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NOT INVENTED HERE

Institutional resistance to practical solutions

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Foreword

The theoretical advantage of single-issue pressure groups is that they can form broad coalitions, gathering people from across the political spectrum who need not agree on anything other than the group's single issue. For example, Women Against State Pension Inequality (WASPI) is a group that campaigns for financial compensation for women affected by the increase in the state pension age. That is all they do. WASPI do not express a view on whether or not Britain should rejoin the EU, abolish the monarchy, convert the House of Lords into an elected upper chamber, or replace the First Past The Post electoral system with Proportional Representation. With that strategy, they have managed to attract support from many different corners of the political spectrum without attaching themselves to any of those.

Curiously, though, many high-profile single-issue pressure groups are not like that at all. Black Lives Matter (BLM), Extinction Rebellion (XR), Just Stop Oil (JSO), Mermaids, the Stop the War Coalition (StWC) and the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) are very much not cross-ideological broad-church coalitions. They are remarkably politically homogenous, including on issues that have nothing to do with their stated cause. They draw almost all of their support from one specific corner of the political spectrum.

This is because groups that present themselves as single-issue campaigns often pursue unstated companion causes, the most common one of which is anti-capitalism. The most clear-cut example of this is BLM UK, where the companion cause is not 'unstated' at all, but prominently stated on their FAQ page ('We

are […] all anti-capitalists'[1]) and on their GoFundMe page ('Black Lives Matter UK (BLMUK) is […] guided by a commitment to dismantle […] capitalism'[2]). Similarly, XR also regularly tweet about their anti-capitalist orientation.

Why would a pressure group do that? Why would they deliberately limit their appeal to one corner of the political spectrum, thus foregoing the main advantage of being a single-issue group? And why would a movement distract from its primary cause by adding an unrelated secondary one?

The answer is that for such movements, the primary and the secondary causes are not unrelated at all. For an anti-capitalist, every social problem is really just downstream from capitalism. From that perspective, an 'ally' who is not committed to dismantling capitalism is not a useful ally at all, and there is no harm in losing them. The useful allies are those who would not bother joining the group if it did not have a distinct anti-capitalist vibe.

So, we need to draw a distinction between genuine single-issue pressure groups such as WASPI, which pursue one cause and one cause only, and groups where a visible, explicit primary purpose is complemented by a less visible, less explicit secondary one. Groups of the latter variety are, in fact, more common than groups of the former, although the unstated secondary cause does not always have to be out-and-out anti-capitalism. It can also be a narrower aversion to specific industries, business models, technologies or lifestyle choices.

1 Black Lives Matter UK: General FAQs. https://ukblm.org/faq/ (Accessed January 2025)

2 UK BLM fund, GoFundMe, https://www.gofundme.com/f/ukblm-fund (Accessed January 2025)

But what happens when the stated primary cause and the unstated secondary cause collide? What happens when a group exists to campaign against problem X, assumes that the fight against X is synonymous with the fight against capitalism – and then all of a sudden, a viable solution to problem X emerges out of capitalism itself? This is the question that Dr Christopher Snowdon, Zion Lights and I explore in this paper because it is not some rare exception. It happens regularly.

The details differ, but the common theme we have found is that in such cases, the unstated secondary cause often trumps the stated primary cause (which, of course, then raises the question of whether it might not make sense to swap those labels). When a solution emerges outside of the preferred framework, pressure groups tend to react defensively, retreating into a 'Not Invented Here' mindset. They end up attacking perfectly workable solutions when they solve the problem in the wrong way.

We are not in the business of picking winners. We are not advocating for any particular product, technology or industry, and we are certainly not suggesting that any product/technology/industry should be eligible for government favouritism. Where a market exists, any product/technology/industry should have to pass the market test, and if consumers choose to reject them, so be it. But it is consumers who should make that choice, not politicians or activist pressure groups.

It is not really the point of this publication to advocate for specific policies either. Where we describe something or other as 'a solution,' we usually mean that in the narrow sense that it works on its own terms: it does what it is supposed to do. Whether what it does is actually desirable, or worth doing, or how important it is compared to other objectives, is a separate question. The Victoria Line is 'a solution,' *if* your objective is to get from Victoria to King's Cross in a relatively short time. Whether

you actually *want* to get from Victoria to King's Cross, or whether you prioritise speed over other aspects such as comfort or sightseeing, is not our business. But if an influential pressure group claimed that its purpose was to facilitate quick travel between Victoria and King's Cross, and if they also vigorously campaigned for the closure of the Victoria Line, we would call out that inconsistency.

