

Hospitals overwhelmed. Lines around the block for food pantries. Families separated from one another due to travel bans.

While devastating on many levels, the coronavirus pandemic allows our fast-paced society a rare opportunity: time to reflect. As many have pointed out, it has also highlighted the vast inequities within our society; our healthcare systems, schools, food systems, and cities are built not with the common citizen in mind.

In order to rebuild sustainably, we must rebuild inclusively. Here's the thing: even if we stop emitting greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions tomorrow, the temperature of the planet is still going to increase. With this warming will come the exacerbation of inequalities; in particular, women in the global south¹ are the most threatened by the climate crisis, despite having contributed the least to emissions.

At the time of writing this essay there are protests across the United States (and indeed, the world) responding to the unjust killing of black Americans at the hands of the police. Although I will largely focus on the UK, as an American citizen, it is a timely reminder to me that we cannot simply repair systems to what they once were. As such, at the core of any recovery plan must be a form of reparations for the injustices done by white, industrialized society. Otherwise, we risk replicating the mistakes of our past: native lands pillaged to further the mission of the white man, communities of color so polluted their inhabitants can scarcely breathe, cities built exclusively for those who are able-bodied. We can do better than that. We can learn from our past to create a better future.

To do so, I propose three key initiatives which fall under "*government policy, regulatory & institutional change*":

1. A marginal tax rate of 90% above £5 million in income, to be used to fund investments in renewable energy and heat decarbonization.
2. Tax incentives and legislation to promote a shift to a more circular economy and nature-based solutions, with a focus on employing the disenfranchised.
3. National and local task forces on various structural issues which give political representation to underrepresented groups.

Of course, it is difficult to give adequate coverage to the myriad issues which need addressing in just a few initiatives. However, I believe these perhaps bureaucratic-seeming changes would at a minimum help to turn the ship in the right direction.

¹ Halton, Mary. *BBC News*, "Climate change 'impacts women more than men.'" 8 March 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-43294221>

Marginal tax rate. A high marginal tax rate used to be the status quo. For several decades,² the marginal tax rate ranged between 63-92% in the United States. As a result, the richest 1% had a much lower share of total wealth in the country. When this decreased, inequality increased. Recently, a high marginal tax rate has again become mainstream among progressive Democratic leadership in the United States.

For context: 4 million people in the UK live in deep poverty.³ Increasing taxes for many doesn't make sense; real income for most households in the UK has actually fallen over the last 10 years.⁴ However, some investment needs to be made in order to clean up our energy profile. While in the UK the amount of *electricity* generated by renewables now exceeds that of fossil fuels for much of the year⁵ (and this is likely to continue as solar power becomes cheaper than coal⁶), it's a different story for heat. About 90% of UK households use gas boilers,⁷ and heating buildings makes up approximately 37% of national carbon emissions. This represents both a huge challenge and an opportunity.

Meanwhile, the six richest individuals in the country are worth a combined £39.4 billion.⁸ I don't have figures on their annual incomes, but a retroactive marginal tax rate of 90% above £5 million on these six individuals' net worth alone would result in over £35.3 billion in tax revenue. This is enough to install electric heat pumps in 3,530,000 UK households⁹–

² Pramuk, Jacob; Schoen, John W. *CNBC*, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Elizabeth Warren want the rich to pay a lot more in taxes – here's why history may be on their side." 5 February 2019. <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/02/05/warren-sanders-ocasio-cortez-propose-taxes-on-the-rich-ahead-of-2020-election.html>

³ Butler, Patrick. *The Guardian*, "More than 4m in UK are trapped in deep poverty, study finds." 28 July 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jul/29/uk-deep-poverty-study-austerity>

⁴ Boulton, Sinead. *FullFact.org*, "How have wages changed over the past decade?" 1 Nov 2018. <https://fullfact.org/economy/how-have-wages-changed/>

⁵ Evans, Simon. *CarbonBrief*, "Analysis: UK renewables generate more electricity than fossil fuels for first time." 14 October 2019. <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-uk-renewables-generate-more-electricity-than-fossil-fuels-for-first-time>

⁶ Morton, Adam. *The Guardian*, "Wind and solar plants will soon be cheaper than coal in all big markets around the world, analysis finds." 11 March 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/mar/12/wind-and-solar-plants-will-soon-be-cheaper-than-coal-in-all-big-markets-around-world-analysis-finds>

⁷ *Energy Savings Trust*. "Decarbonisation of heat - a crossroads." 18 April 2019. <https://energysavingtrust.org.uk/blog/decarbonisation-heat-%E2%80%93-crossroads>

⁸ Neate, Rupert. *The Guardian*, "UK's six richest people control as much wealth as poorest 13m - study." 2 December 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/dec/03/uk-six-richest-people-control-as-much-wealth-as-poorest-13m-study>

⁹ Assuming an average cost of 10,000 per heat pump: <https://energysavingtrust.org.uk/blog/decarbonisation-heat-%E2%80%93-crossroads>

a move that could also help aid in alleviating fuel poverty. Plus, these six individuals in question would all still be multi-millionaires.

