

Dorling, D. (2019) Climate Change - Letter, Oxford Magazine, 0th week Trinity Term, p. 27, Friday 26th April,
<https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/Oxford%20Magazine%200th%20week%2C%20Trinity%20term%202019%20-%20No%20407.pdf>

TO THE EDITOR

Climate Change

Sir –Mayer Hillman (Oxford Magazine, No. 405, 5th Week, HT 2018) informs us that he does not share my view that reducing economic inequality is key to facing up to climate breakdown. I thought I should set the record straight.

This is not my idea. I first came across the evidence that this was the case upon reading the 2015 report by Lucas Chancel and Thomas Piketty: “Carbon and inequality: from Kyoto to Paris” (<http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/files/ChancelPiketty2015.pdf>). Since then I have not found a single economist who has studied the relationship and not landed upon the same conclusion. Economic inequality is a key driver of the pollution that harms our climate and would be one of the key contributions required for reversing the process which is causing the ice caps to melt and sea levels to rise.

The UK is the most economically unequal country in Europe. Although it is not enough, we need to do a lot more than reduce levels of economic inequality in all rich countries to those low levels enjoyed by the most equitable countries. That, alone, is the largest contribution we could most quickly make to reducing pollution. More unequal affluent nations pollute far more, per head. Everyone in more unequal nations consumes and pollutes more; the rich being far more profligate than the rest.

Perhaps an example would help? Consider a series of colleges in Oxford. They all admit a similar number of undergraduates. Some colleges are stinking rich, others just mildly rich (or in relative terms ‘poor colleges’). Each college has a heating bill, that heating bill is much higher for the richer colleges because they have so many more buildings to heat on their estate; but they also don’t have to worry quite so much about the running costs given the annual growth of their endowment, and can also award their students travel grants to fly away during the long vacation for the purposes of working on their undergraduate dissertation.

Which undergraduates in which college do you think would have the higher carbon footprint? And, if this were a normal university in a more equitable country by how much would all their carbon footprints be reduced by the change in behaviour that would result? How do you think the carbon footprint of Oxford undergraduates (and academics) might compare to their counterparts in Germany, Norway, Japan or the Netherlands?

Yours sincerely

Danny Dorling

St Peter’s College

IN RESPONSE TO:

Climate Change Sir –While I agree with Danny Dorling (Oxford Magazine, No. 402, 8th Week, MT 2018) that the inevitability of disaster from climate change is “almost certain”, I do not share his view that “reducing economic inequality is key to facing up to climate breakdown.” Of course the elimination of income inequality is important for many reasons; however, it would make no contribution to reversing the process which is causing the ice caps to melt and sea levels to rise. This can only get worse and worse as average global temperatures increase. Key to mitigating the effects of climate change is the unlikely goal of achieving zero carbon emissions speedily in order then to hope that a credible breakthrough will be found to reduce their concentration in the atmosphere. Yours sincerely

Mayer Hillman, Oxford

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DANNY DORLING

St Peter’s College

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MAYER HILLMAN

Oxford