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London, February 2025

Obesity

Christopher Snowdon

The Department of Health and Social Care[3] says that 'obesity costs the NHS around £6.5 billion a year'. The health secretary, Wes Streeting, has claimed that it costs the NHS £11 billion a year[4]. When wider societal costs, including lost productivity, are included, Frontier Economics (2022) estimated that obesity cost Britain £58 billion in 2020, and when they made a further estimate to include the cost of people being overweight in 2023, this rose to £98 billion, of which £19.2 billion were direct costs to the NHS (Frontier Economics 2023).

Obesity is routinely referred to as a 'crisis' in the UK and elsewhere. Fifteen million adults (28%) have a body mass index of 30 or more and are therefore classified as obese. The number of obese Britons has been gradually growing for decades, and none of the anti-obesity policies enacted so far, such as the sugar tax and traffic light labelling on food, has made any tangible difference. Some countries have gone further. Hungary, for example, has an extensive system of taxes on food that is high in fat, salt or sugar (HFSS). Chile has had mandatory health

3 Department of Health and Social Care (2024) Government plans to tackle obesity in England. Updated 2 February 2024 (https://healthmedia.blog.gov.uk/2023/06/07/government-plans-to-tackle-obesity-in-england/)

4 Jamie Grierson 'Unemployed could be given weight-loss jabs to get back to work, says Wes Streeting', *The Guardian*, 15 October 2024 (https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/oct/14/unemployed-could-be-given-weight-loss-jabs-to-get-back-to-work-says-wes-streeting).

warnings on HFSS food since 2016 and has banned the use of cartoon mascots such as Tony the Tiger. Both countries have seen obesity rates continue to rise.

Given how seriously public health campaigners take obesity as a health problem, you might think that they would be delighted to find something that makes people lose a great deal of weight in a short space of time. But you would be wrong. A new generation of pharmaceuticals that have been shown in randomised controlled trials to help people lose an average of 15% to 20% of their body weight have been given a cautious welcome at best by those who should be most excited by them.

The drugs have been attacked from the right, with some commentators suggesting that using drugs to overcome obesity is a form of cheating that absolves people from using willpower, but they have mostly been attacked from the left where the institutional preference is for radically changing the 'food environment' through taxation, advertising bans and mandatory food reformulation.

In 2023, a *Guardian* headline exclaimed that the arrival of effective weight-loss drugs was 'no excuse to let junk food companies off the hook'. *The Guardian*'s health editor Sarah Boseley5 called on the government to reject the 'quick fix' of semaglutide (AKA Wegovy/Ozempic) and instead 'promote healthy diets, redesign our towns to get people walking and help shift societal values towards food', neglecting the fact that governments have been promoting healthy diets for decades and that our towns have already been designed (I can't comment on 'societal values towards food' as I don't know what they are).

5 Sarah Boseley 'A "skinny jab" is no quick fix for obesity – and no excuse to let junk food companies off the hook', *The Guardian*, 25 April 2023 (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/apr/25/skinny-jab-obesity-junk-food-britain-tax).

Another *Guardian* writer has complained that weight-loss drugs are 'trying to solve the wrong problem' and that the real issue is 'primacy of work, long hours, low pay, hustle culture, structural inequalities, poverty and precarity'[6].

Even those who are not hostile to the drugs *per se* are concerned that having a proven remedy for obesity will be a distraction from the real task of fundamentally changing society with untested policies and giving more power to the state. Giles Yeo, a geneticist who has written several books about obesity, last year told *The Guardian* that 'I do fear, and this is a true fear, that actually not only our government, but many governments and policymakers, may very well use [these drugs] as a cop-out not to make the hard policy decision'[7]. In case you are wondering what a hard policy decision looks like, he has since explained to the BBC that 'we're going to have to lose some liberties'[8].

Dr Margaret McCartney, a writer and GP, says that her 'big concern' about the drugs is that 'the eye is taken off the ball with stopping people getting overweight in the first place' which, for her, means changing 'the obesogenic environment'[9]. The restaurateur-turned-campaigner Henry Dimbleby is worried that 'we will increasingly drug our way out of the problem' and that this will 'move the profits from the food companies to the

6 Rebecca Seal 'Too tired to cook. Too easy to open a packet. It's not our fault we eat junk', *The Guardian*, 13 May 2023 (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/may/13/too-tired-to-cook-too-easy-to-open-a-packet-its-not-our-fault-we-eat-junk).

