

# Steady as she goes: global climatic denial guarantees chaotic future for all

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**OPINION:** Consumption-based capitalism is now an unsustainable model of wealth creation

A giant tanker ship carrying 150,000 cubic metres of gas left Norway earlier this month for Japan. The vessel, Ob River, is taking a short cut of several thousand kilometres. Its historic voyage would, just a decade ago, have been inconceivable even in high summer. The Ob River is travelling through the remnants of the once-frozen Arctic ocean – in the depths of winter.

While 17,000 politicians, NGOs and policymakers gather in Doha for the 18th annual talking shop of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, back in the real world, temperatures are rising, ice is melting and the planet is slipping into a chaotic climatic era that scientific studies have been warning about for decades.

Three major reports this month, from the World Bank, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) and the European Environment Agency all point to the same stark conclusion: the climate crisis is rapidly turning into a planetary emergency that is fast moving beyond humanity's ability to contain, let alone reverse.

“This isn't about shock tactics, it's simple maths,” according to Leo Johnson of PwC. “One thing is clear: businesses, governments and communities across the world need to plan for a (dangerously) warming world – not just 2 degrees, but 4, and, at our current rates, 6.” Even at 2 degrees over pre-industrial levels, the world is likely to have stepped into the abyss of irreversible climate disruption. As that approaches 4 to 6 degrees, “we are passing through the gates of hell” in the words of one senior scientist. The World Bank report warned that India would lose half its grain crops and Africa a third of its arable land at just 2 degrees global average temperature increase. Drought and famines will spread into some of the world's most important food-producing regions – northern China, the US midwest, much of the Middle East, as well as India and Pakistan are all facing collapse in water supplies within 10 to 20 years. PwC calculates that, to have a 50:50 chance of avoiding the 2 degree climate “red line”, annual carbon emission reductions of 5.1 per cent will have to be achieved, year on year from now until 2050. In reality, emissions are heading in the opposite direction, growing at more than 2.5 per cent annually.

Not since the second World War have emissions declined by this level, and even then, it was for five, not 40 years.

The US military is bracing for the collapse of multiple states on a scale that will overwhelm any capacity to respond. Ironically, publication of a CIA study was delayed by 10 days as superstorm Sandy shut down the US federal government last month.

“We're on track for a 4 degree warmer world . . . and life-threatening sea level rise,” according to the World Bank report Turn Down the Heat. A 4 degree rise this century is “a doomsday scenario”, said World Bank president Jim Yong Kim.

Scientists estimate that 80 per cent of all known fossil fuel reserves must remain in the ground to avert disaster.

We now have no choice but to forgo the easy wealth that comes from burning this vast carbon store and switch to low-carbon sources. Like it or not, this also means the winding down of consumption-based capitalism and big drops in living standards.

Once we finally grasp that the consequences of “business as usual” are unimaginably grim, political and economic changes may soon be inevitable.

The global slave trade went, in a matter of years, from pillar of the world economy to morally repulsive. To have a future, humanity’s relationships with fossil energy may very soon have to undergo a similar transformation.

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