

U3AC Environment Group Workshop
Climate Change
Monday 9th September 2019 Seminar Report

Brian Wallis welcomed the U3AC members to the seminar.

Leslie Miller-Bernal introduced Professor Aled Jones, the Director of the Anglia Ruskin University's Global Sustainability Institute (GSI), who has a distinguished research and publication record. Professor Jones leads national and international research teams who investigate the social, political and economic impacts of climate change using computer modelling.

Professor Jones began his lecture by saying that he enjoys leading seminars for U3AC. He also noted that GSI is celebrating its 10th anniversary, and that as part of the celebrations, they are asking ten year-olds how they believe the world will be in ten years time. He has received some remarkable letters; one girl spent her summer holidays looking into global warming and other environmental issues.

He invited the U3AC seminar participants to write their views on the topic, too, as he would value their input.

Professor Jones and his colleagues have posed the question, "What are the impacts of severe weather events?" Government organisations and UK finance sector businesses are taking these impacts very seriously in order to improve their resilience. (He later said that the UK was ahead of the world in such matters.)

Floods, monsoons, droughts, fires and reduction of available resources are having and will continue to have serious social, political and economic impacts. The price of fossil fuels is now volatile. Globally, inequality between nations has increased and is now back to pre-WW2 levels. Climate change is leading to increased social disruption, migration and emigration. Brexit, especially if it is no-deal, will have impacts, too. Greater life expectancy has increased retirement age; we are now living longer lives and are slightly more ill at the end of our lives.

The 2003 French heatwave caused an extra 14,000 deaths that summer; subsequently steps were taken and now France is resilient to heat waves. If money is spent preparing for the impacts of climate change, there will be less available for wages and a greater proportion of industries will go to big business, especially oil businesses, and firms in China.

As the climate emergency is being increasingly acknowledged, related mental problems- eco-anxiety-occur. If people exercise more, engage with nature, and do little and bigger things to reduce their carbon footprint, they tend to feel better, research has found. The birth rate is dropping all over the world especially in Europe; shortfalls in labour are being met by emigration.

China, US and India produce over half of the world's food; Brazil and Russia are also significant. In the UK we produce 40-60% of our food, ie we are net importers. African countries, some Latin American countries, Canada, and Norway import food. If China suffered food losses through flood, drought, etc, it would import food; it has many bilateral agreements with food producing countries which would override Britain's and other countries' needs.

If the world had multiple failures then there would be worldwide food shortages such as those that caused the Arab Spring which was mitigated by China dumping cheap food into the market.

At the moment we have enough food to feed us all; the problems are distribution and food waste.

The UK food system is appallingly bad; we do not have food storehouses any more, food is delivered 'just in time' and is on lorries. We do not have a food strategy, unlike the US and Europe, and we waste about 30% of food once we have purchased it. (See previous seminar on food waste.)

There is an obvious linkage (see Aled's graphs) between climate events, food shortages, deaths and riots. If food prices rise more than 50%, there are food riots and protests and changes of government. Professor Jones and his research colleagues have explored various scenarios. One of the earliest scenarios was developed by Molly John of the University of Wisconsin. She investigated what would happen if there is a flood in the US followed by drought in Brazil: maize prices rose by 10%, soya 11%, wheat 7% and rice 7%. These rises then caused food riots across Middle East, Northern Africa and Latin America and a civil war in Nigeria. Issues developed around cricket in India, there were problems on Europe's border with Russia, the Euro weakened, European stock lost 10% and the US stock market 5%. Public commodity stocks rose by 100%, agricultural chemical stocks went up by 500% and agricultural engineering (tractors) were up by 150%. He described a number of other scenarios, for example, Greece leaving Europe, ending with WWII in Europe!

The impacts of climate heating are catastrophic; it is agreed that millions will die; but tackling this now will change our society. We should have started in 1992!

UK, France and Germany are reducing their carbon emissions but not other European countries such as Austria. Professor Jones ended his talk by noting that the Government and pension funds have massive investments in fossil fuels. US, UK and European countries get a lot of tax from fossil fuels. But we need not use 80% of fossil fuel reserves if we slow down or preferably, even stop, CO2 rises, thereby keeping the global carbon pledges.

Feedback from discussion groups; where we were asked to consider what type of government can cope with these issues.

- The first group proposed a national overriding non-elected body with climate change experts (Prof Jones was thought to be a likely member). Its remit would be to consider the climate emergency and what has to be done. The same group thought that there should be resource rationing.

- The second group thought that obstacles were:- a. lack of long-term vision, b. not extending the franchise to young people, c. the intergenerational (inequity) issue, d. need to manage variable expectations, e. how we move to positive actions, f. the need to increase ownership and partnerships, g. the multinationals h. other countries, especially China, governed by self-interest We need to have a cooperative government with greater transparency about lobbying, to reach the wider population, not just work on single-issue politics, and to be able to cope with future shocks Mass media especially social media are significant and we have learnt that heroes such as Attenborough and Thunberg can make a real difference.

Professor Aled Jones commented that family-owned or cooperative companies are most sustainable and that there is a challenge around civil responsibility. We can change; 30% of UK meals are now vegan.

The third discussion group wants to use existing government structures and to set up a government body to collect information and have the power to carry out changes, unlike the Commons' committees. They'd thought about how to pay for this; some changes have no cost, for example, in Melbourne, Australia where volunteers have accomplished needed changes by working with local groups. There are many groups in Cambridge which are working hard on these matters.

Feedback

Feedback forms were completed by 46% of the 40 delegates. The event was considered to be very good/excellent. The speaker was rated very highly. Several volunteered to join the U3Ac Environment Group.

Elizabeth May and Leslie Miller-Bernal
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