



NOVEMBER 2024 NEWSLETTER



Best wishes for the festive season – with some thoughts on how to enjoy it without wrecking the planet.

MARCHING FOR CLEAN WATER

It was good to take part in the March for Clean Water in London on 3 November, joining a wide range of individuals and organisations – young and old, anglers, surfers, swimmers, rowers, the Women's Institute, trade unionists, and citizen scientists testing the water in their local rivers. It was a good-humoured event with lots of home-made placards and plenty of puns about 'cutting the crap', but also a strong feeling of anger at the way that the private water companies have prioritised the payment of dividends over the quality of our rivers, lakes and seas. The purpose of the march was to call on the new Government to enforce current laws, and deliver new legislation to end all pollution, and restore our rivers, waterways, seas, and reservoirs to full health by 2030.



READER OPINION PIECE



CONSUMERISM AND CHRISTMAS

'We buy things we don't need with money we don't have to impress people we don't like.' Chuck Palahniuk (Fight Club)

As we head into the orgy of consumerism once known as Christmas (and putting to one side the Christian co-opting of a pre-Christian winter festival), it is timely to reflect on some of the negative impulses behind and effects of excessive buying and consumption. The issue is not to reject or criticise consumption per se – we all need to consume – but consumerism, the threshold beyond which consumption becomes unhealthy or dangerous for people...and the planet.

Modern debt-based consumerism promoted by advertising is one of the key defining features of our modern economy and society. Do not believe for one moment that 'advertising does not work' – if so why is it a multi-billion pound industry? Advertising and excessive consumption is a structural requirement of a capitalist growth-oriented economy to ensure there is always growing demand. Having 'enough', or reusing and repairing goods, goes against the grain of this understanding of the economy. Indeed, having more shared goods and services (such as libraries for tools, for example, as well as books) is also a threat to the economic status quo. And yet, if we want to address the climate and ecological crisis, and do so based both on the science and ethical principles of justice, those of us living in the minority world, the high carbon, high over-consuming world, will need to shift our shopping habits away from more and mine, to enough and shared.

Lest this come across as a dour Scrooge-like position that replacing more with enough means everyone has less, it actually means (from an ecological point of view) that so long as the macro-level of consumption is within 'safe planetary boundaries', many people even in the

minority world need to increase their levels of consumption, while some, i.e. the rich, need to radically reduce theirs.

Advertising and the consumerism it promotes can be said to be harmful in at least two areas, both of which should be of concern to humanists. Firstly, from an ecological and climate science perspective, it is clear that an endlessly growing economy, and endless consumption of goods and services (especially high carbon ones), are unsustainable. We have enough scientific and normative evidence that we, in the minority world, need to move beyond 'economic growth'. Second is the less discussed issue of how consumerism and advertising harm human wellbeing and freedom by the connection between debt and consumerism. We can observe the infantilising impacts of consumerism, with debt short-circuiting the normal/healthy and adult response of 'delayed gratification'. We want something now but do not have the finances, but rather than delay the purchase until we have the money, we can use our credit cards to buy it now. Private debt is a powerful way of disciplining a population. If you are in debt you are forced to work, are much less likely to be engaged in politics, are less connected to your community, and have less time or energy for anything but work or consumption.

Debt is fundamentally a way of creating profoundly unequal power relations between those who have the (private) power to create money as debt and those to whom they lend it. It is easy to see how people on low income can often dread Christmas and its 'compulsory consumerism'. For many, Christmas is anxiety producing, as it means a struggle to find enough money to participate in socially expected activities such as gift buying and expressing their love and care for family and friends. So the question for us humanists (and everyone) is how we can experience pleasure, joy, communicate our love for family and friends without either getting into debt, wrecking the planet or exploiting people. And while we're at it, what should we replace 'Christmas' with? Saturnalia? Winter solstice? 'Buy nothing week'?

John Barry

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ONE SMALL STEP

Continuing our series on actions to take through the year:

Challenge yourself to do something different!

What is it you like best about Christmas? For me it is gathering our extended family and seeing the grandchildren so excited to be together. What I like least is the ridiculous waste that is generated. So I challenge you to buy less stuff. 'Killjoy' I hear you shout, but I would say, 'not at all'. The best presents are ones that are thoughtful and personal so here are some ideas that I have found greatly appreciated by my friends and family.



