Why do political and economic leaders deny Peak Oil and Climate Change?

Contributed by Alice Friedemann
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Since there's nothing that can be done about climate change, because there's no scalable alternative to fossil fuels, I've always wondered why politicians and other leaders, who clearly know better, feel compelled to deny it. I think it's for exactly the same reasons you don't hear them talking about preparing for Peak Oil.

1) our leaders have known since the last energy crisis that there's no comparable alternative energy ready to replace fossil fuels.
To extend the oil age as long as possible, the USA went the military path rather than a "Manhattan Project" of research and building up grid infrastructure, railroads, sustainable agriculture, increasing car fuel efficiency, and other obvious actions.
Instead, we've spent trillions of dollars on defense and the military to keep the oil flowing, the Straits of Hormuz open, and invade oil-producing countries. Being so much further than Europe, China, and Russia from the Middle East, where there's not only the most remaining oil, but the easiest oil to get out at the lowest cost ($20-22 OPEC vs $60-80 rest-of-world per barrel), is a huge disadvantage. I think the military route was chosen in the '70s to maintain our access to Middle East oil and prevent challenges from other nations. Plus everyone benefits by our policing the world and keeping the lid on a world war over energy resources; perhaps that's why central banks keep lending us money.

2) if the public were convinced climate change were real and demanded alternative energy, it would become clear pretty quickly that we didn't have any alternatives. Already Californians are seeing public television shows and newspaper articles about why it's so difficult to build enough wind, solar, and so on to meet the mandated 33% renewable energy sources by 2020.

For example, I saw a PBS program recently on the obstacles to wind power in Marin County, on the other side of the Golden Gate bridge. Difficulties cited were lack of storage for electricity, NIMBYism, opposition from the Audubon Society over bird kills, wind blows at night when least needed, the grid needs expansion, and most wind is not near enough to the grid to be connected to it. But there was no mention of Energy Returned on Energy Invested (EROEI) or the scale of how many windmills you'd need to have. So you could be left with the impression that these problems could be overcome.

I don't see any signs of the general public's losing optimism yet. I gave my "Peak Soil" talk to a critical thinking group, very bright, sparkling, interesting, well-read, thoughtful people, and to my great surprise realized they weren't worried until my talk, partly because so few people understand the Hirsch 2005 "liquid fuels" crisis concept, nor the scale of what fossil fuels do for us. I felt really badly; I've never spoken to a group before that wasn't aware of the problem, so I wished I were a counselor as well. The only thing I could think of to console them was to say that running out of fossil fuels was a good thing — we might not be driven extinct by global warming, which most past mass extinctions were caused by.

3) as the German military peak oil study stated, when investors realize Peak Oil is upon us, stock markets world-wide will crash (if they haven't already from financial corruption), as it will be obvious that growth is no longer possible and investors will never get their money back.

4) as Richard Heinberg has pointed out, there's a national survival interest in being the "Last Man (nation) Standing." So leaders want to keep things going smoothly as long as possible. And everyone is hoping the crash is "not on my watch" — who wants to take the blame?

5) there's no solution to this problem, and too many problems are already getting out of hand on a daily basis at local, state, and national levels, plus all that matters is the next election — who's got time to work on a future problem with no

solution? Jimmy Carter is perceived as having lost partly due to asking Americans to sacrifice for the future (i.e., put on a sweater).

I first became aware of this at the 2005 ASPO Denver conference. Denver Mayor Hickenlooper pointed out that one of his predecessors lost the mayoral election because he didn't keep the snow plows running after a heavy snow storm. He worried about how he'd keep snow plows, garbage collection, and a host of other city services running as energy declined.

A Boulder City Council member at this conference told us he had hundreds of issues and constituents to deal with on a daily basis, so no way did he have time to spend on an issue beyond the next election.

Finally, Congressman Roscoe Bartlett told us that there was no solution, and he was angry that we'd blown 25 years even though the government knew peak was coming. His plan was to relentlessly reduce our energy demand by 5% per year. Not efficiency; that doesn't work due to Jevons paradox.

There is no solution — leaders can't even propose everyone become a farmer or rancher, because there simply isn't enough land and water (rainfall, aquifer, snow melt) to do that in the United States.

The only solution that would mitigate suffering is to mandate that women bear only one child. Fat chance of that ever happening when even birth control is controversial, and Catholics are outraged that all health care plans are now required to cover the cost of birth control pills. Congressman Bartlett, in a small group discussion after his talk, told us that population was the main problem, but that he and other politicians didn't dare mention it. He said that exponential growth would undo any reduction in demand we could make, and gave this example: if we have 250 years left of reserves in coal, and we turn to coal to replace oil, increasing our use by 2% a year — a very modest rate of growth considering what a huge amount is needed to replace oil — then the reserve would only last 85 years. If we liquefy it, then it would only last 50 years, because it takes a lot of energy to do that.

