



# Democratic or Authoritarian Action

How should people respond to the Climate Emergency?

Contributions by Jem Bendell and John Foster

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## Preface

This gas published by Green House Think Tank is an exchange between Jem Bendell, and John Foster around a critical question of our times: **Can democratic action now avert climate and ecological catastrophe and if not, is any form of authoritarian approach ever worth considering?** Jem and John take a different stance on this question, which Green House Think Tank believes must be confronted.

### **Key issues here might be:**

- What is the likelihood of limiting climate change by authoritarian compared to democratic action?
- What other risks are inherent in bypassing democracy?
- If this is really the choice people face in some or all contexts, which undesirable course of action should be chosen?

Many people, and our society as a whole, tend to avoid such thorny questions, as the only route through them requires listening to hard truths, accepting difficult compromises, and grappling with the world as it is, not as we'd like to believe it to be. However in spite of this others have also considered the implications of these questions, and the predicament they present. For example [Dougald Hine's](#) and [Chris Samje's](#) recent books, take very different perspectives whilst considering the same fundamental reality.

In order to facilitate debate on such issues, Green House Think Tank publishes material about which its active core members may have reservations, sometimes even strong ones, but which they consider worth reflecting on and debating. Views published remain those of the authors, not of Green House collectively.

This discussion piece came about because Jem Bendell expressed (via 'Twitter') disagreement with a piece which John Foster had written and Green House Think Tank had published. Green House Think Tank invited Jem to lay out his argument for publication along with a response from John Foster. This discussion gas was the result. The disagreement was initially raised by a paragraph in John Foster's [review of Rupert Read's new book \*Do You Want to Know the Truth?\*](#), expressing the hope that Read's proposed '[Climate Majority](#)' would develop quickly into a self-recognised revolutionary vanguard.

Jem's latest book "Breaking Together: a freedom-loving response to collapse.", from which some of his argument below is an edited excerpt, is available here [paperback/hardback/kindle](#). Published by The Schumacher Institute.

John Foster's Book [Realism and the Climate Crisis: Hope for Life](#) also engages with this subject and is published by Bristol University Press.

Green House is a think tank founded in 2011 which aims to lead the development of green thinking in the UK. Find out more and read our strategy at [greenhousethinktank.org/about](https://greenhousethinktank.org/about)

## **Jem Bendell's contribution:**

### **Why we must ALL challenge authoritarian views in green politics:**

During my decades in environmental work, I often discussed with people whether democracy was an impediment to protecting the environment. That had even been one of the essay questions in my final exam for my Geography degree at the University of Cambridge. As I became more aware of how much we have all been manipulated and coerced by capitalism, and what I describe as Imperial Modernity, I realised that we do not even know what we might have decided in truly democratic systems, with widespread informed participation in all aspects of our lives.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, many of my fellow environmentalists haven't developed their ideas in similar ways. Instead, when facing the terrifying data on the environment, and with politics trending in the opposite direction, they have become more misanthropic and authoritarian. I have witnessed how, if people don't understand that it is our lack of freedom that has forced such destruction, then they can adopt a negative view of human nature. If the story that 'strong leaders' can force positive changes is not seen as part of our indoctrination to live in modern hierarchical societies, then we can adopt an authoritarian view as if that is common sense (as I explain in detail in the chapter on the 'freedom to know' in *Breaking Together*).

Observing the draconian responses of governments to Covid, some environmentalists are ignoring how stupid, counterproductive and illegitimate those responses were, to regard them as a model for action on the climate crisis. In the introduction of *Breaking Together* I provide examples of environmentalists expressing that sentiment. Meanwhile, some scholars who perceive societies to be crumbling in the ways I describe in the book are expressing authoritarian strategies. For instance, philosopher John Foster writes of his wish for a "vanguard elite" who "*knowing the hard truth of our situation and determined to live in it, accept the accompanying grim responsibility of taking power by whatever means they can, without waiting for any sort of majority endorsement and even overriding strong majority reluctance, in order to prevent what horrors can still be prevented. But in thus acting out of and on behalf of human wholeness they stand in, at this desperate juncture and with a thoroughly non-quantified kind of representativeness, for the whole of humanity. That is their warrant and legitimation for wielding whatever institutional force they can command, and indeed whatever force beyond that turns out to be called for.*" He explains that his faith in humanity is a faith in such a "vanguard elite" existing. He considers that our climate predicament means that "politics must shift decisively from the democratic to the therapeutic" whereby the public are regarded as addicted to consumption, rather than sovereign people being manipulated and oppressed.<sup>2</sup> He hopes that initiatives of professionals like 'the Moderate Flank' could lead to a

