

# Green New Deals must push the boundaries

Sunday 10 November 2019, by [THORNETT Alan](#) (Date first published: 20 September 2019).

**Green New Deals (GNDs), of various kinds, are increasingly a feature of the global climate and ecological struggle, writes Alan Thornett . They are not new but today they have greater significance. The most important such deal to-date is one submitted to the US Congress - entitled ‘Recognizing the duty of the Federal Government to create a Green New Deal’ - by the new Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez from New York, along with the veteran Senator Ed Markey from Massachusetts. The proposal originated with the Sunrise Movement - a group of environmentally motivated young people in the Democratic Party - and adopted by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (also known as AOC).**

In Canada a [‘Pact for a Green New Deal’](#) has been launched and is getting wide support. There are calls for a European-wide GND and an Australian GND. In the British Labour Party, a campaign for the adoption of a GND at its forthcoming conference has gained mass support and is likely to be adopted.

These initiatives are a response to the frightening pace of ecological destruction. As I write the Brazilian rain forest, the lungs of the world, its greatest biodiversity treasure house, and the home of indigenous peoples, is in flames. Climate records are broken at ever greater regularity. Crucial resources are running out, including fresh water and arable land. Pollution is choking the ecosystems of the planet. The oceans are now 30 per cent more acidic than in pre-industrial times. Coral reefs are dying off at an unprecedented rate. There will soon be more plastic in the oceans than fish and species are becoming extinct at a disastrous rate.

They are also a response to increasing public awareness of the ecological issues and new developments in the struggle itself, in particular the emergence of Greta Thunberg and the (inspirational) international school students strikes she has generated, and of Extinction Rebellion, a non-violent direct-action movement that has placed the biodiversity crisis at the heart of its activities.

## The AOC Deal in the US

The AOC Deal - or more precisely ‘Resolution’ because it is in the form of a resolution to Congress - has added significance because of its location in the USA, where it is a beacon of hope in the bleakest of landscapes. A stark alternative to the ecocide emanating from a White House that presides over ever rising US carbon emissions whilst rolling back climate regulations enacted by the Obama administration. The Resolution has already redrawn the boundaries of the debate on the ecological crisis in the USA, prompting Trump (unsurprisingly) to brand it as ‘socialist and therefore un-American’.

The Resolution was publicly launched in Washington in February with the support of 60 members of the House, nine Senators, and several presidential candidates. The headline message stressed at the meeting was to make the USA “net carbon-neutral in ten years”, which would require huge

strides in reducing the USA's reliance on oil, gas and coal and its replacement by clean, renewable and zero-emission energy sources. [1]

Its first point of principle is that human activity is the dominant cause of global warming over the past century, causing the sea level to rise, more severe wildfires and storms, droughts, and other extreme weather events that threaten human life, healthy communities, and national infrastructure. [2]

Its second is (crucially) that global warming above 1.5°C pre-industrial level will have catastrophic consequences. The result, it says, will be mass migration driven by climate change. Wildfires, by 2050, will burn twice as much forest area in the Western United States than was burned in the years preceding 2019. Ninety nine percent of all coral reefs on Earth will be lost. More than 350,000,000 extra people will be exposed globally to deadly heat stress by 2050. There is a risk of \$1,000,000,000,000 damage to public infrastructure and coastal real estate in the United States.

These principles directly reflect the conclusions of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) *Special Report on Global Warming*, published in October last year. It was compiled by climate scientists from around the world following the failure of the Paris climate summit to fully adopt 1.5°C concluded that the previous UN target of 2°C above preindustrial levels is indeed now out of date and should be superseded by a new maximum of a 1.5°C increase – after which key elements of the crisis start to run out of control.