- Tickets for a pantomime or other entertainment work for adults and children alike. Cheap local pantomimes can be much more fun than the ones with 'stars'.
- Memberships can save the recipient money and provide a year of entertainment. The National Trust, English Heritage, The National Gallery, The Royal Academy, The Royal Horticultural Society and many other organisations offer memberships. The trick is to work out what would be most aligned with the recipient's interests and make time to go together.
- Beauty treatments from manicures to overnight spas are popular. Don't buy a voucher, rather offer to arrange the treatment or even better go together. Massages are particularly appreciated by many adults regardless of age or sex.
- Making or taking someone out for a meal or cream tea.
- Offering to give money to a charity they support.

For my grandchildren I have purchased theatre tickets, arranged days out, bought second-hand lego, duplo and books.

The presents I have enjoyed most are being taken out for lunch by my children and being given the creative efforts of my grandchildren. It is important to remember that giving time is often the most appreciated gift of all.

Pauline Element

HOW TO HAVE YOURSELF A MERRY VEGGIE CHRISTMAS



Veggie/Vegan Wellington

The great thing about a veggie wellington is that there are many variations. The filling can be based around beetroot, butternut squash or mushrooms and can include kale, spinach, chestnuts, pecans, and many other ingredients depending on your personal preferences.

Assuming you don't want to make your own puff pastry you may be pleased to hear many high-street versions are vegan (remember that depending on your Wellington size you may need more than one sheet).

Below are some Wellington recipe variations centring on different ingredients:

[The veggie parcel](#) – a delicious mix of sweet potatoes, mushrooms, kale, spinach and chestnuts

[The beetroot centre](#) – red beetroot centre surrounded by mushroom and butternut squash

[The squash centre](#) – less sweet than the beetroot version

Tips

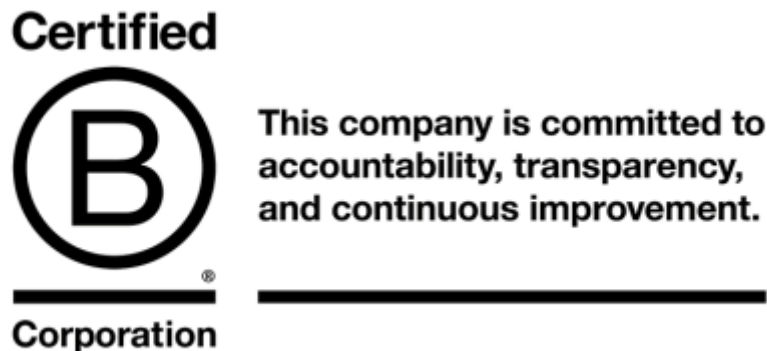
Golden pastry – to get that egg-brushed golden pastry you can find a non-egg vegan alternative in most large supermarkets, or you can use a non-dairy milk (simply brush over the pastry in the usual way).

Layered effect – to get the classic layered effect in your wellington, make a [mushroom duxelles](#) and layer it on the inside of the puff pastry before placing your centre fillings.

Enjoy!

Lori Marriott

WHAT IS A B CORP CERTIFICATION? AND IS IT WORTH LOOKING OUT FOR?



A certified B Corporation, or B Corp, is a company that is said to meet 'high standards of social and environmental performance, transparency and accountability.'

You might have seen its logo on products or websites of companies including FatFace, Alpro, and The Guardian. In April 2024 there were 2,000 Certified B Corps in the UK. Of the 8,400 B Corps globally, almost a quarter are based in the UK.

Critical views of B Corp certification

There is a concern that subsidiaries of large companies (which have dubious practices) achieve certification. In one case subsidiaries of a major French advertising agency were stripped of their certification when the parent company won a huge contract with Shell.

What do B Corps do well?

The important thing that B Corp certification does, which most other certification schemes do not, is require companies to amend their governance structure to become accountable to all stakeholders, not just shareholders.

