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Renewables Are Not Enough

Forum: [*The Climate Movement: What's Next?*](#)

Kerryn Higgs

“System Change, Not Climate Change”?

I write as an Australian deeply disappointed by my country’s failure to elect a somewhat aware alternative (Labor) government last month. Sadly, Australia will continue to line up with Saudi Arabia and the USA for another three years (shame on us!) with its conservative Coalition Government led by the man who brandished a chunk of coal in Parliament and told MPs not to be afraid of it.

There were no doubt many reasons, including the unpopularity of the Labor leader and the sweeping ambition of the social welfare programs he offered, which were furiously resisted by sections of the business community and by the Murdoch press. A flood of disinformation through social media may also have played a part, instigated not by Russia in this case, but by the Coalition party and its allies. But one key reason lies in the influence of coal and mining interests more generally.

Huge personal fortunes are not usually deployed in Australian elections (as distinct from the US practice), but one billionaire mining magnate spent something like \$60 million on advertising against Labor, much of it completely untrue. So our climate (and energy) policies will continue to be paralyzed by the influence of Big Coal, the Minerals Council of Australia, and Rupert Murdoch’s NewsCorp.

The emergency is grave and multi-faceted. Corporations comb the earth, extracting anything that can be sold, churning carbon out into the atmosphere, and leaving devastation behind, as well as farming on the equally extractive industrial model. It's not just the climate that's in crisis, but the biological fabric of life on earth.

The biggest obstacles to success in limiting global warming to 2°C above pre-industrial (or, even more hopefully, 1.5°C) are the vested interests that oppose this endeavor. The problem is political, as democracies like ours here fail to reject the propaganda dispensed by the beneficiaries of destruction. No real solution can be established while corporate capitalism remains the dominant economic system almost everywhere on earth. It's a system that demands consumption for the sake of expansion rather than serving actual human needs; profit at all costs, even if that means destroying its basis; and the endless pursuit of economic growth.

Thus, although humans may have the technical capacity to turn the ship around, I am unconvinced that a new world of renewable energy can or should service an economy dedicated to the old goals of growth and consumption. The extent of extraction that would be required to convert the growth economy to renewable energy, for example, even if it is possible, will extend worldwide devastation, and be especially negative for people who do not live in the charmed world of the rich countries.

So the central question for me is how do we get traction, as a movement, against the well-organized, well-financed wheels of the growth machine? Alas, I don't have any easy answer, short of revolution—which in itself is not an easy answer.

So I also applaud those who encourage and strategize ongoing efforts to curb emissions and pursue transformation as best we can. There is no doubt that a temperature of 2.5°C or 3°C above pre-industrial will be more survivable than one of 4°C or 5°C, so everything we do to mitigate the damage is worthwhile.

About the Author



Kerryn Higgs, an Australian writer and historian, is currently a University Associate at the University of Tasmania and an Associate Fellow of the Club of Rome. Higgs has been an activist and researcher on issues of environment, social justice, and social-ecological limits for several decades. She has also published a novel and numerous articles on environment and politics. Her latest book is *Collision Course: Endless Growth on a Finite Planet*. She has taught history at Melbourne University, and creative writing, gender studies, and environmental studies at the University of New South Wales. She holds a PhD in Geography and Environmental Studies from the University of Tasmania.

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