

CORONA VIRUS v THE CLIMATE CRISIS: molehill versus mountain!

Covid-19 is a fast-approaching global catastrophe! No-one can pretend that is not the case, not even Donald Trump. But how does it rate with other pending disasters ... the climate crisis for example?

It takes a calamitous happening to occupy media headlines day after day, while at the same time causing stock markets to plummet. In recent years only the financial crisis of 2008 and now the Coronavirus epidemic (Covid-19) have been able to do this. In contrast, the climate crisis - which promises far more disastrous consequences than financial crises and epidemics combined - has only had a spasmodic effect on media and no real impact on market prices. Why is this so?

The short answer is 'human nature': most of us tend to inhabit the present, rather than think too much about the future. A quote from the late Christopher Hitchens says it all ... ***'If I'd known how long I was going to live, I would have taken better care of myself'***. It implies that if we could see into the future, we would do more to shape our direction of travel ... and the end result!

Of course, while Covid-19 is a hard-hitting dose of pain, the climate crisis is an ongoing (and potentially terminal) illness; acute versus chronic we might say. Human nature also dictates that while we react sharply to the acute, we tend to put up with the chronic, hoping that eventually it will disappear; it ceases to make big news, because it's there with us all the time. But though we strive desperately to fix the acute (and justifiably so!), in the long term it's the chronic that we really need to worry about.

If only the climate crisis could be presented in a similar manner to Coronavirus then we might be able to predict our future more precisely and (as Hitchens says) take better

care of ourselves. The problem lies in the word 'precise', for if 100 people die in Wuhan, that's Coronavirus; but if 100 people die in a Caribbean hurricane or an Australian bushfire, is that the climate crisis? 96 out of 100 scientists can only say ... '**most likely**'. However, if media reports could link disasters directly to climate crisis – one day 1,000 die in Indonesian Tsunami, the next 5,000 lives lost in Ethiopian famine, **caused by the climate crisis** – then the climate crisis would become a rolling Coronavirus stone. And more importantly, people would begin to see it as such.

Yes, Coronavirus is important, particularly for those directly affected, and yes it will have a relatively short-term, but major impact, on economic activities. However, the world will recover, businesses will return to normal and people will resume their regular routines. The world will move on. However, if we compare this with the climate crisis, there is only comparison in the short term, for the long term there is no comparison, because the Coronavirus will have been forgotten, while the climate crisis will be there, rolling ominously onwards, year on year.

If we make a rough comparison of the two phenomena – Coronavirus and climate crisis - we would find that from the short term view (one or two years) the potential loss of human life might be similar (although the climate crisis, because of the unpredictability of disasters, such as flood, fire or famine, could in fact cause many more deaths). In addition, the ongoing loss of flora and fauna due to the climate crisis is a factor not affected by Coronavirus. Thus, we can conclude that even in the short term the climate crisis could have a greater effect on our planet than Coronavirus.

But the big difference comes through comparison on the longer term (let us say 50 years). After one or two years the Coronavirus will have been controlled, with limited long term effects, whereas the climate crisis will keep rolling on, producing exponential effects (dependent to some extent on tipping points, such as ice-melt and methane gas release, etc.) with untold loss of plant, animal and human life. Dwindling food and water

supplies, intra and inter-nation wars, migration and ethnic relationships, are just a few of many factors most likely to be dramatically impacted by the climate crisis.

A cost analysis comparison for controlling the two phenomena is not unrelated: short term costs are similar (billions of dollars), but long term costs of investing in mitigation and adaption technologies to control the climate crisis are enormous (trillions of dollars) ... but vital if we are to avoid Armageddon! There are also countless benefits from this necessary investment to control the climate crisis: a greener environment, less pollution and better living conditions for humans and other species, less migration and fewer wars. These benefits begin to offer a decent future for those who inherit the future.

So, what do we need to do to turn the climate crisis into something which presents as a continuing Coronavirus epidemic? Firstly we need scientists to turn '**most likely**' into '**definitely**'; then for the combined forces that drive stock markets to cast off the fear factor and begin instead to see the plethora of opportunities that present themselves by investing in a healthier planet; and lastly for all forms of media to report the vast majority of natural and man-made disasters as happenings along a continuum of climate crisis events. Even wars can be caused by the climate crisis!

The good news is that some of this is already happening: renewables overtaking fossil fuels for energy generation; electric cars replacing petrol driven vehicles, and biodegradable plastics on the horizon. But much more is needed to slow the juggernaut of climate change – the phenomenon that has turned into a chronic crisis for our planet.

As an endnote, the quote from Christopher Hitchen becomes even more poignant when we realise he died a short time after writing it ... from cancer of the oesophagus. He smoked and drank a fair bit over the years. But his memory would be etched in gold if we could take a leaf from his many books and use our foresight to take better care of this planet we inhabit ... so that it might function as normal, and live to a ripe old age.