### **Cutting carbon emissions**

The Resolution makes a number of proposals in terms of cutting carbon emissions including the following:

- Meeting 100 percent of the power demand in the United States through clean, renewable, and zero-emission energy sources;
- To achieve zero Green House Gas (GHG) emissions through fair and just transition for all communities and workers.
- Building or upgrading to energy-efficient, distributed, and “smart” power grids, and working to ensure affordable access to electricity;
- Upgrading all existing buildings in the United States and building new buildings to achieve maximal energy efficiency;
- Working collaboratively with farmers and ranchers in the United States to eliminate pollution and greenhouse gas emissions from the agricultural sector;
- Overhauling transportation systems to eliminate pollution and greenhouse gas emissions from the transportation sector as much as is technologically feasible, including through investment in zero-emission vehicle infrastructure and manufacturing; with clean, affordable, and accessible public transport.
- Removing greenhouse gases from the atmosphere, including by restoring natural ecosystems and low-tech solutions that increase soil carbon storage, and afforestation.
- Restoring fragile ecosystems through locally appropriate and science-based projects that enhance biodiversity and support climate resiliency.

It also recognises that a reorganisation of the economy and of society on this scale would represent a historic opportunity to virtually eliminate poverty in the United States and to make prosperity, wealth and economic security available to everyone. It goes on to call on the Federal Government to make green technology, expertise, products and services a major export of the United States, with the aim of becoming the undisputed international leader in helping other countries bringing about a global GND.

## **Bernie Sanders**

The Resolution has already had an impact on next year's presidential election campaign. Bernie Sanders, for example, who was the first presidential candidate to support the AOC Resolution, put forward his own ecological platform, which he sees as complementary to what AOC is doing. He launched it recently, and poignantly, whilst visiting the town of Paradise, California, home to 26,000 people that was completely destroyed in December last year by the deadliest wildfire in the history of the state, driven by climate change.

Sanders called for the creation of 20 million clean energy jobs and \$16.3 trillion in green federal investment. He called for the decarbonisation of transportation and power generation, the two largest sources of emissions in the United States, by 2030, which would lower US emissions by 71 percent.

His plan, he said, would raise money from numerous sources including: \$6.4 trillion from selling energy via power marketing authorities; \$2.3 trillion from income tax from the new jobs created under the plan, and \$1.2 trillion from reducing the military expenses related to protecting oil shipping routes. Expenditure would include:

- \$40 billion for a climate justice resiliency fund for under-resourced groups like Native Americans, people with disabilities and the elderly; to prepare for climate change
- \$200 billion for the United Nations Green Climate Fund to help other countries reduce their emissions
- \$1.52 trillion to deploy renewable energy and \$852 billion for energy storage
- \$526 billion for an underground high-voltage direct current power transmission network

## **The controversies**

Crucial as the 1.5°C target is it is still far from universally accepted even on the left. The British Labour Party, for example, despite having greatly strengthened its overall ecological profile under the Corbyn leadership, has still not accepted it as its official position. When Red-Green Labour activists proposed its adoption at the AGM of SERA, Labour's environmental section, in January 2019, we lost the vote on 1.5°C. John McDonnell, however, in an interview in the Independent on June 13 2019 said that Labour was strongly considering adopting the 1.5°C target 'in order to respond to the science'.

One strength of the Labour Party GND resolution, which is heading for Party conference very soon, is that it clearly accepts the 1.5°C target and that this means achieving zero carbon emission by 2030. There were challenges to this during the debate in some branches and committees with proposals for a 2050 target date and to insert 'net' before zero. It is also positive that it recognises that the greatest burden of environmental devastation is borne by communities in the global south and calls for support for climate refugees and for climate justice.

The AOC campaign is not clear on the 2030 deadline and 'net' zero either. Although a target of net-zero by 2030 had been headlined at the public launch the AOC GND the Resolution itself, as submitted to Congress, is more conservative. It says that: "Global temperatures must be kept below 1.5°C above pre-industrialised levels to avoid the most severe impacts of a changing climate, which will require global reductions in greenhouse gas emissions from human sources of 40 to 60 per cent from 2010 levels by 2030 and net-zero emissions by 2050."