7 Nicola Davis 'Weight-loss jabs shouldn't be quick-fix solution for governments, says expert', *The Guardian,* 25 May 2024 (https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/may/25/weight-loss-jabs-shouldnt-be-quick-fix-solution-for-governments-says-expert).

8 James Gallagher 'How will weight-loss drugs change our relationship with food?', *BBC*, 19 October 2024 (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4g518d5j5lo).

9 Ibid.

drug companies' (Food, Diet and Obesity Committee 2024a). Nesta, a state-funded body that describes itself as an 'innovation agency for social good,' is a prominent defender of the public health orthodoxy and is a fierce proponent of state-sanctioned food reformulation. When, in January 2023, it produced a report looking at 'what would be required to halve obesity,' weight-loss drugs were not even mentioned. Instead, Nesta focused on 'population-level interventions in the food environment such as reformulating food, reducing junk food advertising and shifting price promotions towards healthier foods' (Mariani et al. 2023). A month later, Nesta published another report that expressed concern that the use of weight-loss drugs 'might well deepen the emphasis in the public discourse on a "personal responsibility narrative"' (Butcher et al. 2024).

In October 2024, the House of Lords Food, Diet and Obesity Committee published a 181-page report that contains just one passing reference to weight-loss drugs. The committee acknowledged that 'there is increasing interest in the potential of new medicines such as semaglutide' but effectively dismissed them on the basis that they are 'a targeted rather than a population measure'. They also noted that the drugs are 'expensive' and that halving the rate of obesity by prescribing them 'would place considerable additional pressure on the NHS' (Food, Diet and Obesity Committee 2024b: 23).

The reference to cost is telling. Isn't obesity supposed to be such a burden on public services that almost any effective countermeasure would reduce the 'pressure on the NHS'? A legitimate criticism of the new generation of weight-loss drugs is that they are expensive and will remain so until they go off-patent in the 2030s. A four-week supply of Wegovy (semaglutide) or Mounjaro (tirzepatide) typically costs around £170. If we assume, perhaps optimistically, that the NHS could negotiate a better price of £130, it would cost £26 billion per annum to give

them to every obese adult in the UK. If all overweight people were also given it, it would cost a total of £58 billion. In the context of the £98 billion that obesity is said to cost Britain, this sounds potentially cost-effective, but a closer look at the figures suggests that it would actually require a massive net increase in government spending. Of the £98 billion in Frontier Economics' latest estimate, £56.6 billion is comprised of the intangible costs of lost years of life to obese or overweight individuals, and £15.1 billion is made up of lost productivity costs that mostly, if not entirely, are borne by obese employees through lower wages and unemployment.[10] A further £6.5 billion comes from informal social care costs, such as a husband looking after his wife, based on an estimate of how much it would cost to employ someone to do this work if they were being paid.

None of these 'costs' are borne by the government. The only direct cost to the taxpayer is the £19.7 billion attributed to NHS treatment and formal social care, but this is a substantial overestimate as it does not include savings to the public purse from obese individuals dying prematurely, nor does it account for the counterfactual in which the individuals concerned were not obese and lived long enough to require other healthcare needs. An analysis published by the IEA in 2017 looked at the net cost of overweight and obesity to the government in England and Wales, including savings to the state, and found that the total was less than £2.5 billion per annum and could be zero (Tovey 2017).

10 Although lost productivity makes up a large share of all cost-of-obesity estimates, campaigners have objected to productivity being taken into account when obesity treatments are available. When Wes Streeting announced plans to give Mounjaro to obese jobseekers, the idea was described as 'unethical' by the public health academic Simon Capewell because it prioritised those who could be economically active. Another public health academic, Dolly van Tulleken, agreed, saying that it was questionable whether the government should be 'measuring people based on their potential economic value'.

The government therefore finds itself on the horns of a dilemma. Either it can accept the inflated estimates of how much obesity costs Britain, in which case spending £26 billion per year on weight-loss drugs makes sound financial sense, or it can accept that the real cost of obesity is a fraction of what has been claimed. Public health campaigners have an incentive to exaggerate the negative externalities associated with obesity, but so too does the pharmaceutical industry. It is perhaps no coincidence that the report from Frontier Economics, which claimed that obesity was costing £58 billion a year, was commissioned by the manufacturers of Wegovy, Novo Nordisk.