Bartlett was speaking about 250 years of coal reserves back in 2005. Now we know that the global energy from coal may have peaked last year, in 2011 (Patzek) or will soon in 2015 (Zittel). Other estimates range as far as 2029 to 2043. Heinberg and Fridley say that "we believe that it is unlikely that world energy supplies can continue to meet projected demand beyond 2020." (Heinberg).

6) Political (and religious) leaders gain votes, wealth, and power by telling people what they want to hear. Several politicians have told me privately that people like to hear good news and that politicians who bring bad news don't get re-elected. "Don't worry, be happy" is a vote getter. Carrying capacity, exponential growth, die-off, extinction, population control — these are not ideas that get leaders elected.

7) Everyone who understands the situation is hoping The Scientists Will Come up With Something. Including the scientists. They'd like to win a Nobel prize and need funding. But researchers in energy resources know what's at stake with climate change and peak oil and are as scared as the rest of us. U.C. Berkeley scientists are also aware of the negative environmental impacts of biofuels, and have chosen to concentrate on a politically feasible strategy of emphasizing lack of water to prevent large programs in this from being funded (Fingerman). They're also working hard to prevent coal fired power plants from supplying electricity to California by recommending natural gas replacement plants instead, as well as expanding the grid, taxing carbon, energy efficiency, nuclear power, geothermal, wind, and so on — see rael.berkeley.edu/projects for what else some of UCB's RAEL program is up to. Until a miracle happens, scientists and some enlightened policy makers are trying to extend the age of oil, reduce greenhouse gases, and so on. But with the downside of Hubbert's curve so close, and the financial system liable to crash again soon given the debt and lack of reforms, I don't know how long anyone can stretch things out.

The 1% can't justify their wealth or the current economic system once the pie stops expanding and starts to shrink. The financial crisis will be a handy way to explain why people are getting poorer on the down side of peak oil too, delaying panic perhaps.

Other evidence that politicians know how serious the situation is, but aren't saying anything, are Congressman Roscoe Bartlett's youtube videos (Urban Danger). He's the Chairman of the peak oil caucus in the House of Representatives, and he's saying "get out of dodge" to those in the know. He's educated all of the representatives in the House, but he says that peak oil "won't be on their front burner until there's an oil shock."

I think that those who deny climate change are thinking like chess players several moves ahead. They hope that by denying climate change an awareness of peak oil is less likely to occur, and I'm guessing their motivation is to keep our oil-based nation going as long as possible. What I'd like to know is if there are plans or strategies to let the air out of the tires of civilization as slowly as possible to prevent panic and sudden discontinuities.

Given history, I can't imagine the 1% giving up their wealth (especially land, 85% of which is concentrated among 3% of owners). I'm sure they're hoping the current system maintains its legitimacy as long as possible, even as the vast majority of us sink into 3rd world poverty beyond what we can imagine, and then are too poor and hungry to do anything but find our next meal.

Until there are oil shocks and governments at all levels are forced to "do something", it's up to those of us aware of what's going on to gain skills that will be useful in the future, work to build community locally, and live more simply. Towns or regions that already have or know how to implement a local currency fast will be able to cope better with discontinuities in oil supplies and financial crashes than areas that don't. I would hope that cities are looking at how to collect garbage less often, beef up water delivery and sewage treatment infrastructure, and so on right now rather than wait until a crisis, when energy is most likely to go to agriculture and transportation first before trickling down to other essential services.

I wish it were possible for scientists and other leaders to explain what's going on to the public, but I think scientists know it wouldn't do any good given only 5% scientific literacy, and leaders see the vast majority of the public as big blubbering spoiled babies, like the spaceship characters on floating chairs in Wall-E, who expect, no demand, happy Hollywood endings.

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This article was originally posted on February 10, 2012 on Alice Friedemann's website EnergySkeptic, recently updated.

Alice Friedemann knew about the energy crisis for decades because her geologist grandfather, Francis Pettijohn, was a friend of M. King Hubbert. Alice has been part of the peak oil community since discussions began on EnergyResources and attended many ASPO conferences. She's spoken at U. C. Berkeley on biofuels and published at CultureChange, EnergyBulletin, EnergyPulse, TheOilDrum etc. She has a B.S. in Biology and Chemistry/Physics minor from the University of Illinois, and is a member of the Northern California Science Writers Association. She was a senior-level systems architect and engineer for 25 years in health care, banking, and transportation. Her other articles on Culture Change are listed with online links at search: CultureChange.org