In addition, whilst B Lab (the non-profit organisation certifying B Corps) has been criticised for certifying some of the subsidiaries of multinationals, it does offer a vision of how such monoliths change – one subsidiary at a time – into something less damaging. Danone, of Alpro and Evian fame, is an example of this approach: 82.5% of its sales are now covered by B Corp certification, and it still has a stated ambition of making it 100%.

What do B Corps do less well?

Although B Corp claims to be a 'holistic' approach looking at five impact areas (environment, workers, customers, community and governance), a company only needs to score 80/200 to pass. This means a company could score zero for an area you feel strongly about and still display the logo.

The Ethical Consumer found some of the B Corp climate standards to be unusually vague. There didn't appear to be, for example, an expectation to be reporting carbon emissions or to have science-based targets for reduction.

This would perhaps be less important if there were sufficient transparency in the system for consumers to see more detail on how their favourite brands were scoring. Unfortunately only high level scores across each impact area are available on the B Lab website.

B Corp standards review

In fairness to B Lab, some of these issues will apparently be dealt with once its standards review is complete. Current proposals include a new notion of minimum standards in each area, greater public transparency around the detail of each company's score, and much tighter requirements around carbon management and reporting. However this review has been a very long time coming and looks like it won't be implemented until 2026.

The need for other certifications

At one point, the appearance of the B Corp certification, which covers a range of areas, looked like it might offer some kind of simplification, because other labels would not be needed. However, pretty much everywhere you see the B Corp logo in the UK, it is used in conjunction with other certifications. No matter how refined the standards of B Corp become, they cannot offer the assurance that the audited agricultural standards of Fairtrade and Organic can for a food producer, or that the Fair Tax Mark can for tax practices.

B Corp - necessary but not sufficient

It is necessary because it can provide an assurance that the business is sufficiently serious about ethics to change its governance structure to reflect this.

It is not sufficient, because most industries will require much more specific assurance schemes.

The Ethical Consumer, in a recent review, concluded that B Corps continue to be a welcome addition to the ecosystem of transformational ideas that the world still needs. For me, I find it useful when shopping. Knowing that the companies have invested time and effort to complete the certification process gives me some confidence when buying from them. At the very least it is worth knowing what this standard is and what it is trying to achieve.

Pauline Element

SUPPORT THE CLIMATE AND NATURE BILL



Roz Savage MP

The [Climate and Nature Bill](#) is a Private Members' Bill requiring the UK Government to come up with a strategy which would:

- reduce UK greenhouse gas emissions to the level representing our share of limiting global heating to 1.5C degrees;
- commit to reversing the destruction of nature by 2030.

The Bill would bring together action on climate change and action on biodiversity loss into a single coherent approach, with increased urgency. It also calls for a Climate and Nature Assembly, comprising a representative sample of the UK population, to draw up policy proposals.

The Bill is being promoted by the organisation [Zero Hour](#). It was first introduced by Caroline Lucas MP in 2020. It was reintroduced by Roz Savage MP for its first reading on 16 October, and is due for its vital second reading on 24 January 2025. Please [urge your MP](#) to turn up on 24 January and vote in favour of the Bill. You can find out [here](#) which MPs are already backing it.

KEEP IN TOUCH

Phillip Middleton contacted us after reading the pieces by John Barry and John Burns in our newsletters to agree that 'the radical changes needed cannot happen within the political, social and economic systems presently in place. No one will vote to lose the right to fly around the world freely, move to a plant based diet or look forward to having less. Thoughts about improving one's lot in life are as hard wired as survival.'

Faced with such a daunting struggle, how do we avoid losing hope? Phillip says: 'One thing I do is to make and add to a list of things I can do i.e. things under my personal control.' His own list of over 100 actions ranges from 'Take to the streets and protest', via personal choices such as 'compost food waste' and 'carbon-free Christmas/birthdays', to good humanist principles like 'stay sceptical and look for evidence' and 'remember that the greatest happiness comes from helping others'.

Making such a list, he says, and reading it and adding to it, helps him to stay focused on what he can control and what he can actually do. 'The list has helped to lift me when I'm low.'

Thanks, Phillip. Sound advice, from which we can all learn.

We welcome feedback and responses to items in HCA newsletters. We aim to exemplify the humanist commitment to rational discussion and debate. 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](#). We aim to produce a newsletter every two months.