

Moral malaise at the BBC

Gareth Dale | 15th February 2022 | © 2022 The Author

The facts of climate breakdown are scientifically established - so don't get lost in BBC Radio Four's latest Moral Maze.

The late 1970s saw the death of Elvis Presley and the birth of a new age in climate politics. By an odd quirk of fate, the president of the Elvis Presley Fan Club at the time was the lead singer in a group called [The Jasons](#), and the new climate-political era was inaugurated by a group of scientists called the JASONS.

The basic science of anthropogenic climate change is simple. Fossil-fuel combustion releases carbon dioxide, a heat-trapping gas, into the atmosphere where it remains for a very long time. For the best part of a century the scientists who recognised that this raises the prospect of a profound and long-term alteration of the global climate were lone voices: Svante Arrhenius in 1896, Mikhail Budyko and [Peter Bergmann](#) in the 1960s, to name a few.

But in 1979, the [JASONS' report](#) alerted the US government to the threat, and similar reports followed [in 1981](#). The following year another [report](#) was submitted to Exxon's management warning of the "catastrophic" climatological consequences of burning fossil fuels.

From 1985, when Carl Sagan testified to US Congress, or at the latest with Jim Hansen's testimony to the US Senate in 1988, knowledge of the present reality and future threat of global heating entered the mainstream.

Don't Look Up

The BBC, for most of the period since the JASONS' report, has treated anthropogenic climate change as a matter of belief, with non-believers given starring roles.

It reserves this approach uniquely for climate change. On other questions of popular discussion - say, Elvis Presley's whereabouts - the stance is scientific. The BBC's most recent Elvis documentary is a case in point. Despite its title, [The Rebirth Of The King](#), the presenter does not claim to have seen Elvis playing live at the Hammersmith Apollo last Friday night. He instead informs us matter-of-factly that the King is dead.

With climate change, by contrast, the BBC took care to 'balance' each 'believer' with a denier. Not until 2018 did it decide that "climate science is solid," writes [George Monbiot](#) in exasperation, and yet, even now, it continues to "let climate deniers walk all over it."

From my own experience on the BBC's Moral Maze, I can attest to this; it was my [Don't Look Up](#) moment.

The Moral Maze is chaired by climate denier Michael Buerk. There are four panellists, one of whom is the *Daily Mail* columnist Melanie Phillips, plus four 'witnesses.' The latter are each given up to a minute to present their case before being quizzed by panel members.

Making his priorities apparent through use of the gavel, the chair permitted one witness, the climate denier [Ross Clark](#), more than his time, then guillotined my own contribution when I was barely past the halfway mark.

An artful ruse

Buerk's style of climate denial may be genteel yet it is no less effective for that. It comes straight from the [oil-corporate playbook](#): sow confusion in the public mind, give the impression that the experts disagree, that each is cherry-picking their own facts. This was precisely his tactic on Moral Maze.

So frightfully complex is the climate question, Buerk believes, that impassioned demands or activism should be ruled out of court. Environmentalists like me, [in his estimation](#), are "quasi-religious" fanatics. They use climate change as a vehicle for ulterior agendas such as "public-sector job creation", and they have the effrontery to argue that nature's limits constrain "the free play" of human desires.

Let's consider the climatological assumptions on which these claims rest. Buerk insists that nobody knows "for certain" that human economic activity is "causing the planet to heat up," and there has been "no significant rise in global temperatures for more than a decade." He repeats the belief that the Sahara Desert has been shrinking for decades, as well as the contention, popularised in a Michael Crichton novel, that Antarctica is getting colder.

All of these claims [have been disproven](#). But veracity is not the point; he is mobilising them as a rhetorical device. "There may be answers to all these quibbles," he [concedes](#), "I think there probably are and I would like to hear them."

This is nothing but an artful ruse: completely ignore the well-established scientific findings, float climate-denialist canards and stir up doubt, then spray some spurious modesty to give an air of fair-minded rationalism.

Tilting at windfarms

Buerk's partner in denial, Melanie Phillips, projects a rather different persona. She is cracked as a coconut, on many an issue, not just climate.

A topical one is public health. Britain's [most prominent supporter](#) of the MMR [fraudster](#) Andrew Wakefield, she has done as much as anyone to undermine public trust in vaccines. As to her climate denialism, it draws on [coal-funded pseudoscience](#) and on the remarkable discovery that carbon dioxide, when viewed through Melanie's microscope, occupies only a "small proportion of the atmosphere, most of which consists of water vapour." If this were so, quips [Monbiot](#), we'd need gills.

