

# Porritt ducks the political questions

Yes – there is hope we can escape the worst of global warming, but technical fixes are the easy bit

Piers Taylor

Jonathon Porritt's new book, *Hope in Hell*, is written from the perspective of one working at the forefront of climate activism in the UK for the last 50 years. From Friends of the Earth to the Green Party and the UK Sustainable Development Commission to Forum for the Future, Porritt has always been there, championing environmental causes.

Porritt's message here is one of hope – hope that we can do over the next decade what is needed to reverse runaway climate change. Porritt believes the next 10 years is THE key decade to cap global warming to a maximum of 1.5° above pre-industrial levels. In the first part of *Hope in Hell*, he reminds us of where emissions come from – 75% globally come from power generation, transportation and the built environment – with its concrete and steel hungry industry norms.

## Hope

The hope Porritt feels is expressed by articulating that we have the means, knowledge and solutions already at hand to make the changes necessary to address climate change in such a manner that total global emissions peak in 2020 and are halved by 2030 – which is what is needed (at the very least) to limit further destructive global warming.

Typically, the changes he suggests we need to make are technical fixes. The big change, he proposes, is in terms of renewables. At present only 25% of power (within the UK) is generated from renewables and yet we have the technology and investment necessary to double that in five years, and get

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to 100% of power needed by the UK by 2035.

The big question, of course, is that having declared a climate emergency, why doesn't the UK make these changes as a matter of urgency? The simple answer is politics, which is in thrall to the oil industry (which has served so well the dominant politics of the right) and conventional business systems and infrastructures that are resistant to change.

And... that's it. Porritt spends so much time telling us how we can solve things there's little left to really unpick how politics can change – which, given that we have the knowledge, technical solutions and, increasingly, collective social will – is the critical requirement to limit climate change. This, more than technical fixes, is the central issue of our time, particularly now, when politics seems stuck in the old ways of old leaders who are resistant to change.

If the coronavirus crisis has taught us anything, it is that we can change overnight if there is the political and social will. UK carbon emissions dropped almost instantly by 36% at the start of lockdown, although this has now halved and will quickly be back at near pre-Covid levels. Nothing else has made such an instant reduction to emissions so quickly and yet, as Porritt reminds us, the climate emergency is far bigger than the coronavirus emergency. As he also reminds us, the needs of today always win over those of tomorrow.

## Disappointment

My main frustration with Porritt's arguments focused on how technically we can reduce emissions is not that they're not interesting, relevant or accurate. It is more that they are

**Above** Technical fixes to the climate emergency such as renewables could get to 100% of UK power need by 2035. But there are other issues.

well known and well argued by others too. Understanding socially and politically how we can make change is the key issue of our time, particularly in the face of self-serving structures that are so resistant to change and politicians who label those who care about the environment 'activists'. Dealing with climate change, of course, isn't about one thing alone – the technical solutions, or the political will – but of entire connected systems of change. Focussing on one without the other is useless, as Stewart Brand has argued so thoroughly in *Whole Earth Discipline* – so where, here, is the chapter on the politics of change?

In his book, Brand describes how change can occur on a huge level. His volume is much more convincing than Porritt's in describing how social and political change is key; and by relating how the manner in which we live in cities can make enormous environmental change he shows how social change in terms of urbanisation has reshaped everything. For example, Brand describes at length how living densely in urban centres is the most important thing we can do – we consume less, travel less, have fewer children, share resources efficiently and free up land for more environmentally sustainable uses than intensive agriculture or low density living. These changes are far more interesting – and useful – than Porritt's technical fixes alone. Indeed, Brand goes as far as to suggest that the city is the greatest contribution to sustainability we have ever known, regardless of how we heat, produce power or build, but this doesn't fit with Porritt's view of simply investing in renewables and green transport.

## Practicality

However... what (else) can we do as architects, other than moving to the city, having fewer children and building nothing new? As Porritt sees it, our (architects') big problem is the carbon intensive industries that produce steel and concrete on the scales we demand. As a profession, we have never really tackled the issue of embodied energy – focusing for too long on energy use. Given that the embodied energy of a building can be as much as 80% of the total carbon emissions over its entire lifecycle, we are miles away from any significant building that is anything approaching zero carbon. It is on carbon, rather than mere energy, that we architects need to focus. The big challenge for the profession is how we build with low carbon materials in an

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**Below** Social and political change is critical, as Stewart Brand showed in his book *The Whole Earth Discipline*, which showed how living densely in urban centres is the most important thing we can do.

industry that has few, and within a political and planning systems and a post-Covid landscape that are not necessarily conducive to models of developments and settlements that are the most sustainable – super dense ones.

My other frustration with Porritt's book – particularly when he has spent his entire adult life effectively using such language – is that this rhetoric is so similar to so many others'. Porritt tells us that we need to act now – so did Al Gore 15 years ago, and Lovelock, who now phlegmatically suggests that it is far too late, and anything we do is akin to trying to row a boat against the flow up the Niagara falls. We have seen that 'disaster speak' doesn't make change, and ultimately, suggestions on how to achieve real change is missing from *Hope in Hell*. The real question has to be – in a global climate dominated by reactionary buffoons hell bent on propping up the status quo, how on earth (literally) can we legislate to make change happen quickly? If there is some hope in hell it is perhaps in younger people who don't have the same attitudes to existing financial structures. Perhaps (hopefully) they will overthrow the status quo, challenge the existing models, and re-value society's assets. ●

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