

HIGHWAY TO HELL

The horrifying pictures of forest fires in various parts of the world shown by news media over the summers of 2021 and 2022 have been like scenes from the fires of Hell. The suffering and destruction faced by the people, the land and the environment in those regions seems deadly. There have been other natural disasters too, such as flooding and drought, and scientists have attributed these phenomena to climate change. Climate change is no longer providing subtle warnings: its disasters are happening now. The phrase *climate change* has recently been replaced by *climate crisis* by many concerned commentators.

Henry George spoke of an advancing intellectual and moral response to our “mastery over matter”. However, it seems that humanity’s attempted mastery over matter, through the use of fossil fuels, is in conflict with nature itself. Present international responses are manifestly inadequate and far too slow to avoid the kind of disasters that are already happening. The unjust exploitation of the environment has obvious consequences. It affects the poorest countries most severely where there are fewer resources to cope. For example, they have fewer weather warnings from monitoring stations. Climate fluctuations have always had an impact on the yields of crops with potentially fatal consequences for those in poorer countries who rely on this food directly. The fluctuations in the weather, caused by environmental pollution, impacts the very survival of people in these poorer nations. Henry George probably did not foresee the enormous scale of the negative effects resulting from the industrialisation of society and the indiscriminate use of natural resources. But he certainly did see that humanity’s appropriate response alongside material progress should be intelligent and moral. He saw that industrial and social advance “demands the recognition of the equality of natural rights”.

The present environmental crisis clearly shows a lack of justice towards those in poorer nations, putting in peril the whole planet. The ‘natural disasters’ we witness can no longer properly be called ‘natural’ since they arise through indiscriminate abuse of the earth. The complex question of what to do about it now arises. To change the course of the so-called material progress towards a more environmentally, socially and morally responsible direction will be costly and difficult for reasons beyond the scope of what can be suggested here.

It would be far beyond my knowledge to suggest solutions that would have a global impact. What I do suggest is to follow the thoughts of Henry George and to seek “a higher standard of social morals.” An intelligent and moral question to ask first could be, where can we start? Transportation reform seems to me an obvious choice. The high concentrations of diesel pollution in

our cities is creating a wide variety of serious health problems. So to reduce the number of vehicles on the roads would be a good place to start. This could be achieved very quickly and easily with the political will to do so.

One radical yet entirely practical suggestion is to make all public transport free to use. With government investment this could easily be done. In many countries outside the UK, including some less wealthy nations, public transport has a very minimal cost for the traveller because there is a great deal of government investment put into it. In the UK there is proportionately far less government investment in public transport and it is prohibitively expensive, especially for less affluent people, those who perhaps need it most. Would it not be just and intelligent to provide greater mobility to those least able to afford it, while at the same time offering the public a way of travelling which could reduce the number of vehicles on the road? The clear advantages to health and environmental improvement would easily outweigh costs.

Around the world, ninety-eight cities and towns have made their public transport free. As recently as March 2020 Luxembourg made its public transport free. What would be the implications of making public transport free in the UK? There are many apparent and less apparent knock-on effects. We can only mention some here. The ticketing infrastructure could obviously be removed entirely, reducing the cost of running the service, and these savings could be used to improve the service and retain those jobs used for ticketing duties for facilitating the improvements. What could be the change for the users? The cost of travel to a city to work would no longer be a barrier when choosing to live further away from the city in cheaper accommodation. Would it have the desired effect of getting people out of cars and onto public transport? In places that have made the switch to free public transportation, the reduction of car use has depended on the quality of the service itself. In some places, car use has dropped very little. The cost of fuel, parking and congestion charges are a way of shifting usage to public transport through financial leverage. The reduced number of cars on the road would be a primary aim of making public transport free. This decrease alongside an increase in safer bicycle lanes would have a further benefit to public health through lower pollution and more accessible exercise.

A higher standard of social morals is what is required, and we need start to making such changes immediately. We could begin to live better, healthier lives and at the same time contribute to averting the worst effects of climate change through taking such responsible action. 🗳️