Whether or not these drugs are cost-effective depends on which costs you consider relevant, but they are at least *effective* – and that sets them apart from the 'population level' policies that organisations such as Nesta continue to cling to. There is a conspicuous lack of evidence in favour of top-down, supply-side restrictions on the food supply as a way to reduce obesity. This is sometimes due to the policies never having been implemented (often because they are impractical), but when policies *are* implemented and they fail, their advocates say that this is only to be expected as there is no 'silver bullet'. They then insist that the government should take a 'whole systems approach' in which a large number of ineffective and/or untested policy interventions that do not reduce obesity when introduced individually will have an effect if combined. This, too, is unproven.

But while we have RCTs showing that food reformulation does not work (Markey et al. 2016), we have RCTs showing that Wegovy and Mounjaro do. The USA recently reported an unprecedented 2% decline in the obesity rate which, as John Burn-Murdoch

argued in the *Financial Times*, can only plausibly be attributed to weight-loss drugs, which one in eight Americans have now used.[11]

No policy promoted by public health campaigners has reduced obesity anywhere in the world by even 1%. No wonder they are jealous.

11 John Burn-Murdoch 'We may have passed peak obesity', *Financial Times*, 3 October 2024 (https://www.ft.com/content/21bd0b9c-a3c4-4c7c-bc6e-7bb6c3556a56).

Alcohol

Christopher Snowdon

Doctors have been advising people to have several days without alcohol each week for decades. It is sound advice because, as the British Liver Trust (2018) says, 'it is simple and easy to understand, reduces the overall number of units that you drink each week, helps prevent alcohol dependency and importantly for liver health gives your liver a rest and a chance to rejuvenate.' In 2011, Ian Gilmore, the chairman of the Alcohol Health Alliance, advised drinkers to have 'two to three alcohol-free days a week'[12]. In 2012, the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee[13] said that 'people should be advised to take at least two drink-free days a week'. In 2016, the Chief Medical Officer said that 'a good way' for people to reduce their alcohol consumption was to have 'several drink-free days each week' (Department of Health 2016: 4). None of this was remotely controversial until the alcohol education charity Drinkaware partnered with Public Health England (PHE) in 2018 to launch the 'Drink Free Days' campaign. Aimed at drinkers aged between 40 and 64, it advertised on radio and digital platforms and provided an app to help people monitor their alcohol consumption.

12 'Avoid alcohol three days a week, doctors warn', *BBC*, 23 October 2011 (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-15415713).

13 Sarah Boseley 'MPs call for two alcohol-free days each week and clearer guidelines on drinking', *The Guardian*, 9 January 2012 (https://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/jan/09/mps-alcohol-drinking-guidelines).

You might think that public health groups would be delighted to see a well-known charity put its time and money into encouraging drinkers to consume less alcohol. But you would be wrong. Drinkaware is funded by donations from alcohol producers and retailers, and this was enough to make the aforementioned Ian Gilmore resign as co-chair of PHE's alcohol leadership board and write an article titled 'Public Health England's capture by the alcohol industry' (Gilmore et al. 2018). An open letter opposing any collaboration between PHE and Drinkaware was signed by 332 academics, some of whom threatened to stop working with PHE if it did not part ways with the charity.[14]

To outsiders, the furore was baffling. As *The Times* pointed out in an editorial, 'Drinkaware is not a front for the alcohol industry' and the 'campaigning message is both sensible and realistic'. It urged the head of PHE to 'not allow academics' purist objections to the drinks industry to override his responsibility to work with it to develop a pragmatic approach to public education'.[15]

For the 'purists', the problem was not so much that they had not invented the idea of Drink Free Days – they had – but that it was being promoted by the wrong people. Their institutional preference was to have the drinks industry excluded from the policy-making process and they feared that collaboration between the government and any organisation linked to the industry would give the industry 'legitimacy' (Maani et al. 2024).