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<sup>1</sup> This is explored in depth in Chapters 2 and 10 of *Breaking Together*.

smaller group emerging with such a sense of purpose—something we might dub a ‘Stalinist Flank’.<sup>3</sup>

Despite nods towards socialist concerns, one of the immediate problems with authoritarian strategies is that they can encourage seeking alignment with the elites that are using the ecological situation to pursue self-enriching initiatives which do not work well and can be counterproductive. One example has been carbon trading, which has generated profits for polluting companies without any significant impacts on emissions.<sup>4</sup> Since the market for carbon offsets was formalised by the UN in 2021, that will increase the rate of large land acquisitions leading to forest monocultures with poor environmental outcomes.<sup>5</sup> An example of what can go wrong was in New Zealand, where ‘carbon farming’ approaches to forest management led to far more damage during a cyclone.<sup>6</sup> Another example of corporate profiteering from the crisis was embedded within the so-called Inflation Reduction Act in the USA, when it provided huge sums of public money to dubious projects like Direct Air Capture machines (critiqued in Chapter 5 of *Breaking Together*). After a huge investment in public relations and lobbying by these industries, similar policies are being put in place elsewhere. The industry interests related to responding to climate change now amount to trillions of dollars, and consequently many professionals risk becoming ‘climate users’ rather than climate defenders (climate users are professionals who leverage climate concern for their own wealth, status, influence and self-esteem).<sup>7</sup>

Another problem from aligning with elites in pursuit of the levers of power, is that it distances oneself from the realities and concerns of ordinary people, including the working class. The draconian policies adopted in relation to farmers created a massive political backlash in both Sri Lanka and the Netherlands, as mentioned in the introduction of *Breaking Together*. The mass protests and electoral rebellion against compulsory purchase of farming land by the government provided an important reality check for people who think litigation will be the silver bullet to drive change without democratic consent. Both situations were either ignored or defended at the time by all high-profile Western environmentalists who I know of. The common factor behind all of the responses I’ve listed in the last two paragraphs is the influence of elites.

<sup>2</sup> Reyes, O. & Gilbertson, T. (2010). Carbon trading: how it works and why it fails. *Soundings*, 45, 89-100. <https://doi.org/10.3898/136266210792307050>

<sup>3</sup> He previously wrote similar ideas in another article on the Green House website. [The Climate Majority: Apathy and Action in the Age of Nationalism](https://greenhousethinktank.org) (greenhousethinktank.org)

<sup>4</sup> Morgan, J. (2021). Cop26’s worst outcome would be giving the green light to carbon offsetting | Jennifer Morgan. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/03/cop26-carbon-offsetting-greenwashing-paris-agreement>

<sup>5</sup> Kelly, R. (2023). Groundswell NZ says overseas carbon farmers need to be included in slash review. *Stuff.co.nz*. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/131324200/groundswell-nz-says-overseas-carbon-farmers-need-to-be-included-in-slash-review>

<sup>6</sup> Bendell, J. (2022). Don’t be a climate user – an essay on climate science communication. *Jembendell.com*. <https://jembendell.com/2022/08/03/dont-be-a-climate-user-an-essay-on-climate-science-communication>

<sup>7</sup> Gossling, S. & Humpe, A. (2023). Millionaire spending incompatible with 1.5 °C ambitions. *Cleaner Production Letters*, 4, 100027. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666791622000252>

As just the millionaires of the world alone will use up 72% of the remaining carbon budget identified by the IPCC as “safe,”<sup>8</sup> it is important to reject the hypocritical leadership of elites on the environment. Therefore, it is useful to resist all the kinds of policies I have just described, alongside promoting alternatives that give power to people to regenerate their environments and prepare for greater disruptions to their societies— something I define and describe in my book as an ‘ecolibertarian approach’.

