

WHEN CUTTING EMISSIONS IS NO LONGER ENOUGH:

An honest debate about life in the post-industrial age

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In June 2017, sixty-five people died in Portugal due to forest fires. Three years later, six young Portuguese activists sued their own government and thirty-two other countries, including Germany. They say that the 2017 fires were caused by climate change, a claim backed up by scientists. The lawsuit accuses the thirty-three states of worsening the climate crisis and contributing to people's deaths. Although no ruling has yet been made in the case, Germany's Federal Constitutional Court did make a landmark decision on climate policy in April this year, ruling that the German government could not keep on with 'business as usual'. According to the judgment, the coalition's climate change plan is inadequate to protect younger generations. Article 20a of the German constitution states that 'Mindful also of its responsibility towards future generations, the state shall protect the natural foundations of life and animals.'

The court has given protecting the climate the status of a constitutional duty. It's a historic decision, but only a first step towards a new German climate policy.

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Clearly, our current lifestyle won't stop climate change. As of 2019, our remaining CO2 budget for the rest of the century is 7.9 gigatonnes. If that figure is exceeded, the effects of climate change will be unmanageable. Each individual emits an average of 7.9 tonnes of CO2 per year. So if we keep going as we are now, we'll have used up the budget by the end of the 2030s.

OUR CURRENT WAY OF LIFE DOES NOT STOP CLIMATE CHANGE

Until now, the German government has attempted to manage emissions using market mechanisms such as emissions trading. But reality is starting to sink in for politicians too, and a comprehensive transformation of the economy has begun, including a series of bans: a ban on combustion engines in many EU states from 2030 onwards, a ban on coal-powered electricity generation, stricter rules on the use of heating oil and heavy fuel oil in Germany. On top of that, politicians are hoping that citizens themselves will do what they can to minimise the amount of CO2 they pump into the atmosphere. To speak plainly: they're hoping people will give things up. Hoping that they'll give up meat, give up their holidays to Mallorca, give up the way of life we've known for generations.

CAN THE STATE STILL HOPE THAT CITIZENS WILL DO WITHOUT?

Unsurprisingly, progress on cutting emissions is far too slow and there's little hope that people will heed the government's calls to give up their carbon-intensive activities by 2030. But what will happen if Germany's current strategy is inadequate to protect the fundamental conditions of its citizens' lives? Would the government then have the right to impose stronger restrictions on individual freedoms, in order to protect the environment its citizens live in?

The coronavirus pandemic has shown that people are willing to accept curbs on their freedom for the greater good of protecting health. For almost a year, the government has controlled which businesses are allowed to open and how many people are allowed inside shops. We've given up our normal life in order to fight the pandemic together. However, it should be clear that things aren't as simple with the climate crisis. We can't simply cut emissions for a year to 'eradicate' climate change. Global warming is inseparably linked to the way our economy and production

of goods have functioned for the past two centuries. The mass production and factories that have created universal prosperity have also emitted harmful gases into the atmosphere and disrupted its chemical composition. There is no end date when we can stop taking measures to protect the environment.

THE TRANSFORMATION TO AN EMISSION-FREE ECONOMY MUST NOT LOSE SIGHT OF PROSPERITY

The industrial age will have to come to an end. But unlike with the coronavirus pandemic, we still have a chance now to talk about it as a society and think about what our life will look like in the post-industrial world. Because it's also clear that the transformation to a carbon-free economy mustn't be allowed to mean a fall in our living standards. That's why speed is of the essence. Most of the conditions for a carbon-free economy are already in place. The coming decade therefore needs to be one of investment in order to maintain our standard of life.

The climate crisis is no longer a topic that politicians can kick into the long grass. Even during the prolonged crisis of the pandemic, surveys have shown that the public consider the environment the second most important issue after coronavirus. For Germany's federal elections, this means that only parties with a clear plan to combat the climate crisis should win, and the chancellor candidates will need to finally spell out clearly what the transformation of the economy will mean for our lives.

WE CANNOT AFFORD TO FAIL IN COMBATING CLIMATE CHANGE

Politicians need to have the courage to give citizens an effective legal mechanism that can compel the government to meet its self-imposed climate targets. Even six years after the Paris Agreement there are barely any legal consequences if progress towards these targets is too slow.

At the start of the pandemic, the measures introduced by the Infection Protection Act shielded Germany from being hit hard by the virus, and the world looked on in amazement. Those days are long gone. We need to prevent a similar failure in the fight against climate change.



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