doi: 10.1111/1753-6405.12315

Civil disobedience, the energy-climate nexus and Australian coal exports

Colin D. Butler,[1,2] Peter Sainsbury,[3] Fiona Armstrong[4]

1. Faculty of Health, University of Canberra, Australian Capital Territory
2. NCEPH, Australian National University, Australian Capital Territory
3. School of Public Health, University of Sydney, New South Wales
4. Climate and Health Alliance, Victoria

A recent *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* editorial argues that we live in a critical decade with regard to the 'energy transition' required to respond to climate change.[1] Many who have followed the long debate about climate change, energy and other aspects of limits to growth[2] feel growing disquiet.[3] Predictions of the consequences of approaching limits – such as rising energy prices – have long been made, based on theory and models. Now, these forecasts are supported by increasing observational evidence.[4] Greenhouse gas concentrations continue to rise. While the rate of increase in land surface temperatures may have temporarily slowed, warming of the Earth system, including the ocean, has not.[5]

The time remaining before we must act to avert potentially irreversible climate change is alarmingly short – perhaps less than a decade. Climate change poses potentially catastrophic risks for global public health, extending to civilization itself, due to compounding interactions. For example, it is increasingly clear that climate change, in conjunction with various forms of resource scarcity, is likely to worsen conflict.[6]

All is not doom and gloom: many ingredients of a global clean energy transition already exist. Cleaner energy is necessary, if not sufficient, for a wider sustainability transition.[7] How might this step be encouraged?

The prevailing faith placed by the dominant neoliberal capitalist ideology in the capacity of markets and human ingenuity to generate solutions is putting the global population at risk. In Australia, many powerful decision makers, some with substantial influence over energy and climate policy, openly express scepticism about or totally reject climate science. Examples include David Murray, inaugural chair of the Future Fund; Dick Warbuton, chair of the Renewable Energy Target review; and Nick Minchin, recently appointed as Australian Consul-General to the US. In the face of political paralysis, and the absence of important policy levers, the ingenuity that well-informed markets might otherwise unleash to solve the energy-climate nexus is greatly constrained.

Furthermore, Australia, already the world's largest coal exporter, is seeking to expand its coal exports, heedless of the risk not only to the climate and global health, but also to the creation of "stranded assets".[8] The expansion of Australian coal mines is increasingly contested, not only because of global but also because of local issues – from the health hazards of coal mining and coal dust exposure to the threat to forest ecosystems and the Great Barrier Reef.

An increasing number of prudent economists, such as Lord Stern,[9] argue that these carbon exports are unburnable (and unsellable) if we are to avoid high-stakes climate gambling. Given what we now know about the social chaos unchecked climate change portends, continued short-term monetary profit from coal exports is completely immoral.

Civil society leaders increasingly consider non-violent direct action, also known as civil disobedience, as a vital circuit breaker to accelerate the excruciatingly slow progress towards preventing further climate change. Examples may include passive obstruction to prevent mining or sit-in protests to garner publicity. As the editorial notes, such action can both "publicise the matter and force government to carry out its public health protection responsibility".

Civil disobedience to resist climate change policy inertia is growing overseas, especially in the US, where leading climate scientist James Hansen has been arrested protesting fossil fuel projects and the Sierra Club has recently reversed its opposition to civil disobedience as a valid form of protest.[10,11]

Health is a vital public good. In advanced democracies such as Australia, we would like to think that evidence, morals and public discourse are sufficient to protect public health. But, much Australian policy is now an evidence-free zone. Additional tactics are needed, including civil disobedience, as was the case with the suffragette movement, ending the involvement of Australia and the US in the Vietnam War and ridding South Africa of apartheid.

In Australia, protestors are unlikely to be permanently 'disappeared', but civil disobedience against coal exports may risk careers, grants, mortgages and retirement plans. However, the alternative – which could be a gradual and then a rapid, perhaps unstoppable, retreat of civilization – is an unconscionable risk. Public health workers have a duty of care try to prevent this.

Only a few decades of comparative global stability may remain if 'business as usual' practices are continued. If so, older people (such as the authors) may escape personal experience of the worst. But our children and those of our friends, family and colleagues may not. We cannot accept passive observation of the precursor events in the face of compelling evidence of risk. Concern only with 'Me, Here and Now' is to us morally unacceptable.

While continuing to write, speak, organise and advocate for action, we have also concluded that civil disobedience by health professionals, as part of a wider social movement, is now necessary. Collectively, such actions may yet trigger sufficient corrective action to see the optimists vindicated.

References

1. Tait PW. A critical decade for public health: Responsibility for energy transitions. *Aust N Z J Public Health*. 2014;38(1):4-6.
2. Butler CD. Food security in the Asia-Pacific: Malthus, limits and environmental challenges. *Asia Pac J Clin Nutr*. 2009;18(4):577-84.
3. Hansen J, Kharecha P, Sato M, Masson-Delmotte V, Ackerman F, Beerling DJ, et al. Assessing "dangerous climate change": Required reduction of carbon emissions to protect young people, future generations and nature. *PLoS ONE*. 2013;8(12):e81648. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0081648.
4. Murphy DJ. The implications of the declining energy return on investment of oil production. *Philos Trans A Math Phys Eng Sci*. 2014;372(2006). doi: 10.1098/rsta.2013.0126
5. England MH, McGregor S, Spence P, Meehl GA, Timmermann A, Cai W, et al. Recent intensification of wind-driven circulation in the Pacific and the ongoing warming hiatus. *Nat Clim Chang*. 2014;4:222-7. doi:10.1038/nclimate2106
6. Butler CD. *Climate Change and Global Health*. Wallingford (UK): CABI; 2014.
7. McMichael AJ, Smith KR, Corvalan CF. The sustainability transition: A new challenge [editorial]. *Bull World Health Organ*. 2000;78(9):1067.
8. Caldecott B, Tilbury J, Ma Y. *Stranded Down Under? Environment-related Factors Changing China's Demand for Coal and What this Means for Australian Coal Assets*. Oxford (UK): Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment; 2014.
9. Harvey F. Carbon budget' talks urgent, warns Lord Stern [Internet]. *The Guardian*. 2013 [cited 2014 Dec 5]. Available from: http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/sep/29/carbon-budget-talks-urgent-ipcc-lord-stern
10. Fox News. *Top NASA scientist arrested (again) in White House Protest* [Internet]. New York (NY): Fox News Channel; 2013 [cited 2014 Dec 5]. Available from: http://www.foxnews.com/science/2013/02/13/top-nasa-climate-scientist-arrested-again-in-white-house-protest/
11. Martin MJ. Three Tactics for a Stronger Climate Movement [Internet]. *Yes Magazine*. 2013 [cited 2014 Dec 5]. Available from: http://www.yesmagazine.org/planet/sierra-club-in-handcuffs-implications-for-climate-justice

Correspondence to: Professor Colin Butler, Faculty of Health, University of Canberra, Bruce, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory 2617; e-mail: colin.butler@canberra.edu.au