Anthropogenic climate change is a “scam,” [says Phillips](#). “The temperature is going down not up,” the seas aren’t rising, the ice isn’t melting, the [coral reefs](#) aren’t bleaching!

The idea that “the climate can be significantly affected by human beings is intrinsically absurd,” she babbled recently on the [climate-denial website Net Zero Watch](#), adding that to achieve ‘net zero’ targets would require “fascist measures” that would hurl “the west backwards to a pre-industrial way of life.” Given that pre-industrial transport and production drew on wind power, it’s no surprise that she condemns windfarms as “the [most ruinous folly](#) of our age.”

In her bitter opposition to wind and solar energy, to the [Insulate Britain](#) campaign, and to even [the mildest of green measures](#) under the [Cameron](#) governments (which were promptly scrapped), Phillips has played her part in ensuring Britain’s prolonged over-reliance on fossil gas. The upshot is soaring gas bills - and electricity too as its price is [set by gas](#).

Britain’s energy bills are around [£3bn higher](#) than they would have been had those measures been implemented - billions of pounds that are flowing from consumers to the fossil-fuel giants, for reinvestment in climate disinformation campaigns.

Varieties of violence

At bottom, Phillips’ animus toward climate radicals expresses a fear that, driven by a misguided belief in human perfectibility, they will agitate for utopian experiments that open the door to mob violence and totalitarian rule.

Here is not the place to unpick this case in detail, but a few points can be made. One concerns violence. The principal targets of radicals and environmentalists are amply-funded and well-girded institutions: governments and corporations.

Phillips, by contrast, is a warmonger, a supporter of US/British invasions in the Middle East. At home, she whips up animosity against vulnerable social groups: Muslims, refugees, Palestinians, and [trans](#) and gay people—for which she received Stonewall’s ‘[Bigot of the Year](#)’ award. Her newspaper, *The Daily Mail*, is notorious for its vilification of welfare recipients and for its racism. It was the paper that applauded fascism in the interwar period. Phillips condemns Anders Breivik’s terrorist acts. But this feeling was not mutual. He quotes admiringly from her [prejudice-pickled](#) columns.

There is also the violence that Phillips, Buerk, Ross and other deniers are gleefully abetting: the [slow violence](#) of climate chaos. Driven chiefly by the [rich and powerful](#), it is inflicted [most lethally](#) on [poor](#) and racialised communities.

An ‘uncontrolled climate experiment’

We reds and greens, in Phillips’ demonology, are itching to unleash a dangerous experiment on her settled social order.

This is deeply misleading. Our preferred technologies are simple and harmless - bicycles, buses, windmills, home insulation - and our overriding goal is conservative: to maintain a habitable planet for humans and other species.

The social order she defends in its current industrial-capitalist form, by contrast, is pariously *unsettled*. It is, observes [Martin Wolf](#) at the *Financial Times*, “conducting a huge, uncontrolled and almost certainly irreversible climate experiment” with the only home we humans have. Positive feedback effects from rising temperatures, Wolf goes on, will ratchet up the risk of “calamitous change.”

If the deniers get their way, the emissions and temperature measurements will rise remorselessly, and so too the potential for a feedback-propelled [cascade of tipping points](#), and abrupt ruptures such as the shutdown of the [Gulf Stream](#).

An era of experimentation

To grasp even the basics of climate science is to be aware that humanity has entered an era of planetary experimentation. As I tried to explain during the Moral Maze, the stable *status quo ante*, the Holocene, is no more. The prevailing experiment is fossil-capitalism; its climate-catastrophic chemical effects are recorded hour by hour at [Mauna Loa](#).

What form should the alternative, recuperative experiment take? My analysis proposes that it must surely be post-capitalist, given that the cause of environmental despoliation and of global wealth polarisation is the unreformable capitalist motor, the accumulation imperative. One can imagine a rational ‘Moral Maze’ episode debating the rival positions.

One could envisage a consequentialist debating a virtue ethicist. A liberal might seek to expand the conception of rights to include those of [future generations](#). A conservative could point to the social critique of the [Tractarians](#) or of John Ruskin, or the theology of [stewardship](#), or the organic traditions of kin and nation extending down the generations, asking: what obligations do we owe our descendants?

Such debate is plural but the language of established fact is not. If you throw Elvis, my goldfish, onto the kitchen table, we cannot rationally debate the rights and wrongs of your act if you insist that air consists mostly of water vapour and that he therefore survives.

Rational debate is the lifeblood of politics, yet its common premise in the Anthropocene must be that anthropogenic climate change is real and a threat. Where that premise is denied, the result is the antics of Buerk and Phillips - a moral malaise.