Many solutions for tackling climate change are already at our fingertips. There is good potential¹⁰ for low-carbon electrification in most of the Global South. Electric vehicles make up an increasing share of vehicle sales.¹¹ If financing keeps pace with technology, we can make serious progress. In addition, having fewer very rich people can be good for the planet: one Oxfam study estimates that the richest 1% emit more than 30 times the amount of the poorest 50%.¹²

Circular economy. However, to tackle climate change, we not only need renewable energy proliferation—we need economic transformation. Because to tackle climate change, we also need to tackle something so integral to Western culture it feels blasphemous to suggest otherwise: consumption.

Unfortunately, “free trade” isn’t very free. On the human rights front: a report published in 2016 showed that companies face a 71% likelihood of encountering slave labor in their supply chains.¹³ Many supply chains also leave production communities with devastating environmental pollution and health problems.¹⁴

But beyond the more obvious human rights violations are implications of “outsourcing” emissions from high-income countries to low-income countries. While GHG emissions are reported to have decreased in the EU since 1990, this does not account for outsourcing of consumer goods production.¹⁵ About 13% of China’s GHG emissions come from making

¹⁰ *World Resources Institute*, “Shifting Currents: Opportunities For Low-Carbon Electric Cities In The Global South.” February 2019. <https://www.wri.org/publication/shifting-currents>

¹¹ *BBC News*, “Electric vehicles sales surge in UK as fuel prices rise.” 5 September 2018. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-45419705>

¹² Colarossi, Jesse. *United Nations University*. “The World’s Richest People Emit The Most Carbon.” 12 May 2015. <https://ourworld.unu.edu/en/the-worlds-richest-people-also-emit-the-most-carbon>

¹³ *Sustainable Brands*. “Companies face 71% likelihood of Finding Modern Slavery in Supply Chains.” <https://sustainablebrands.com/read/supply-chain/companies-face-71-likelihood-of-finding-modern-slavery-in-supply-chains>

¹⁴ RiverBlue. <http://riverbluethemovie.eco/the-film/>

¹⁵ *Eurostat*. “Climate change - driving forces.” November 2019. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Climate_change_-_driving_forces

things for other countries.¹⁶ The fashion industry alone accounts for around 10% of global GHG emissions.¹⁷

This is all largely unnecessary: shoppers in the UK own up to £10bn in clothes they do not wear,¹⁸ while the average garment is kept half as long as it was 15 years ago.¹⁹ Meanwhile, an estimated 3.6 million tonnes of food (valued at £1bn) are thrown away before reaching UK supermarket shelves—each year.²⁰

Put simply, we cannot continue consuming at our current pace. We cannot continue to treat commodities—and the people who make them—as disposable. We cannot continue to equate a good life with a lot of stuff. Otherwise, we risk undoing any progress from renewable energy through the production of more and more things.

Luckily, there is a solution which can keep jobs and help us meet our environmental priorities: shifting from a consume-and-replace model to a rent-and-repair model. Let me explain. In entertainment, we have moved from families owning dozens of DVDs to most switching to a subscription-based streaming service. The same can be applied to virtually any product; why not pay to rent items that we only use once in a while? (Lawnmowers, drills, and baking tins come to mind.)