A similar kerfuffle had taken place in 2012 when alcohol manufacturers promised to 'remove' a billion units of alcohol from the market by 2015 by giving consumers 'a wider choice of lower strength products' was one of the central pledges of

14 https://ranzetta.typepad.com/files/public-health-open-letter-dfds.pdf

15 'Alcohol Awareness', *The Times*, 10 October 2018 (https://www.thetimes.com/uk/healthcare/article/alcohol-awareness-58xxk2nvv).

the government's Alcohol Strategy and was part of a voluntary arrangement between industry and government known as the Responsibility Deal (HM Government 2012). Since there were 52 billion units of alcohol consumed in the UK at the time, this amounted to a pledge to cut the nation's alcohol consumption by around 2%. The logic was similar to that of the subsequent sugar tax and of food reformulation; that small changes to individuals can add up to make a significant difference to the population.

The pledge was met ahead of time. The Department of Health's evaluation found that the number of units sold fell by 1.9 billion between 2011 and 2013, and attributed 1.3 billion of this to the industry launching new, lower-alcohol products and reducing the alcohol content of some of its existing products (Department of Health 2013).

You might think that anti-alcohol groups would be in favour of less alcohol being consumed. But you would be wrong again. In 2009, two prominent public health academics had published a study with the self-explanatory title 'Low alcohol alternatives: a promising strategy for reducing alcohol related harm' (Segal and Stockwell 2009). When asked about the billion unit challenge in 2012, Ian Gilmore grudgingly admitted that it would produce 'some benefit'[16] if the target were achieved, but by the time the evaluation was published in 2014 nearly every public health group had walked out of the Responsibility Deal in protest at the government's refusal to proceed with their institutional preference of minimum pricing.

Instinctively opposed to anything that did not involve state coercion, public health campaigners refused to celebrate the billion-unit target being achieved. Some of them refused to

16 https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmhealth/uc1928-i/uc192801.htm

accept that it had been achieved at all. Three academics who had made their name doing theoretical modelling for minimum pricing complained that the data used in the evaluation were not good enough to draw any firm conclusions and that since the type of evidence that would satisfy them would never exist, the evaluation report should be withdrawn and never spoken of again (Holmes et al. 2014). Several activist-academics argued, without a shred of evidence, that people had started drinking the new, lower-alcohol drinks in addition to their usual intake (ibid.). Others griped that if the target had been achieved, it was only because the drinks companies made changes to their products that they were going to make anyway (Knai et al. 2015). Eight years later, a 3% fall in alcohol sales in Scotland following the introduction of minimum pricing was described in the *British Medical Journal* as 'extremely encouraging' (Christie 2019). In 2014, however, the same journal described a similar decline in sales in the UK as 'a mere accident of the market' (Gornall 2014).

The Responsibility Deal ended in 2016 and the market has since moved towards drinks that are not just lower in alcohol, but totally alcohol-free. Even these products, which are literally soft drinks, have faced institutional resistance from the neo-temperance lobby. Alcohol Action Ireland, a state-funded pressure group, claims that the industry advertises brands such as Guinness 0.0 not because it wants people to buy them but because such advertisements act as 'alibi marketing' for the alcoholic versions (Alcohol Action Ireland 2023: 4). That is not their only objection. They say:

> Like alcohol itself, zero alcohol products are no ordinary product and seek to further normalise drinking at every single occasion in life. There is no end to the possibility of where industry will go with this or what other consequences might flow from it over time (ibid.: 5).

They do not speculate about what these consequences will be but complain that 'there is no law preventing zero alcohol drinks being sold to under 18-year-olds' (why should there be?) and claim that zero-alcohol drinks have 'the potential to disrupt public health achievements as the potential risk of normalisation of alcohol use for young people could be developed' (Alcohol Action Ireland n.d.).

In 2023, the World Health Organisation got involved. In a report that threw every conceivable objection at no- and low-alcohol drinks (NoLos), the WHO claimed that they 'normalise a culture of alcohol consumption' and could serve as 'gateway products' (WHO 2023: vi). It fretted that 'NoLos may be purchased at a broader range of retail outlets than typical alcoholic beverages, further normalising alcohol consumption' (ibid.: 2). Noting that many countries tax drinks according to their alcohol content, the WHO made the puzzling complaint that this meant that people 'pay lower taxes for NoLos, resulting in cheaper products on the market, reducing the overall effectiveness of these taxes' (ibid.).