The most obvious unaccountable approach to responding to the environmental situation would be simply to raise prices so much that people could not afford to consume. In Chapter 2 on the monetary system, I explained how central bankers knowingly caused the conditions for persistent higher inflation with policies they erroneously claimed were due to the pandemic. I have no information on whether making people poorer is part of a plan of some central bankers, whether for environmental reasons or any other. But an ecolibertarian approach demands accountability for their behaviour and seeks to reclaim both banks and monetary systems for the people as part of a wider agenda of democratising a system that has caused such damage in the first place (as chronicled in Chapter 10).<sup>9</sup>

Both the editors of the mainstream media and the new US-based ‘censorship industrial complex’ are organising against more radical perspectives on the environmental situation. Mass media are framing any critique of establishment climatology as ‘conspiracy theory’, despite the extensive science for such a view (as outlined in Chapter 5 on the climate). Fact-checking websites claim that articles about environmental thresholds being crossed are false, and platforms like Facebook ‘visibility filter’ both the content and those people or groups that share it. That was condemned by some top climatologists, but has persisted anyway, indicating the non-scientific motivation for the censorship.<sup>10</sup> In a more sinister turn, the state-funded think tanks working on security issues and internet censorship have been seeking to connect our quite normal expectation of further societal disruption and breakdown with violent extremism, despite a lack of both psychological theory and evidence for that view. One think tank with influence on British government policy argued that groups like the non-violent Extinction Rebellion should be considered domestic extremists and the full anti-terrorist powers of the state used against them. As I was mentioned throughout their report as being an inspiration for XR, it felt rather surreal, especially as I have constantly criticised anyone for even suggesting more violent activism might be acceptable.<sup>11</sup> Various other state-funded organisations, in the

<sup>8</sup> Arnsperger, C.; Bendell, J. & Slater, M. (2021). [Monetary adaptation to planetary emergency: addressing the monetary growth imperative](#). Institute for Leadership and Sustainability (IFLAS) Occasional Papers Volume 8. University of Cumbria, Ambleside, UK.

<sup>9</sup> Knorr, W. & Steffen, W. (2020). [Fact Checking the Climate Crisis: Franzen vs. Facebook on False News](#). IFLAS – Initiative for Leadership and Sustainability.

<sup>10</sup> Bendell, J. (2021). [As non-violence is non-negotiable we must have tough conversations](#). Jembendell.com.

<sup>11</sup> One organisation that is publishing reports and articles to make arguments to justify authoritarian action online and offline is the GNET – Global Network on Extremism and Technology ([gnet-research.org](#)). For instance, they carry articles suggesting that a belief in ‘doomsday’ approaching is a coherent terrorist motivation behind mass murder by those who might be mentally ill and grasping at any explanation. Rather than focusing on a dark incomprehensible future ‘end’ or ‘judgement day,’ this book explains that we are already within an era of collapse and that we can find

US in particular, have been working hard to frame critiques of capitalism and its role in ongoing societal strife as aligned with efforts to overthrow capitalism, or to accelerate its demise, and connect that with violent individuals.<sup>12</sup> Like most people who recognise the inevitable or unfolding collapse of modern societies, I am merely chronicling the demise and exploring what to do about that, and seeking neither to overthrow nor accelerate its demise. It is due to these sinister developments by powerful corporations and state agencies that rhetoric from scholars like John Foster that a 'vanguard elite' should take power and enforce changes on society is not only wrong in principle but also likely to be tactically unhelpful.

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Another reason that authoritarian sentiments from environmental scholars are unhelpful is because they distract us from the need to challenge the corrupt merger of corporate and state power, on a range of issues, and thus build coalitions that seek to reclaim our power to live in more right relationship with each other and nature.