There is also tremendous potential to re-skill low-wage hourly workers, the unemployed, and former inmates as gatekeepers of high quality items and experiences. Retail associates can be re-skilled as tailors and style consultants. Others might receive training in implementing nature-based solutions across the country.²¹ This also partially solves the problem of automation, with over 25% of supermarket cashier jobs in the U.K. automated

¹⁶ Plumer, Brad. *The New York Times*, “You’ve Heard of Outsourced Jobs, but Outsourced Pollution? It’s Real, and Tough to Tally Up.” 4 September 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/04/climate/outsourcing-carbon-emissions.html>

¹⁷ UNFCCC. “UN Helps Fashion Industry Shift to Low Carbon.” 6 September 2018. <https://unfccc.int/news/un-helps-fashion-industry-shift-to-low-carbon>

¹⁸ Mangan, Lucy. *The Guardian*. “Why are our wardrobes full of unworn clothes? Because most purchases are not rational.” 2 January 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/shortcuts/2018/jan/02/wardrobes-full-unworn-clothes-worth-10-billion-pounds>

¹⁹ UN News. “UN launches drive to highlight environmental cost of staying fashionable.” <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/03/1035161>

²⁰ Butler, Sarah. *The Guardian*, “More than £1bn of food wasted before hitting supermarkets - study.” 25 July 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jul/25/food-waste-farms-before-reaching-supermarkets-wrap-study>

²¹ Nature-based Solution Initiative, University of Oxford. <https://www.naturebasedsolutionsinitiative.org/what-are-nature-based-solutions/>

since 2011.²² What if these employees were instead stewards of the supply chain, with specialist knowledge of products and how to repair them?

Millions of new jobs can be created globally in materials recycling. Estimates vary, but one study from 2010 projected 50,000 additional jobs if recycling in the U.K. increased to 50%,²³ while another estimates that recycling and reuse create nine times more jobs than landfills.²⁴ Analysis from McKinsey estimated that adopting circular economy principles could create a net benefit of €1.8 trillion.²⁵

In other words, making new things isn't the only way to make money.

The recent proposal²⁶ from the EU to ban companies from destroying unsold durable goods is a good move, but the UK needs to go even further. I propose using some of the revenue from the carbon tax²⁷ to give small businesses money to invest in circular economy changes.

Representational task forces. Put simply, if we do not ask people what measures would help them, we won't know. To ensure equity, it is critically important to make the sustainability measures we take accessible to all. A few key areas come to mind:

- Making sure bulk food shopping, clothing repair shops, and public transportation are accessible to those with physical disabilities.
- Reaching faith and community organizations in order to disseminate information about measures such as small business loans or tax incentives, especially in areas where English is not the primary language.

²² Collinson, Patrick. *The Guardian*, "Automation threatens 1.5 million workers in Britain, says ONS." 25 March 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2019/mar/25/automation-threatens-15-million-workers-britain-says-ons>

²³ *The Guardian*, "Increased recycling could create 50,000 jobs, report finds." <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2010/sep/14/recycling-jobs-england>

²⁴ Eco-Cycle. "Zero Waste Creates Jobs." <https://www.ecocycle.org/zerowaste/jobs>

²⁵ McKinsey & Co. "Europe's circular-economy opportunity." 1 September 2015. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/sustainability/our-insights/europes-circular-economy-opportunity>

²⁶ Edie, "Everything you need to know about the EU's new Circular Economy Action Plan and Industrial Strategy." 11 March 2020. <https://www.edie.net/news/11/Everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-EU-s-Circular-Economy-Action-Plan-and-Industrial-Strategy/>

²⁷ Watson, Frank. S&P Global. UK budget: CPS carbon tax kept at GBP18/mt in 2021-22. <https://www.spglobal.com/platts/en/market-insights/latest-news/coal/031120-uk-budget-cps-carbon-tax-kept-at-gbp18mt-in-2021-22>

- Ensuring that government services and sustainability-oriented stores are open for extended hours and on weekends for those who cannot take time off work.

There are many areas in which different forms of privilege intersect with access. It is therefore critical that any widespread legislation takes into account different backgrounds. Unfortunately, many communities across the UK are still underrepresented politically.²⁸ Even if their MPs understand the issues they face, the specific measures that would make a difference “on the ground” may get lost when it comes to final decision-making.

If politics included the voices of those who have historically been excluded, it could better serve the Britain of today. Likewise, if a new economic model which prioritizes circularity re-skills those who have been disenfranchised by the labor market, we all benefit. And by taxing the “super rich,” we can invest in a future that improves the wellbeing of future generations.

Let this be the moment in which we show our true colors—for the better. Let this be the moment in which we choose to reflect our shared humanity. Let this be the moment in which we put what is right before what is popular. Because if we don’t, we risk everything.

²⁸ Ashe, Jeanette. *London School of Economics*. “Why is the Commons so unreflective of society? Candidate selection processes are the cause and quotas are the cure.”
<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/candidate-selection-underrepresentation/>