

from Co-opportunity by John Grant part 1

**WHY DON'T WE HAVE A CLIMATE FOR CHANGE YET?**

Barack Obama has a fateful choice that he-and we- must make to begin an emergency rescue of human civilisation from the imminent and rapidly growing threat posed by the Climate crisis

Al Gore, ' The Climate for Change', New York Times, September 11th 2008

Once Upon A Time In America, a student was taking part in what they thought was a research project about 'life in the university'. They had been shown through to a waiting room and given a questionnaire to fill in.

A wisp of smoke trailed into the room, through an air vent. Then another. A few minutes later, so much smoke had come into the room that it was difficult to ignore. Yet they remained sitting there, stoically filling in their questionnaire and shooting occasional anxious glances at the other two young men also sitting in the waiting room. The subject didn't leave the room to report the smoke - even when the smoke was so thick that it was hard to see, or breathe. And according to experts- if this was a real fire - their chances of getting out alive were now very low.

They just sat there. Why? Because the other two people in the room were actors. They had been given instructions to ignore the smoke, sit calmly, pretend that nothing was happening. 90% of the time given this situation , the experimental subject would follow their lead. Only 10% of the subjects ever left the room to report the smoke.

These experiments were first performed in the 1960's by social psychologists investigating a phenomenon they labelled 'Bystander Apathy'. These experiments were repeated with all three interviewees being genuine subjects and no actors present. Even now, only in 38% of cases did someone leave and report the smoke. Presumably with three volunteers, each subject was waiting for another to respond. Whereas when the experiment was conducted with a single interview subject, sitting on their own, 75% left the room and reported the smoke.

It sounds incredible. But the experiment has been repeated numerous times with similar results. This experiment has been repeated on YouTube with one subject and a whole semi-circle of stooges. In this case the subject sits for 20 minutes, while smoke pours into the room.

The experiment shows our reliance on reading others' reactions, when assessing risk and the need to take action. Especially in emergency situations, where drastic action might be required. If nobody else seems to be responding, we assume that everything is OK. You can perhaps remember a situation like this yourself, for instance when a fire alarm went off in an office. Nobody else moved, so you assumed that it was some kind of 'test'?

All of which may begin to explain why, despite regular reports in the media about climate change, most carry on regardless. Record levels of ice melting in the Arctic. Record annual temperatures. One in ten homes in the U.K at flood risk. Hurricane Katrina. Climate change is reaching the point where scientists say it could be too late to halt or reverse. And yet here we are, changing very little, not quite believing it is really happening.



Why? Because we look around and no one else seems to be responding. There are no emergency measures being brought in by the government, like fuel rationing. The only people we see responding are ones we can label as 'fringe extremists'. So we can discount their protest marches and stunts. All the real signals indicate there must be no risk. Despite the news. In fact if it was really happening it would'nt be in the regular news( which is about things continuing as they are). It would have it's own news flash. Imagine scientists discovered a large comet on collision course with earth. They'd hardly stuff this in the middle of News at ten, just after the human interest story. As one woman said, in research groups I was conducting for the U.K government 'if climate change were real, there would be mass hysteria'

The lack of public engagement and action worries politicians a great deal. It has given rise to many a report about 'behaviour change'. The question is: how can we get the general public, in large numbers, to respond to the danger signs? Attention often focuses on the gap between intention and action. It might better focus on the gap between politicians and people.

In 2006 , on the publication of their handbook on climate change, the Rough Guides editor sent a copy to every M.P in the U.K, along with a letter asking three questions:

1. How important an issue is climate change?
2. What can Britain do to make a difference?
3. What steps do you plan to take(or have you taken), in your constituency, and as an individual?

The results of this survey were published in the Independant newspaper, their headline being 'How green is your M.P?' Nearly half of all the M.P's replied(318). That's a notable result in itself, given their packed post bags. And the reason for this (at least among those that replied) may be apparent from their (near) unanimous answers to question 1: that it is the most important issue, bar none. Here is a selection of their replies:

1. Climate change is the most important challenge the world is facing. ( Labour)
- 1 Climate change is the defining issue of our age. Previous generations had to deal with the rise of Nazism or communism. This is the issue on which my generation of politicians will be judged. This is our Dunkirk . (Conservative)
1. Climate change is the most important issue facing us today-and has been for some time.The consequences if we do not tackle this urgently and fully are potentially catastrophic for the whole human race and life on the earth.

The answers to the other two questions showed strong support for public investment (in renewable energy efficiency) and also that politicians are making substantial changes in their own homes and lives. Many acknowledge that the public are not nearly as fully behind this issue as they are(so it's hard to argue that this was an exercise in pandering to public opinion?).For instance one went on to say:

The problem to date has been persuading enough people to recognise the threat, and despite Al Gore etc. I remain alarmed at how few people still really understand the scale of the problem and how fast we need to move.

Building a climate for change, one where the general public do recognise the threat and are motivated to act, is the subject of this part of the book. Before we come onto public and business attitudes, it's worth pausing to reflect on just why the M.P's do see this as the most important issue, bar none. One reason may be their exposure to the latest science. Another, I suspect, is their position as people who take responsibility for society-and planet -wide issues. Perhaps we need to move to a position where all of us, not just M.P's include such global issues within our our scope of responsibility.