It is true that this is in accord with the IPCC Report. Unfortunately, however, it reflects one of its weaknesses. The Report predicts that "the global temperature is likely rise to 1.5°C above pre-

industrial levels between 2030 and 2052 if warming continues to increase at the current rate.” This does not make sense. First it is predicated on warming continuing at the “current rate” – which is looking increasingly unlikely. Second it proposes action on the best case scenario rather than the worst. If 1.5°C by 2030 is a clear possibility, as the IPCC report accepts, that should be the target date, since 2050 could well be too late.

‘Net’ zero means achieving zero carbon emissions by balancing emissions with removal or sequestration, (often through offsetting) rather than eliminating carbon emissions altogether. The idea of ‘net’ zero is at best a diversion and at worst profoundly problematic – we must aim to eliminate emissions not “balance” them, nor export of emissions to the global south. ‘Net’ zero is defended in the AOC resolution by saying that it might not be possible to fully get rid of, for example, emissions from beef production or air travel before then. But unless we do so, it will be impossible to stop runaway climate chaos. Science needs to dictate our programme here.

It should also be said that both of these deals are vague as to what constitutes fossil fuel energy and either explicitly or implicitly accept the use of nuclear power.

Both also fail to address the issue of economic growth. With the AOC Resolution this is compounded by the name ‘New Deal’ with its reference to Franklin Roosevelt’s response to the Great Depression – which was based entirely around growth. Growth, however, is not an option when it comes to saving the planet. At the average rate of economic growth of 3 per cent per year over the past 60 years the global economy would grow by a factor of sixteen in the course of a century and 250 over the course of this century and the next.

In terms of the Labour for a Green New Deal motion, people should oppose attempts to water it down – but also be aware it can be strengthened. It ignores the key issue of airport expansion, it talks about green integrated public transport but doesn’t mention making it free or at least affordable and much more detail is needed about climate and green jobs and a transformative transition. And the fact that the battle on such issues is not yet won in the unions is no reason not to push them – and just after September 20 climate strike gives one of the best possible contexts for such a debate.

## **Carbon pricing**

The two different Green New Deal proposals have another commonality as well. Whilst they both make excellent demands that point in the right direction, they both lack a high impact centralising demand capable of stopping the global temperature going above the 1.5°C maximum temperature increase in the time-scale available to us and generating a mass movement around it – for example by making the polluters pay via much higher taxes (or fees) on carbon.

Fossil fuel is hard-wired into the global energy system, with massive financial, corporate and ideological resources behind it. As long as it remains the most profitable way to generate energy this stranglehold will continue to be used. In my view, an important part of breaking this stranglehold is carbon pricing – making fossil energy dramatically more expensive than renewables by heavy (and increasing) taxes on carbon based products within the framework of a socially just progressive taxation system that transfers of wealth from the rich to the poor and generates mass support in the process. (Carbon taxes should not be confused with carbon trading as promoted by Kyoto and the UN: schemes such as the Clean Development Mechanism, the Joint Implementation Mechanism, and the EU Emissions Trading Scheme. These are at best window-dressing and at worst licenses to pollute.)

This issue has just become highly topical with the publication (on September 16<sup>th</sup>) of a report by the UK government’s special representative on climate change Sir David King. Speaking at the Clean

Growth Innovation Summit – hosted by Innovate UK’s Knowledge Transfer Network as part of Green GB Week – King claimed that policy and business action was critical in averting the severe climate threats facing humanity in the near future.

“This is the most serious challenge humanity has ever had to face up to,” King said. “Time is no longer on our side. What we continue to do, what we do that is new, and what we plan to do over the next 10 to 12 years will determine the future of humanity for the next 10,000.

He went on to say that governments will have to bring their climate targets forward by at least 10 years and the price of oil will have to be quadrupled to £113 a tonne against the current price of £24 a tonne.

The omission of carbon taxes from the GNDs is unsurprising, since carbon taxes are widely opposed on the radical left. This is often on the basis that they are a market mechanism, which indeed they are, but so is taxing the rich which has long (and rightly) been supported by the radical left. The issue is not whether a tax is a market mechanism but whether, in a given circumstance, it is progressive or reactionary.