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Despite the damage to public support for environmental action due to the wrong-headed and self-serving policies of elites, some environmental leaders have been doing their ideological work. They do that by demonising protestors, so undermining our ability to organise against the systemic problem of corporate power behind the myriad problems. The obvious examples are the lies spread about critics of policies on Covid, farming and war. The lies include that the protestors are all racists, far right, or working for a foreign power, or are being duped by such people. This means people protesting about one issue don't realise that their views of protestors on other issues have been negatively shaped by mass media, and so they don't team up in their common fight against corporate power—rendering them ineffective.<sup>13</sup> Some commentators even go as far as describing peaceful protestors against instances of the overreach of corporate or state power as being fascists. It is a somewhat odd accusation, given that fascism describes the political approach that invites public hatred towards people who critique the policies of an amalgam of state and private power.<sup>14</sup> There is a long history of

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*pro-social ways of responding to that, which reflects the true nature of a huge and growing community. Unfortunately content like the following indicates that there may soon be efforts to censor and criminalise us as extremists for a peace-loving nature-loving and freedom-loving outlooks: Boughali, K. (2023). Frank James: The New York Subway Shooter's Radical Discourse on Social Media. Global Network on Extremism & Technology.*

<sup>12</sup> Bendell, J. (2021). [Uniting in Love and Rage against Corporate Power](https://www.jembendell.com). Jembendell.com.

<sup>13</sup> I recommend my summary of the sociology and psychology on the rise of fascism and what it suggests for us today in my psychology paper: Bendell, J. (2021). [Psychological insights on discussing societal disruption and collapse](https://www.jembendell.com). *Ata: Journal of psychotherapy Aotearoa New Zealand*. 25(1).

<sup>14</sup> Typically, the discursive efforts to describe an opponent as, first, a coherent opponent, with the negative characteristics one is allocating to them, and then as a real threat, are subsequently followed up with the actions of lone nuts, agent provocateurs, or outright false flag attacks, that can be blamed on those opponents. Then the force of the state is used, via institutions, to suppress the views and people they want suppressed. An example of this in recent times might be from India where the BJP party accused its opponents, particularly left-wing activists and intellectuals, of being violent and 'anti-national', while themselves promoting a right-wing nationalism and intolerance, which then inspired acts of violence. (Ganguly, S. & Menon, R. (2018). *Democracy à la Modi*. The



demonising people for what you yourself are doing or planning to do.<sup>15</sup> Which is why some of us are becoming nervous seeing leading environmental commentators label anyone they disagree with as succumbing to fascism. One way that ecolibertarians can respond is with vigilance from critical wisdom. When there are negative framings of protestors in the media, or in meetings, we can ask what is the evidence for such opinions, and whose interests are threatened by the common cause that might exist?

One aspect of the ideological work being done to remove objection to authoritarianism in general, and likely eco-authoritarianism in particular, is to reframe what we mean by freedom. It is likely that attempts to ditch our moral commitment to personal freedom will be central to the future of eco-authoritarianism. We see that harmful reframing attempted when we are told that our freedom is no longer our right, which should only ever be curbed by processes that are accountable to us (and everyone) if we are negatively affecting others. It also happens when we are told that our freedom is dependent on us having the right intentions and effects, where what is 'right' is determined by some unspecified authority. Reframing freedom, so it is a privilege offered to us if we have the right views, is something that all ecolibertarians should reject. The reason for this should be obvious, after a few years of the corporate manipulation of worried people to harmfully co-police everyone with misinformed moral sentiments.

