

Breaking up with fossil fuels

David Le Page

Love or hate: what is your emotional connection with fossil fuels, oil, gas and coal? As a child, growing up in the Johannesburg suburbs in the 1980s, I always enjoyed the smell of petrol. A mixture of the sweet and the synthetic, it was the smell of journeys beginning, of heading for long family holidays in the mountains and by the sea.

I also knew the smell of other hydrocarbons, comfortingly domestic: turpentine, that my mother used for her oil painting, and benzene—that all-too-carcinogenic, once-common household cleaner. At the beginning of every winter, my parents would order a truckload of anthracite from the Middelburg Coal Company. Men dressed like looming apparitions from the Dark Ages, covered in soot and sacking draped from

their heads, would unload great loads of black rock into the bunker outside our kitchen door. And we'd burn it throughout the winter, the stove always on, leaking a faintly acrid, dusty smell along with the solid glow that warmed us through dry, bitterly cold Highveld mornings and evenings.

Later, as a young man, I remember the sheer exuberance I felt when I first drove



Did I have any sense, then, of the dark side of these fuels? There was the obvious poverty of the men who delivered our coal (and those who rail that we must protect these jobs should remember how dangerous and insecure they often are), the gloom of sooty winter nights, but these impressions were different to separate from the generally oppressive air of late apartheid South Africa. It's now difficult to remember a time when I was not conscious of the threat of climate change, but I do have a sense of the over-awing sensation that came on me as I slowly learned the full dimensions of the challenge in the mid-2000s. And the helplessness I felt: how could such an immense problem be turned around?

A pension that is invested in oil, gas and coal is, it's increasingly clear, a pension that is designed to lose value in a climate-threatened economy.

As a father, my stomach sometimes lurches with fear when I read the latest news of scientists confronted by racing global change that all too often outpaces predictions: drought-stricken farmers, melting glaciers, acidifying oceans and threatened ecosystems. How will my children, and their children, cope with the unstable world we are creating? Is it too late for us, or can we transform, by some alchemy of blind optimism, our world of greed and inequality into a new, more humane and persistent equilibrium?

Humanity has been supplementing our own energy by burning things for tens of thousands of years, with profound impacts on the land and climate even before the Industrial Revolution steroid boosted the whole process. Fire, whether it's grilling a steak or trapped in an engine, or clearing land for agriculture, or embodied in the steel and concrete with which we're over-paving the Earth, is a deep part of our culture—and we now have to turn away from it, find a way of life that is more about growing than burning and consuming, reorient the vast and inexorable apparatus of industrial capitalism to actually feeling the pain that it inflicts on the biosphere and our prospects for a secure future.

In 2013, a friend who felt this dilemma as keenly decided to mount a public screening of a documentary about an obscure social movement that was getting underway on US campuses. The documentary was *Do The Math*. It profiled a dishevelled US writer and activist, Bill McKibben, who had co-founded the global climate campaign 350.org to mobilise global civil society for a favourable outcome to the ultimately disappointing 2009 Copenhagen climate negotiations. I liked 350, to me it seemed to embody a colourful and approachable strain of activism less grim than some others. McKibben has a wry and folksy sense of humour: 'In fact, corporations are the infants of our society—they know very little except

how to grow (though they're very good at that), and they howl when you set limits. Socialising them is the work of politics. It's about time we took it up again.'

Do The Math told the story of a 350.org US roadshow designed to persuade people and churches and foundations and universities to stop investing in fossil fuels on the basis of the kind of simple logic that sophisticates often loathe: 'If it's wrong to wreck the planet, then it's wrong to profit from that wreckage.'

After watching *Do The Math*, I thought it might be a good idea to write to the University of Cape Town, and try to persuade it to divest from fossil fuels, just like the many US universities that were starting to do the same thing. That letter, co-signed by other alumni, staff and students, began a long journey. You can dive into the details on the Fossil Free South Africa website, because yes, the letter turned into a process, and the process into a campaign, and the campaign into an organisation. UCT is now seriously considering a responsible investment policy, and the world has greatly surprised even 350 itself by taking up the divestment campaign to the tune of \$5.4 trillion worth of investment funds now freeing themselves of the dead weight of carbon emissions to varying degrees. This last May, Fossil Free South Africa hosted a divestment dialogue in Cape Town attended by representatives of 15 different investors and asset managers.

"The global fossil fuel sector is being shaken to its roots by technological transformations in renewable energy and electric mobility, and this change is only just beginning"

Divestment in South Africa is a huge challenge. We're a developing country still saddled with the widespread and erroneous belief that fossil fuels are needed for development, though 48 developing countries with 100% renewable energy targets now prove that to be wrong; an incredibly coal-dependent energy sector, a polity threatened by state capture (not least by big coal interests), and few if any existing ethical funds. But even if you're a deeply selfish person who cares not a jot for planet or children, your own self-interest demands you pay attention to this movement. Whole countries, like Ireland, Norway and New Zealand are now divesting their major pension and sovereign wealth funds—cities like Melbourne, Paris, Oslo, Seattle and many others have divested. Join us on this journey—subscribe to news from Fossil Free SA at tinyletter.com/FossilFreeSA.

David Le Page is the Coordinator of Fossil Free South Africa.

home a little 1600 hatchback bought second-hand, my first car, its lively kick underfoot as I squirted the distilled force of irreplaceable multi-million-year-old fossil essences through its engine. And gas! I grew up with rickety ring-plated electric stoves, but have always preferred the instant keen blue flame that surges up into my cooking from a gas stove.