This is an important discussion. Peter Hudis, for example, in a recent article on the Red Green Labour site on June 15, argues that the most important attribute of the AOC Resolution is precisely that it has nothing to say on carbon taxes. He references, in justification, to the opposition of the Yellow Vests to Macron’s fuel tax in France, who saw it as an additional burden on the poorest in society.

Macron’s carbon tax was indeed regressive, and the reaction of the Yellow Vests was entirely predictable. This was not because carbon taxes per se are regressive, but because this one was introduced in the framework of Macron’s right-wing agenda including tax breaks for the rich and cuts to social programmes. The fact that nothing had been done on the left in France to promote the idea of progressive carbon taxes did not help.

### **The James Hansen proposals**

There are many ways in which carbon pricing can be used to bring down emissions rapidly and democratically – but they have to be just and democratic. A proposal worth looking at, in my view, is the one proposed by James Hansen, the climate scientist who has done more to tackle climate change over the past 30 years than anyone else. He famously made a high profile intervention in the US Senate in 1988, which catapulted global warming and climate change into the public arena, resulting in an important turning point in public awareness.

Hansen proposes a fee-and-dividend system which involves placing a uniform fee (or levy) on the fossil fuel production, at the pithead, the wellhead or at the port of entry, for each ton of carbon produced. The revenue generated would be distributed, on a heavily redistributive basis towards the poor, as dividends to the population as a whole on an individual (per capita) basis – with half shares for children up to two children per family (though restricting this to two children seems problematic). Those who reduce their carbon footprint the most would stand to benefit the most. [3]

Carbon pricing can also tackle pollution. According to Britain’s Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) the 5p charge introduced in Britain in 2016 on single-use plastic bags resulted in an immediate 83 per cent reduction in plastic bag usage. More than 7 billion bags were handed out by seven main supermarkets in the year before the 5p charge but this plummeted to slightly more than 500 million in the first six months after the charge was introduced. This is also a market mechanism.

The objection often made that taxing the polluters in this way is not revolutionary enough. This is a big mistake. It is true that this does not propose global socialist revolution as the immediate answer to the ecological crisis with the time scale we have – because such a call would be meaningless. What it does propose, however, that the forces that can in the end challenge the logic of capitalism are assembled in the course of a practical struggle to defend the planet in the here and now whilst capitalism still exists.

## **Pushing the boundaries**

Whilst the various GNDs being proposed are diverse in their scope and objectives, what is clear is that they must push the boundaries of the situation they are in. We are in an evolving and radicalising situation and GNDs need to be at the cutting edge of it.

They need to be a part of the broadest possible alliance in defence of the planet. This means reaching out to the trade unions with policies based on a just transition from carbon-based jobs to jobs based on renewable energy and an environmental perspective. It means a new energy system based on solar, wind, tidal, hydro and geothermal. It means developing green production and rejecting the throwaway society. It means demanding the public ownership of industry and land as the basis for the kind of fundamental restructuring of society that is urgently needed. It means rejecting policies that stand in the way of all this such as airport and aviation expansion, the dash for gas, fracking for more gas, nuclear energy, the use of biofuels and, importantly, industrialised agriculture with its dependency on artificial fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides, and anti-biotics.

All this means major changes not only to our energy superstructure but to how society is organised and to how people live their lives. Such strategic choices involved cannot just be left to governments, even a Corbyn government. Attempting to carry them through without mass support could be disastrous. These issues have to be discussed by the whole movement since they will have to be implemented by the whole movement.

Alan Thornett is the author of *Facing the Apocalypse – Arguments for Ecosocialism*, published by Resistance Books 2019.

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## **Alan Thornett**

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## **Footnotes**

[1] Guardian report of Feb 7.

[2] Pages 1 and 2 of the Resolution.

[3] Hansen first advocated fee and dividend in his 2009 book *Storms of my Grandchildren*. It is also discussed in some detail in my book *Facing the Apocalypse-Arguments for Ecosocialism* published in February of this year.