'My Resignation'; or, 'Long Walks & Anarcho-Primitivism'
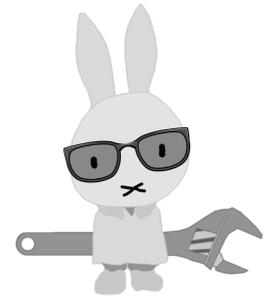
"I am writing to inform you that as of the end of 2020, I am resigning my position with the environmental movement"

Paul Mobbs, *The 'Meta-Blog'*, issue no.9, 1ˢᵗ December 2020

It's two years since I went blind, had surgery, but more importantly had to spend eight weeks with my left cheek pinned flat to the bed all day. After a hectic decade, for the first time I had a chance, without distraction, to reflect on what was, what is, and what may be. This is what I have taken time to discern – *and many of you may not like it*:

To begin, this has been a long-time coming. It's important to take time to think and reflect; to act with clarity rather than ill-judged urgency. Many's the time when out on a walk I've stood and thought, *"now?"*; only to put it off to another day because I could not freely speak what was in my mind.

Now it is that day.

What I talk about here has grown over a decade or two; though it has become more pressing over the last five or six years, and extremely so over the last two. There are two main drivers for that:

Firstly, as the 'climate crisis' becomes mainstream, it eclipses the greater, more complex debate over human ecology, and the wider 'ecological crisis' human 'civilisation' has created – to the point where the mainstream solutions to this crisis are as great a threat as the system they seek to replace.

Secondly, the rise of *Extinction Rebellion*, which has (thankfully) eclipsed role of the established environmental campaigns in Britain; but has (unfortunately) failed to advance the ecological debate any further, as contemporary environmentalism has no critical analysis of humanity's place within its environment – reinforcing our separation from it.

It's important to note that I've been 'doing this' for a long time: My first 'environmental action', aged 9, was a response I wrote at school to a 1977 consultation on the local plan for Banbury; by 14, I was active in local peace and environmental groups; by 17, I was leading direct action protests.

In 1992, that 'amateur' interest turned into a full-time job – which I have been doing ever since. That has taken me all across Britain, working with all kinds of communities and individuals – and occasionally way beyond. It's been an absolute pleasure and honour to work on all those campaigns; but now is the time to change the focus of that work.

That inevitably means risking the loss of many of the 'friends' I have now (hence my delay in writing this); but I have to take that risk now because I can't in all honesty continue in this role otherwise.

After six weeks of near darkness and awesome visual hallucinations – as my brain tried to make sense of my slowly healing eyesight – my vision began to return in late January 2019. During that time my mind 'went for a walk'; or rather, it revisited many of the places I have walked and camped over the last forty years. As I've managed to tie-in walking and camping with working around the country, inevitably, as I revisited those places, I also relived the work I had undertaken while there – and the reasons for doing it.

People have said since, *"weren't you afraid"*. I think the honest answer is, *"no"*. What many might see as a horrific event, I 'viewed' from the beginning as an opportunity to do some serious thinking.

Of course, *'thinking'* can be very dangerous. In February 2019, when I began using a computer again, I opened a new folder called, *'Resignation'.* Since then I have been collecting notes and references that illustrate what it is I have felt for a long time. This has provided the embedded links to this paper – *which I strongly urge you to read*.

My resignation

What is it that makes it difficult for me to call myself, or identify as, an 'environmentalist'?

In short: *What today is called 'environmentalism' has become a self-serving consumer philosophy that strives to preserve affluence rather than protecting all life on the planet.*

That is not what led me to adopt this attitude to the world in my youth; that is not why I've spent almost 40 years actively working to 'change things'.

I believe in protecting 'all life', not any preconceived entitlement to 'affluence'. Yet that is precisely where certain figures in the environmentalism are directing us today – *towards a literal 'dead end'*.

Bill Hicks had a wonderful line: *"Cease your internal dialogue, you're wrong"*. That sums up the feeling I've had for a while now. Even when I can substantiate ideas with research, I've been forced to tone down those thoughts to work with others.

As I can no longer downplay that critique, I cannot in all honesty identify as 'an environmentalist'.

In its everyday language, environmentalism is unable to escape the neoliberal constructs of consumerism, markets, and affluence; and so cannot begin to solve the problems it rails against. So engrained has the language of neoliberalism become within environmentalism, it cannot escape reducing 'progress' to economic valuations, nor imagine any path to change which goes beyond simply 'managing' human impacts – and it would never question the nature of the lifestyle that creates these impacts, and its inherent global inequalities.

Environmentalism cannot solve these problems because what it strives to protect is the root cause of those problems – the affluent lifestyle of the roughly ten percent of the world's population who consume more than half of everything.

