



A BP refinery and a Uniper coal-fired power plant in Gelsenkirchen, Germany, March 6, 2023. A new United Nations report released Monday, March 20, 2023, provided a sobering reminder that time is running out if humanity wants to avoid passing a dangerous global warming threshold. (*Martin Meissner / AP Photo*)

The Nation.

The Media's Recent Turn to "Climate Optimism" Is a Cruel Fantasy

Beneath the upbeat messaging, the latest UN climate report makes it clear that while the means to save the planet may still be available, the political will is nowhere in sight.

WEN STEPHENSON | APRIL 3, 2023

On March 20, the final instalment of the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) landed with all the force of a pebble hurled into the sea. Another round of dutifully—and accurately—alarming coverage appeared on the world's news pages and in social media feeds, but it was barely acknowledged by the guardians of our political and cultural status quo and their corporate paymasters.

As many have noted, this latest IPCC report contains no new scientific revelations; there is no news to be broken here. It is, rather, an elaborate exercise in messaging. And what a feast for the "climate comms" crowd to chew on. In what is surely a first, UN Secretary General António Guterres alluded

to this year's Oscar winner for Best Picture, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, in trying to describe what must be done at this emergency juncture.

But however you dress it up, the salient points remain what we've known for some time (and this fresh reminder should by rights herald the demise of the cheery optimism that has recently overtaken professionalized climate and progressive NGO spaces):

§ The Paris Agreement's goal of limiting warming to 1.5°C above the preindustrial average—beyond which all bets are off for the survival of enormous swathes of humanity, largely in the Global South—is all but dead.

The planet is now likely to cross that threshold in the early 2030s.

§ Some parts of the world are rapidly approaching, or have already reached, the “limits of adaptation” (see: rising sea levels, desertification, and extreme heat intolerable to the human body). With every additional increment of warming, the task of adaptation gets harder and costlier, if not impossible.

§ Our only chance at stabilizing the climate this century requires deep and rapid decarbonization, which entails not only the accelerated build-out of renewable energy but the immediate end of all new fossil-fuel development. Indeed, even capping coal, oil, and gas operations at existing levels will blow through the “carbon budget” for limiting the planet's warming to 1.5°C—or even 2°C.

§ The developed nations have “sufficient global capital” to invest in drastic decarbonization—if “existing barriers” (the report doesn't name names) are overcome.

§ Most important—especially to those for whom sustaining optimism is paramount—the Paris goals are still technically and economically feasible, as experts love to say, assuming the viability of “net-negative” emissions techniques (i.e., removing CO₂ from the atmosphere), which remain unproven at scale. It's only the political will that's lacking.

Guterres calls the report “a how-to guide to defuse the climate time bomb.” But it isn't really. That's because the IPCC says nothing (and never has) about how to overcome those “existing barriers.” All we're told is that—ready?—“political commitment” will be required.

The apparently unspeakable truth, for both the IPCC and mainstream journalists, is the necessity of something like a near-term political revolution to topple those barriers. Yet there's an utter lack of anything remotely resembling the kind of mass political movement capable of bringing it about. The present risk-averse climate movement certainly isn't; nor is anything else on the left. Even well-informed progressives are more inclined to toil away at incrementalist politics-as-usual—or fantasize about far-off technological breakthroughs (nuclear fusion!)—than face up to the kind of radical “political commitment” that's necessary. To call 1.5°C or 2°C “feasible” in the face of these realities is simply magical thinking.

Ten years ago, in my first piece for this magazine, I noted that the Obama-Biden administration's support for the proposed Keystone XL pipeline flew in the face of climate science. The International Energy Agency had by then reached the conclusion that new investments in fossil-fuel infrastructure would have to end by 2017 if warming was to be kept below 2°C. Keystone XL is dead (a historic victory). But as if to show us—and certain donors, no doubt—what he's really made of, just days before the new IPCC report was released, President Biden approved the massive Willow oil project in Alaska's Arctic, even as we recently learned that China is significantly expanding its use of coal power. And why not? Global emissions reached another record high in 2022. It's simply business as usual. Another word for it is nihilism.

A true reckoning with the radical implications of climate science—that nothing short of political revolution will prevent what amounts to genocide for large, mostly dark-skinned portions of humanity—has yet to come. And yet, in one form or another, a reckoning will come: everywhere, and all at once. **N**

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