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When hearing such arguments between people who are active on the environmental crisis, some people argue that we should avoid division and recognize we are on the same side. They could not be more wrong – and even dangerous – to hold such a perspective, as it encourages by-standing of the masses to the antecedents of violence. History is replete with instances of the authoritarian elements in oppositional movements gaining power, or doing deals with incumbent power, to then oppress and murder the proponents of more grassroots democratic ways of organizing communities. I recommend anyone dismissing arguments with eco-authoritarians as 'unhelpful' or 'personal' or 'factional' to ask themselves what kind of society they are wishing to preserve during the worsening environmental crisis. Perhaps they are themselves proto-authoritarian, and simply not admitting that to themselves, or publicly. As such, their concern for the environment would not be an excuse for a panicked expression of ideas that have been inculcated in us by living within hierarchical societies than distort human psychology. Perhaps a field trip to a mass grave of constructive anarchists from the [Spanish Civil War](#) would help shift people out of the self-serving cowardice of by-standing arguments with authoritarians.

*The above text is an edited excerpt from Chapter 13 of **Breaking Together**.*

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*National Interest, 153, 12-24. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26557438>). Observing the outputs from GNET in the coming years, and those that work with them or report based on their content, will demonstrate this process of the development of tyranny in response to the unfolding collapse of modern societies.*

<sup>15</sup> *I realised just how powerful that can be when one famous climate scientist told me he would withdraw from the Scholars' Warning initiative partly because he disagreed with the views on gender of a colleague of mine. That is why I spent a whole chapter on outlining the importance of critical wisdom and how to develop it.*

## **John Foster's Response:**

### **Why we must ALL be honest with ourselves about green-democratic failure**

I very much welcome this exchange and am grateful to Professor Bendell for prompting it – there is at the present juncture nothing more urgently in need of discussion than the matters which are in dispute between us.

Before coming substantively to those matters, however, I must just glance at three significant ways in which Bendell misconstrues what I have said. The first concerns his deployment of the term *elites*, which he seems to treat as if it always meant the same thing. “As just the millionaires of the world alone will use up 72% of the remaining carbon budget identified by the IPCC as ‘safe’”, he avers for instance, “it is important to reject the hypocritical leadership of elites on the environment”. But the sort of elite about which I am talking in the passage which he quotes from me is not that to which Mr Bezos and similar excrescences of unbridled capitalism might think of themselves as belonging, nor any of those which exist to protect their profits. It is, instead, potentially formed by those who are fully aware of (among other things) the damage that such people are doing, and of how it has to be prevented – people who, I claim, need now to *constitute* themselves as an active vanguard (‘elite’ only through being chosen out, as it were, by our unprecedented plight), if there is to be any chance of averting catastrophe.

Again, he says that *rather than* seeing the majority in our kind of society as now addicted to consumption, I should recognise them as “manipulated and oppressed”. But oppression too can mean different things. It aptly describes what capitalism classically did to a proletariat from whom it extracted surplus value while forcing them to live in squalid conditions and work in dangerous ones. What it does to them now, however, is incite them to a purported infinity of consumer choice – and if this is indeed oppression, it is something far from incompatible with a deep-seated form of addiction, since my point is that it is a condition in which the oppressed themselves thoroughly collude.

And then he labels what I should avowedly like to see Rupert Read’s ‘Moderate Flank’ (now rebranded as the [Climate Majority Project](#)) develop into, as a “Stalinist Flank”. The uncharitable might see in this just a cheap smear, since I have never invoked Stalin in any context; but I, of course, am happy to take it as a slip of the keyboard for *Leninist* flank, a label which I have myself used for what I am advocating. (Lenin consolidated and led a vanguard party to a revolution which changed history for the at least arguably better, something on which Stalin, the bureaucrat armed, then merely battered.)

I make these observations not to score points, but because such misunderstandings or inadvertencies all help Bendell to avoid facing up to some hard truths, which the gravamen of my response to him is that he ignores. To highlight them, let me ask him directly five questions. I shall also suggest what his answers to them might reasonably be expected to be, though naturally, if they are in fact strikingly different, he is very welcome to come back at me. This catechism may also be taken as addressed to the reader, and intended to conduct him or her



through the key issues at first hand – while leaving unaddressed, I believe, nothing significant raised in Bendell's piece.

