

## People, Power, Politics and Peak Oil

By Steven Robert Harris

Experts have variously predicted the advent of Peak Oil – that moment in time when we have extracted over half of all the known oil reserves on Earth – as occurring sometime between 1996 and 2025. In 2008 a report from the International Energy Agency caused a global sensation by concluding that in 2020 world oil production would “plateau” then “start to decline”, thereby confirming the reality of a concept – Peak Oil – many had previously refused to admit even existed.

So what is the significance of Peak Oil? It is that from here on in, although we are far from running out, oil becomes increasingly expensive and difficult to find and extract, providing diminishing returns on energy invested. This signals the beginning of the end of an era in which humanity’s consumption of ‘black gold’ has relentlessly – and, as we now realise, recklessly – increased year-on-year. We currently use up barrels of oil – each holding 42 gallons or almost 159 litres – at the staggering rate of over 86 million every day. The consumption figure for the UK is more than 1.82m barrels per diem, which means the 2.9 million people of Wales account for around 86,500 barrels of oil daily. And that’s not just for power and heating. Oil fuels around 95% of all transport; almost all of the goods in our shops rely on oil to get there. 99% of our food relies on oil for cultivation, fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides and distribution; and a huge proportion of modern materials – including plastics, clothing, cosmetics, bubblegum and tyres – are derived from oil. And, of course, the consumption of oil and its derivatives is a major source of waste and pollution, contributing a huge proportion of the greenhouse gas emissions which are driving global warming. Yet world crude oil demand is projected to increase 37% over 2006 levels by 2030.

Of course, as the Transition Towns movement recognises, it is not Peak Oil alone that is the problem. Rather, it is the historically unprecedented convergence of resource depletion with climate change, biodiversity loss, human population growth, food insecurity and widespread social injustice, presenting humanity with what can truly be called an ‘Earth System Crisis’. Despite the claims of techno-optimists, neither dramatic improvements in energy efficiency – often negated by ‘rebound effects’ which see overall consumption rise – nor rapid substitution by renewables can possibly meet energy demand at current levels while simultaneously reducing greenhouse gas emissions at the rate required. Scores of scientists, from Odum in the 1970s to MacKay today, have concluded that whatever scenarios we spin there is absolutely no way to avoid some degree of *energy descent* – an overall reduction in energy supply and demand. The key question is not *whether* we reduce energy demand; it is *how* we manage it. Energy descent can be slow, steady, careful and equitable – or sudden, shocking and possibly catastrophic. We now stand where others have before us – facing the kind of ecological and resource collapse that arguably hastened the end of the Roman, Mayan and Cambodian civilisations. The difference, of course, is that

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today we are forewarned by our science; the question is, can we muster the courage and wisdom to act on that knowledge?

Given, on the one hand, the absolute dependence of globalised capitalism on continuing economic growth fuelled by ever-increasing energy inputs, and on the other, the grim reality of a worsening environmental crisis driven by fossil-fuel consumption, it is abundantly clear that 'business as usual' is no longer a realistic or desirable option. This could be good news, if it encourages moves toward new, more equitable and eco-friendly systems of resource use and distribution. However, it could also be very bad news if those in power continue to favour selfish, short-term interests over common humanity. The continuing advocacy of economic growth by mainstream political parties in Wales not only flies in the face of the scientific evidence but also totally contradicts the statutory commitment to sustainable development. Examined closely, the claims of environmental pressure groups that wind, wave and solar can replace fossil-fuel power sources in the short to medium term are at best optimistic, at worst naïve. The clear links between oil, power, profits, pollution and population raise the spectres of increasing warfare, famine and natural disaster – exactly the kind of 'creative destruction' utilised by capitalism to renew itself. They also encourage the rise of anti-human, Social-Darwinist ideologies within the Green movement and beyond. The challenge for an emerging, humanist and truly radical red-green politics in Wales is to confront these harsh realities head-on; to speak truth to power, both state and civil, on the convergence of climate change and Peak Oil; and to help develop plans and policies for a slow and controlled energy descent which enshrine and promote social and environmental justice.

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