More than anything else though, as environmentalism becomes a dialogue on the vicissitudes of affluence, and takes on a purpose that is essentially to preserve that lifestyle, environmentalism has isolated itself from the 'average' person – precisely because the 'average' person, both in Britain and the world, cannot realistically aspire to having such a lifestyle – *so why work to preserve those values?*

Why do 'green' political parties consistently get such low support – not just in Britain, but around the world – and yet believe they can make change? For example, the 2019 Euro-elections, when the greens claimed to make progress even though the anti-environmental far-right got more votes.

Why should 'most' people work to protect a lifestyle they cannot have today, just so those who have that lifestyle can continue to have it tomorrow? Environmentalism can never be a 'popular' force, to the point where it has real political success, while it panders to what are in effect 'minority' values.

The environmental movement cannot advance from its present impasse until it resolves the (at least) 40-year split over *'reform' versus 'radicalism'*; and the paradoxical actions of those who disparage today's economic process, while seeking to maintain their status within it.

This is my 'resignation': That the environment movement is unwilling, and unable to change; because it cannot perceive the errors that arise from its disconnection between goals and means; and those who 'lead' will not veer from that course before a large-scale ecological collapse takes place.

Anti-technology, but pro-science

Even hinting to some earnest environmentalists that first-world affluence is the root of ecological destruction – and perhaps their own affluence prevents them seeing this – results in a clamour of complaint. In reply, their response is nearly always technological solutions that will fix their lifestyle – often with attached web links to some market- or lifestyle-affirming media coverage of one utopian green scheme or another.

If I then respond with peer reviewed research or technical explanations as to why the change they seek is impossible, the result is usually silence – as if, as is generally the case with denial, failing to engage with the criticism will make it go away.

When responses are forthcoming, I am often told that I am being 'negative', or 'anti-technology', or a 'Luddite' *(OK, I will hold up my hand to the latter!)*.

I do not 'blame' people for that position though. Those responses are not really that person speaking; they are neoliberal tropes, being repeated because that is what the public are told these critical arguments represent. Unfortunately, ever since such fallacies were promoted by Plato twenty-four centuries ago, just because these statements have authority doesn't make them true.

These tropes support the ideological fallacy that technological progress is innately good – yet, self-evidently, this cannot be the case because of the ongoing damage to planetary ecosystems.

Yes, 'deep green' ideas represent an end to 'technological society' as we know it today – in which sense they my be those of a *'Luddite'*; but whether people like it or not, its that same technological society that is killing the planet right now.

Technology has become synonymous with scientific knowledge. It is not the same. Though based within science, technology is intrinsically related to the economic and political structures of power.

How can we expect today's dominant economic philosophy, that rejects ecological limits, and the *Laws of Thermodynamics*, to ever represent reality?

Technology is incapable of solving the ecological crisis because the increase in system efficiency, or the cut to emissions involved, is beyond the ability of technology to deliver – *unless we have significant change to affluent lifestyles at the same time*.

Technology is not neutral. Technology reinforces the economic and political culture of the present-day, by allowing the economic system to operate in the way it does. From modern slavery to climate change, campaigns focus on the 'bad' results of the global technocratic economy; ignorant of how the 'positive' reinforcements of consumerism, and especially the screen-based digital realm, reinforce an identity based upon materialism to perpetuate itself.

For example, take the simplistic and and well-worn phrase, allegedly repeated by Deep Ecologists and Neo-Luddites: *"Turn it off"*.

OK… *turn it off and do what?* Let's say I turn-off all the gadgets in my life; *now what?* In today's society how would you work, or buy and cook food?

The idea of 'dropping out' of technologically-enabled society represents a 'double-bind'; you can't exclude yourself from that society because the way it functions prevents you from doing so. Rather like closed religious sects, turning off the technology confers a kind of automatic 'social death', that cuts you off from everything else in your life.

For that same reason the opponents of Deep Ecology use this argument as an attack; that 'turning-back progress' is impossible, and so continuing with ever-more technology is the only viable option for all humanity. And yet, if that ubiquitous technology were to suddenly fail or be disrupted, that's an arguably a worse situation to be in.

What environmentalism increasingly does, instead of advocating lifestyle change, is use technology as a proxy for discussions about the impacts of the affluent lifestyle; but in a way which does not challenge the values of that lifestyle – and which shifts its 'externalities' away to distant economies.

The perfect example of that is the changing debate over cars: Twenty-five years ago, as part of the anti-roads campaigns that arose in response to Thatcher's roads building programme, environmentalists developed a critique of the car as the basis for personal transport – from pollution, to urban destruction, to traffic flow dynamics, to efficiency.

Twenty-five years later where is that ecological critique? It was passed over by mainstream environmental organisations, keen to curry favour with governments: First for an abortive diatribe over biofuels, until biofuels were shown to be worse; and more recently, a discussion about 'green' cars.

Today, that twenty-five year-old critique of transport policy would be called, *'anti-car'*.

Guess what? The critique is still good; and has in fact been strengthened by new evidence that has emerged in the interim. Replacing fossil-fuelled vehicles with electric cars, while creating global equity, is next to impossible – and will give rise to global threats to biodiversity and the climate.