First question, then: **does Professor Bendell think that he himself knows more about the climate and ecological emergency, and about what might still be done to avert its worst consequences, than (say) the average reader of the Daily Mail?** If he doesn't think that, I really fail to see what he is doing writing books about it – although one doesn't need to have written any books, only to be intelligent, reflective, a bit more than ordinarily imaginative and strongly averse to kidding oneself, in order to fall into that category.

Second question: whether or not he claims membership of this cohort, **does he believe that people in such an advantaged cognitive position belong to a comparatively small minority in our kind of society?** Again, I don't see how he could answer this except affirmatively. It is no use advertizing here to surveys showing 65% (or whatever) of the population as agreeing that there is a climate emergency, because other surveys also routinely show that a large majority remain quite unwilling to change their lifestyles to anything approaching the corresponding extent, rendering the former surveys as valuable as would be the results of asking people whether they supported virtue.

Thirdly: **does he believe that this minority has any chance whatever, before irreversibly catastrophic tipping-points kick in, of bringing the wider population through solely democratic means to understand and act on our plight?** This is the pivotal one. By 'democratic means' here, I intend processes of illuminating and persuading the general public leading in due time to the free election of a Parliamentary majority for radical transformation. He would not be alone in regarding that prospect as within the realms of possibility, since the Climate Majority Project already mentioned seems dedicated to trying to believe in it too – but surely, on all the evidence, it is just incredible. Green Parties, for instance, have been pursuing precisely this goal since the emergency became unignorable, and indeed for longer than that, but in comparison with the real scale of the challenge their votes remain inconsequential and their successes comic. (Today Mid Suffolk, tomorrow the world!) Such displacement activities, intended largely to comfort understandably anxious people with the feeling that they are *doing something*, naturally avoid erecting criteria by which stark failure can be recognised, but those who actually want to avert catastrophe more than they want to feel comforted should be stricter with themselves in the matter of acknowledging reality. (They might then, by the same token, find themselves also confronting the deeply-embedded majority addiction to consumerism, surely unshiftable by ordinary persuasion, which Bendell seems to overlook.)

Fourthly: **does he think that preserving any particular political system is more important than averting climate and ecological catastrophe**, followed by the collapse of civilisation and the effective extinction of humanity? Since answering Yes to this would be about as sane (and credible) as someone's saying they would rather be enlightened than *alive*, I pass swiftly on to:

Fifthly: **does he acquiesce in catastrophe?** After encountering some of his later writings and publicities on [Deep Adaptation](#), I am actually unsure how Bendell himself would answer this. I have not yet managed to read *Breaking Together*, so I may be doing him an injustice here,

though I do wonder. Be that as it may, I know how anyone with intellectual honesty, a genuine concern for humanity and a modicum of guts ought to answer it.

And that brings us face to face with the task of working out what might be done in order *not* to acquiesce, in the light of a realistic answer to question three above. I have made in my book [Realism and the Climate Crisis](#) suggestions (and they are just that, seeking to prompt just this kind of debate) about what the minority identified by question two might be able to do if it actively recognised and constituted itself as a vanguard, and then used the very significant leverage which, so constituted, it could deploy, in a concerted drive to make the fossil fuel state unworkable and precipitate the coming to power, without waiting for conventional electoral sanction, of a government which might actually legislate for, and then enforce, the necessary paradigm shift. That would mean, at a minimum, *authoritatively* (that is, not just by asking nicely) rationing carbon and meat, severely limiting recreational flying, commandeering cultivable land as a basis for local resilience, and bringing in a citizens' income to ensure that no-one in the ensuing shake-out starved.

In this light, my very outline potential programme could no doubt be regarded as an equally forlorn hope. It won't be achievable, in any case, until now-inevitable climate-driven disasters have arrived and the helpless incompetence of current arrangements to cope with them has become much more glaringly apparent, so that people at large are readier to embrace an emphatic enough alternative. All this is eminently unclear and risky; it is just that going on pretending is far more eminently likely to be fatal. What I am quite clear about, however, is that Professor Bendell possibly, and certainly anyone who can return an unambiguous Yes to the first two questions and No to the latter three, should be with me and not against me in seeking to take the risk.