Although the WHO claimed that there is insufficient evidence to show that people who consume NoLos drink less alcohol, it simultaneously expressed concern that the products could exacerbate 'health inequalities' because one study found that 'NoLos reduced overall ethanol consumption among more affluent households, and, as a result, they increased inequalities between income groups' (ibid.: 5). The WHO then argued that low-alcohol drinks in Nigeria tend to be sweetened and that since women have a preference for sweetened drinks, there was a danger that Nigerian men would 'buy them for women, encourage them to consume them above their limit, and engage in unsolicited sexual advances when intoxicated'. 'Thus', it concluded, 'due to the marketing of NoLos to Nigerian women, the level of sexual violence and other alcohol-related problems may increase' (ibid.: 7).

It is a long list of charges to level against products that strike most people as being benign at worst, but the WHO had warmer words to say about NoLos if people consumed them as a result of state coercion. The 'public health' lobby's institutional preference is for higher taxes and minimum pricing. Such pricing mechanisms, said the WHO, 'may incentivise producers to reduce the levels of alcohol by volume and may lead to more considerable reductions in alcohol consumption' (ibid: 5). As so often in 'public health', an approach that is ineffective and harmful when done voluntarily magically becomes powerful and life-saving when it is forced on consumers.

Climate change

Zion Lights

Nuclear power is an impressive technology. By producing heat through the process of fission, nuclear reactors boil water and produce pressurised steam, which then spins large turbine blades that drive generators to produce electricity. When permitted to operate for their full life spans, nuclear power plants produce clean energy for 60 years or more. They are one of the most reliable and dependable forms of energy generation, which means that they operate day and night, 24/7, and at high capacity, with power plants producing maximum power more than 92% of the time during the year.[17] That is almost twice as much as natural gas and coal and nearly three times more than wind and solar farms.

It is impossible to oversell the environmental credentials of nuclear energy. Consider the following. Nuclear power plants have the smallest land footprint per unit of the electricity they produce compared to all of the alternatives, producing 1,000 watts per square metre compared with 2 to 3 watts per square metre for wind and 100 watts per square metre for solar. Nuclear power plants are the most land-efficient energy source, requiring 27 times less land per unit of energy than coal and 34 times less than solar PV, which makes them incredibly good for

17 'Nuclear Power is the Most Reliable Energy Source and It's Not Even Close', *US Department of Energy* (blog), March 24, 2021 (https://www.energy.gov/ne/articles/nuclear-power-most-reliable-energy-source-and-its-not-even-close)

biodiversity[18]. They also require the least amount of resources to build, which means less mining and less need for raw materials. They have the lowest lifecycle greenhouse gas emissions of any electricity-generating source, and thanks to the energy density of uranium fuel, the waste produced by nuclear power plants is extremely small in quantity (UNECE 2021). It can also be recycled, which makes the technology even better economically and environmentally.

Wherever nuclear energy programmes are used around the world, they produce cheap electricity for consumers – Japanese electricity bills are around 40% cheaper in regions with more nuclear reactors, and countries that derive a lot of electricity from nuclear power plants, such as Hungary and France, also enjoy some of the lowest electricity prices in the EU.[19]

None of this means that policy should swing to the opposite extreme and try to actively *promote* nuclear energy. (The sensible alternative to being anti-nuclear is not to be 'pro-nuclear', but to be technology-neutral.) What it means is that Western governments should not unduly penalise and constrain nuclear energy. Our current regulatory approach, however, does precisely that. The cost and speed of building nuclear reactors differ hugely from country to country, and much of the difference is explained by differences in regulatory systems (Lights 2024).

You would think that climate activists who are worried about carbon emissions and want to phase out fossil fuels would be in favour of building fleets of civilisation-powering, low-carbon nuclear power plants. But you would be wrong. It does not

18 R. Deakin 'Nuclear power: small is mighty', *UK Research and Innovation* (blog), 10 February 2023 (https://www.ukri.org/blog/voices-nuclear-power-small-is-mighty/).

19 'Electricity price statistics', *Eurostat*, October 2024 (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Electricity_price_statistics)

fit their ideology. Achieving real solutions to climate change stands in the way of their real goal, which is degrowth. Hence anti-nuclear activists parading as 'environmentalists' have demonised nuclear technology for decades, with well-funded and highly organised groups such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth leading the charge. They have successfully branded it as environmentally damaging and dangerous, despite masses of evidence to the contrary.