That critical debate on the car never went away; it was deliberately forgotten by environmentalists who wanted to pander to the desires of the affluent, rather than make peace with ecological reality.

'Doing a John Muir'

Early on during my time face-down in bed I listened to a backlog of podcasts and audiobooks. I gave up that monotonous activity very quickly, and remember few of them – with the exception of one.

As I lay, face taped with eye-shield, I listened to a short biography of John Muir. In 1866, an industrial accident cut open Muir's right eye; then his left eye sympathetically failed. It resonated with my own predicament – albeit my 'industrial accident' was likely the result of 30 years of intensive research.

Laid in bed for six weeks, Muir realised that he missed not his modern life, but his simple travels.

I too realised that things needed to change. Around 2017, I had stopped calling myself an *'ecological futurologist'*, and instead used the label *'planetary hospice worker'*. If the research you review keeps telling you that technological society has no future, how can you call yourself a 'futurologist'?

To preserve any measure of freedom and autonomy in their existence, humanity must let go of affluence and consumption – which, for many, is not unlike a 'death of the self'. These are two very distinct kinds of discussion: You don't help people come to terms with that by explaining environmental destruc-

tion; you help people, as hospice workers do, to accept the end of their existence as 'consumers'.

Just before my eyes failed, I had been in a protracted debate with some of those setting up Extinction Rebellion. I tried to explain that their approach was wrong, for reasons others would later echo.

Fundamentally Extinction Rebellion are a bunch of good-hearted, upstanding people who are being led by 'wannabe agitators'. Explaining that is a blog post in itself, and frankly I've no interest in doing that – or I would have written that already.

Their latest antic, 'money rebellion', is so ignorant of the economics of fiat currencies and the debt-finance system, it deserves ridicule. It proves that their outlook on the world is one of a trapped consumer, unable to think beyond those systems of consumption in order to find a new pattern for living.

They can't see those alternatives because their affluent outlook lacks an ecological critique of modernity; and if you broach that with them most reject it as 'extreme' – such has been the victory of neoliberal economics over common sense, embodied in the creation of the "extreme centre".

Extinction Rebellion is not helping people adapt to the inevitable curtailment of mass consumption. They are not arguing for something better than consumerism, but for options that – like the Green New Deal – avoid any troublesome discussions over consumption and lifestyle altogether.

Just like the *"turn it off"* argument, Extinction Rebellion offer no alternative vision. But if all those grand green schemes are to be believed, the future looks relatively so like today, why would an 'average' person believe it offers anything better?

OK, I need to find a new 'job'

If Covid should have taught the public anything, it is that – irrespective of any claims to the contrary – politicians and technocrats are not in control. Just as, a decade or so ago, the financial crash demonstrated economists are not in control either.

The reality then?; *no one is in control of technological society*. Those 'at the top' are as effectively trapped in that same 'double-bind' of technology as the ordinary consumer I talked of earlier. Those 'in charge' are in it for whatever they can get, because that's what the system requires them to do.

Now build-in climate change, resource depletion, and ecological break-down: The public can have no

confidence that their lifestyle is being guaranteed by anyone; or, to quote Erin Brockovitch's latest sound-bite, *"Superman's not coming"*.

Why am I so un-perplexed by this reality?

I need a new job: With my eyes as they are now, I cannot maintain the effort required to do what I have been doing for the last thirty years.

There's a witty maxim: *"Those who can, do; those who can't, teach; those who can't teach, teach PE"*.

Given my present condition*, I need to find the ecological equivalent of teaching PE!*

Growing up, I never had 'affluence'. The life-skills that were taught to me as a child – from growing and cooking food to foraging – were an inheritance from generations of my poor ancestors; who used simple, practical, communal skills to survive Britain's historic exploitation of the semi-rural poor.

By adulthood I made those skills into a deliberate lifestyle. There is no way I could have enjoyed the life I've had if it were based on a 'modern' lifestyle.

At one low point, I earned money teaching people those skills because they were considered 'green'. There's an idea: *Finding new ways to teach those skills*. That's the best I can offer the world right now, given what is likely to happen in the next few years.

If I had to pick a label for that – a simple slogan to encapsulate what it is people need to do – *what would that be?:*

The easiest way to learn these skills is to go walking and camping, using simple tools that you can carry in a pack. This practical outlook, combined with modern-day organising, are the embodied within the philosophy of anarcho-primitivism.

In which case the simple summary would read, *"Long Walks and Anarcho-Primitivism"***.

Of course, that sounds pretty radical – systematically 'giving-up' on the modern lifestyle by voluntarily simplifying your everyday needs. But what you really need to ask yourself is, does that sound any worse than giving your dependency for your future well-being, to a system over which no one has real authority or control?

**Note, for more information on my new research and writing, *'Long Walks and Anarcho-Primitivism'* will launch as a new blog in the New Year – go to http://www.fraw.org.uk/ap/ for details