

Opinion **FT Magazine**

How to sell climate change and save the planet

'People in rich countries will demand green action only if they feel personally threatened'

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Simon Kuper 4 HOURS AGO

Historians will quite likely say about us, “They ignored the biggest issue of their time: climate change.” In last month’s US midterm elections, there was far more hysteria over the so-called migrant caravan. In France, President Emmanuel Macron has just given into the *gilets jaunes* protesters by [suspending planned fuel tax rises](#). The COP24 [climate summit in Poland](#) isn’t even the story of the week. In short, green communications have been disastrous.

Yet somehow we’re going to have to transform our economies. The world needs to reach net-zero carbon emissions in 50 or 60 years, says Nicholas Stern of the London School of Economics. The EU aims to get there by 2050. So how can we revamp the selling of green?

Talk about “green growth”, not about saving the planet. Roger Pielke Jr of the University of Colorado formulated the “iron law” of climate change: when societies are asked to choose between economic growth or cutting emissions, they always choose growth. So the green story should be: let’s modernise our economies, creating jobs and cleaner air. The green transition would create 18 million more jobs than it destroys by 2030, estimates the International Labour Organization, while the Congressional Budget Office predicts only a slight impact (perhaps positive, perhaps negative) on US jobs. Green growth isn’t simply a growth story, says Stern, “it’s *the growth story*”, because continued carbon-fuelled growth would make earth uninhabitable.

Find the right messengers. Greens must reach people who currently distrust them. Weather forecasters are seen as non-partisan messengers, says Elke Weber of Princeton University. Farmers — some of them already hurting from climate change — can help to mobilise conservatives. Ordinary workers in renewable energy could be appealing spokespeople too. But every group will need its own tailored green message, says Cameron Hepburn of Oxford University. (Stern, Weber and Hepburn all spoke at last month's OECD forum on green growth.)

Stop predicting doomsday. The message should be, "Yes we can, and without much pain." Sacrifice doesn't sell, and when most scenarios are pessimistic, people see little point in acting.

Don't say "carbon tax", say "carbon dividends". Calling carbon pricing a tax isn't simply a turn-off, it's also misleading. States could hand the revenues straight to citizens. That's what Canada's British Columbia did, and public opinion on its carbon charge turned positive within 15 months, says Weber. Next year, Canada's government will start mailing people "carbon-dividend" cheques.

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Don't talk about saving whales and grandchildren; talk about people today.

We have learnt these past 30 years that few people care about the future of the planet, or at least not enough to vote for it. Instead, greens should tell stories about actual living humans. Remember how the gay-marriage campaign — the most successful liberal movement of recent years — led with images of old couples exchanging wedding rings.

And greens should highlight climate disasters today (such as [California's most destructive wildfires ever](#)), not potential disasters in 2050. Cities from Beijing to London are [curbing air pollution](#) now because today's inhabitants don't want to die.

There's another lesson here: people in rich countries will demand green action only if they feel personally threatened. Stories of faraway island states disappearing under the waves will not persuade them.

Tell a populist, anti-elitist story. The chief beneficiaries of fossil fuels are sheikhs, oligarchs and oil companies. Oil and gas are [capital-intensive sectors](#) that employ relatively few workers. In the US, total employment in natural resources and mining (which includes coal, oil and gas) is 756,000, about 0.5 per cent of the American workforce, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In the EU, which has fewer energy resources, the proportion is probably lower.

Help connect the losers to the new economy. De-industrialisation devastated western factory workers and coal miners. For instance, all 22,800 male coal-mining jobs in England's County Durham in 1981 had disappeared by 2004, says the OECD. With defossilisation, at least we

can see the pain coming, and try to carry along the losers. Many miners, for example, could easily be retrained for the solar photovoltaic industry. My FT colleague Martin Sandbu praises Kentucky's "[coal to code](#)" project, which teaches former miners coding. But we'll have to accept that some fossil-fuel workers will need expensive early retirements. Taking care of the losers is essential. If people are shown a future without them in it, they will do anything to stop that future happening.

Ignore climate deniers. They aren't what's blocking climate action, though they wish they were. Don't let them shape the narrative (a mistake we keep making with Trump).

Arguing with deniers just gives them attention (so I won't be replying to denialist emails). Piling on facts — a longtime favourite green strategy — has been counter-productive.

There will never be 100 per cent consensus on climate change. But there's never consensus behind any political action, yet some things get done anyway.

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