembly on climate could give a longer-term view on policy, helping successive governments or local councils to find a clear path to reach the net zero goals which are imperative for a stabilised climate.

Tom McMillen

DRIVING PURPOSEFUL BEHAVIOUR AT WORK



Much of Humanists UK's excellent work around climate has been focused on two aspects; what we can do as individuals in our lives, and how we can lobby and influence government to make regulatory changes to promote climate action, such as a reduction in carbon emissions.

These are appropriate approaches to take, but there is another major route through which we can have real influence. The organisations we work for play a major role in the climate change picture – as indeed they do across the whole range of 'ESG', sustainability and business purpose

issues. Those range from human rights in the workplace to biodiversity, from promotion of disadvantaged groups to pollution and the circular economy.

Now as employees, we can't make unilateral decisions just because of our own beliefs. If we have budgets to spend, we can't just use them to support our favourite causes – that way lies instant dismissal. But if we believe that our own beliefs and ideas could be helpful to the organisation (and more widely), then we are perfectly entitled to explain, educate and promote our thinking to our colleagues and bosses, with the aim of influencing the direction our organisations take.

My particular interest over a long working life has been procurement – how organisations spend money with their suppliers. And that leads to a particularly interesting angle within this debate. Of course organisations can take internal actions to reduce emissions (and support other sustainability goals). If a business operates many factories around the world, or is engaged in mining operations in the developing world, then its internal opportunities to practise sustainability are very significant.

But many large organisations, and pretty much any services or public sector organisation that does not fit into that category, can usually do more good by influencing suppliers than they can by purely looking internally. After many years in the procurement profession, that is the theme of my book, published in 2021 - [*Procurement with Purpose – how organisations can change the way they spend money now to help protect the planet and its people.*](#)

Organisations are using various approaches to drive these agendas. If you are in a powerful position with suppliers you can 'force' them to change behaviour through threats and contractual mechanisms. Or if you have less power, or just prefer the softer approach, you can persuade, influence and collaborate with them to encourage and promote good practice. You can work together, perhaps even involving other firms in your industry or sector, to come up with plans to reduce emissions or address other 'purpose' issues.

It is worth saying that organisations aren't embracing this agenda purely because it makes the CEO feel good. There are hard business reasons at work here – customers are demanding more sustainable approaches, and an organisation's cost of capital may well be lower today if they fit 'green investing' criteria.

So look at what your organisation is doing now – and could do. Consider those 'Scope 1' emissions – the direct energy use in your factories, offices or other premises. Turn the heating down. Look to avoid waste (eliminate single use plastics, for instance). Encourage Zoom or Teams rather than business travel. Everyone can take action – I know firms of only ten people that have taken meaningful steps, as well as the larger exemplars in this field such as Unilever or Patagonia.

But then also consider how you might work with suppliers to change their approach too. Ask your procurement team what they are doing to promote emissions reduction and wider sustainability in the supply chain. They can buy the book or subscribe to my free weekly

newsletter on [LinkedIn](#) if they need some ideas! As I said earlier, don't step over the line in terms of what an employee should ethically and legally do. But we can all look for opportunities to help address what are probably the biggest issues facing humanity today.

Peter Smith (Humanists UK Blackham Society member and schools speaker).

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THE ENVIRONMENT - A HUMANIST ISSUE?



Not all humanists are convinced that Humanists UK and other humanist organisations should be taking action on the climate crisis and on environmental issues in general. This was apparent in the debate at the recent AGM in Liverpool. If some have their doubts, it's not, I think, because they regard these issues as unimportant, but they take the view that it's not the responsibility of humanists organisations as such to campaign on them. Humanists UK has limited resources, it can't campaign on everything, and so, it may be said, it should focus on concerns which have a particular relevance for humanism.

But what are these? And how do we decide which issues are distinctively humanist concerns?

Let's consider some of the issues which have for some time been campaigning priorities for Humanists UK: faith schools, religious education, bishops in the House of Lords, the legalisation of assisted dying, abortion rights, humanist marriages, LGBT rights, blasphemy laws and the persecution of people for holding humanist beliefs. Some of these have an obvious relevance for an organisation which aims to represent those who have no religion, and which is committed to secularism and the challenging of religious discrimination.

Others on the list are less obviously secularist and more focused on the defence of basic human rights. But the 'rights' issues which are picked out tend to be those which have a particular relevance because of the disproportionate role of some religious institutions in blocking or eroding those rights. And rights such as freedom of speech and expression are deeply embedded in the humanist agenda as a result of the long historical experience of having to struggle for those rights against persecution and prejudice.

Campaigning on the climate crisis and the environment may appear to sit uneasily alongside that list and have no special relevance to humanism. But I think we need to take a broader view of humanism's history. If the 'free-thinking' strand has been an essential part of humanism, so also has been the commitment to *naturalism* – the recognition that human beings are part of the natural world and are inescapably dependent on it.

That recognition was given a hugely important boost by the Darwinian theory of evolution and the explanation of human origins in purely natural terms. Indeed, the very idea of 'ecosystems' is central to the Darwinian theory of natural selection. New species emerge because small variations confer an adaptive advantage in a specific environment. The theory emphasises the interdependence of living species and the delicate balance between them. And it is of course that balance which has been massively disrupted by human agency, with the threat of terrifying consequences.

I'm suggesting, then, that we can see the special relevance of environmental campaigning to humanism if we focus on the Darwinian strand in the humanist tradition. It's therefore no surprise to find that there is a long history of humanists valuing the natural world and acting to protect it. If you haven't already done so, do take a look at the material on [humanist environmentalism on the Humanist Heritage website](#).

But what's also of crucial importance, I suggest, is that point about 'the threat of terrifying consequences'. As one particularly knowledgeable visitor to the HCA display at the Convention said, 'I'm not sure people realise that we are no different from any other species. We can go extinct'. Quite apart from its special relevance for humanism, what should motivate *everyone* is the sheer urgency of the need for action. We have only a short time in which to act. People talk of 'saving the planet', but the planet will survive, and life on earth, in some form, will survive. Without concerted, dedicated and sustained action, however, there is a serious possibility that humanity won't survive. And if anything should matter to humanists, it's the future of humanity.

Richard Norman

KEEP IN TOUCH

We welcome feedback and responses to items in HCA newsletters. You can contact us at climateaction@humanists.uk. All newsletters to date can be found on [the Humanist Climate Action section of the Humanists UK website](#).