

Mocking our dreams

The reality of climate change is that the engines of progress have merely accelerated our rush to the brink

It is now mid-February, and already I have sown 11 species of vegetable. I know, though the seed packets tell me otherwise, that they will flourish. Everything in this country – daffodils, primroses, almond trees, bumblebees, nesting birds – is a month ahead of schedule. And it feels wonderful. Winter is no longer the great grey longing of my childhood. The freezes this country suffered in 1982 and 1963 are, unless the Gulf Stream stops, unlikely to recur. Our summers will be long and warm. Across most of the upper northern hemisphere, climate change, so far, has been kind to us.

And this is surely one of the reasons why we find it so hard to accept what the climatologists are now telling us. In our mythologies, an early spring is a reward for virtue. “For, lo, the winter is past,” Solomon, the beloved of God, exults. “The rain is over and gone; The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come.” How can something which feels so good result from something so bad?

Tomorrow, after 13 years of negotiation, the Kyoto protocol on climate change comes into force. No one believes that this treaty alone – which commits 30 developed nations to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by 4.8% – will solve the problem. It expires in 2012 and, thanks to US sabotage, there has so far been no progress towards a replacement. It paroles the worst offenders, the US and Australia, and imposes no limits on the gases produced by developing countries. The cuts it enforces are at least an order of magnitude too small to stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations at anything approaching a safe level. But even this feeble agreement is threatened by our

complacency about the closing of the climatic corridor down which we walk.

Why is this? Why are we transfixed by terrorism, yet relaxed about the collapse of the conditions that make our lives possible? One reason is surely the disjunction between our expectations and our observations. If climate change is to introduce horror into our lives, we would expect – because throughout our evolutionary history we survived by finding patterns in nature – to see that horror beginning to unfold. It is true that a few thousand people in the rich world have died as a result of floods and heatwaves. But the overwhelming sensation, experienced by all of us, almost every day, is that of being blessed by our pollution.

Instead, the consequences of our gluttony are visited on others. The climatologists who met at the government's conference in Exeter this month heard that a rise of just 2.1 degrees, almost certain to happen this century, will confront as many as 3 billion people with water stress. This, in turn, is likely to result in tens of millions of deaths. But the same calm voice that tells us climate change means mild winters and early springs informs us, in countries like the UK, that we will be able to buy our way out of trouble. While the price of food will soar as the world goes into deficit, those who are rich enough to have caused the problem will, for a couple of generations at least, be among the few who can afford to ignore it.

Another reason is that there is a well-funded industry whose purpose is to reassure us, and it is granted constant access to the media. We flatter its practitioners with the label "sceptics". If this is what they were, they would be welcome. Scepticism (the Latin word means "inquiring" or "reflective") is the means by which science advances. Without it we would still be rubbing sticks together. But most of those we call sceptics are nothing of the kind. They are PR people, the loyalists of Exxon Mobil (by whom most of them are paid), commissioned to begin with a conclusion and then devise arguments to justify it. Their presence on outlets such as the BBC's Today programme might be less objectionable if, every time Aids was discussed, someone was asked to argue that it is not caused by HIV, or, every time a rocket goes into orbit, the Flat Earth Society was invited to explain that it could not possibly have happened. As it is, our most respected media outlets give Exxon Mobil what it has paid for: they create the impression that a significant scientific debate exists when it does not.

But there's a much bigger problem here. The denial of climate change, while out of tune with the science, is consistent with, even necessary for, the outlook of almost all the world's economists. Modern economics, whether informed by Marx or Keynes or Hayek, is premised on the notion that the planet has an infinite capacity to supply us with wealth and absorb our pollution. The cure to all ills is endless growth. Yet endless growth, in a finite world, is impossible. Pull this rug from under the economic theories,

and the whole system of thought collapses.

And this, of course, is beyond contemplation. It mocks the dreams of both left and right, of every child and parent and worker. It destroys all notions of progress. If the engines of progress – technology and its amplification of human endeavour – have merely accelerated our rush to the brink, then everything we thought was true is false. Brought up to believe that it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness, we are now discovering that it is better to curse the darkness than to burn your house down.

Our economists are exposed by climatologists as utopian fantasists, the leaders of a millenarian cult as mad as, and far more dangerous than, any religious fundamentalism. But their theories govern our lives, so those who insist that physics and biology still apply are ridiculed by a global consensus founded on wishful thinking.

And this leads us, I think, to a further reason for turning our eyes away. When terrorists threaten us, it shows that we must count for something, that we are important enough to kill. They confirm the grand narrative of our lives, in which we strive through thickets of good and evil towards an ultimate purpose. But there is no glory in the threat of climate change. The story it tells us is of yeast in a barrel, feeding and farting until it is poisoned by its own waste. It is too squalid an ending for our anthropocentric conceit to accept.

The challenge of climate change is not, primarily, a technical one. It is possible greatly to reduce our environmental impact by investing in energy efficiency, though as the Exeter conference concluded, “energy efficiency improvements under the present market system are not enough to offset increases in demand caused by economic growth”. It is possible to generate far more of the energy we consume by benign means. But if our political leaders are to save the people rather than the people’s fantasies, then the way we see ourselves must begin to shift. We will succeed in tackling climate change only when we accept that we belong to the material world.