Thanks to immense efforts from rational voices in recent years, coupled with an energy crisis that caught everyone's attention across the Western world, nuclear power is experiencing a revival, but for decades it was successfully portrayed as the bogeyman of energy sources. From Germany to Japan, power plants that have operated without any problems for decades have been shut down as a result of overblown fears (although Japan has started to reverse this policy), and in some countries, such as Australia, there is a ban on building nuclear power plants. So convincing has anti-nuclear messaging been that when virtually anyone is asked what they think about nuclear energy, they will instantly say that it is dangerous, bad for the environment and hazardous because of nuclear waste. But none of these claims is true.

In reality, nuclear energy is safer than the 'renewables' wind power and hydropower. All of the meltdowns that have ever occurred – including Chernobyl, Fukushima and Three Mile Island – have resulted in fewer than a few thousand deaths. No one was killed at Three Mile Island and Fukushima; estimates for the deaths caused by Chernobyl vary, but – at most – are still in the few thousands. To put this in context with the alternatives: a similar number of lives have been lost due to wind and solar power, millions of lives are lost every year due to air pollution from fossil fuels, and hydropower is immensely more deadly; approximately 171,000 lives were lost due to the Banqiao Dam

Failure in China in 1975.[20] Yet people have not turned against hydropower the way they have against nuclear energy, because it is not as much of a threat to the degrowth agenda, since it is geographically restricted to specific regions. Nuclear energy, on the other hand, can be deployed virtually anywhere in the world.

The waste, or spent fuel, is the most well-managed byproduct of any energy industry. Not only is there an incredibly small amount of it – all the high-level nuclear waste produced in the world would fit on a single football field to a height of approximately 10 yards (Venditti 2024) – but it is stored so efficiently in storage casks that it can withstand having planes flown into it.[21]

All industries produce waste, as do our lifestyles. If the goal is to maximise efficiency and minimise waste, nuclear comes out on top. Compare nuclear waste with fossil fuel waste that is stored in the Earth's atmosphere, or the toxic waste left behind from solar panels and wind turbines that leaches into landfill sites, and it is obvious that many of us have fallen for clever branding when we conflate nuclear energy with dangerous waste.

If these groups truly cared about people and the planet, they would drop their bias against nuclear technology. Research by leading climate scientist James Hansen and NASA scientist Pushker Kharecha found that nuclear energy has saved more than two million people from early deaths from air pollution (Kharecha and Hansen 2013). The clean energy it has generated has saved 64 gigatonnes of greenhouse gas emissions – around two years' worth of total global emissions – which would have been produced by the burning of fossil fuels. As the title of their research postulates, nuclear saves lives.

20 'Typhoon Nina–Banqiao dam failure', *Britannica,* (https://www.britannica.com/event/Typhoon-Nina-Banqiao-dam-failure)

21 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BuIYFshFuI4

Many well-meaning environmentalists have been misled with frightening stories about meltdowns and waste, but the people behind this narrative have planted those fears deliberately. They don't actually want to stop climate change, they want degrowth. For example, Extinction Rebellion, an activist organisation that claimed to be about fighting climate change and of which I was once a member, argued that the 'current system' is what led to climate change, therefore the same system can't save the planet, which means that the solution is to overthrow the system.

If it is a difficult concept to grasp, that is because the branding is so good. Activists and NGOs have been portrayed as heroes across popular media for decades. If Greenpeace, with its turnover of millions of pounds, was a corporation, people would feel very differently about their campaigning, which continues to target life-saving technologies such as nuclear energy and gene-editing worldwide, including in some of the poorest regions of the world where it is needed by some of the world's most vulnerable people.

The core tenet of the degrowth agenda is to reduce consumption, both to consume fewer goods and to use less technology. Intermittent energy fits in with this narrative and is therefore embraced by the wider movement, although there are some more radical degrowthers who are against large-scale energy consumption altogether, including wind and solar power. Anti-nuclear activists worry that abundant reliable energy will lead to continued consumption and therefore continued capitalism, which is the 'system' they want to bring down. They ignore entirely the fact that increased consumption of energy is the reason so many of us have been able to escape poverty and that human prosperity rises in line with increased access to energy. While millions of people still live in energy poverty, the West is making a tragic mistake of allowing policy to be informed by degrowth ideology. A classic case study is Germany's decision to close all of its nuclear power plants, putting thousands of workers

out of jobs, increasing reliance on burning coal and leading to some of the most expensive electricity prices in Europe, which has led to an exodus of manufacturers, which economists are calling deindustrialisation.

The greatest irony of all is that the same organisations that protest climate change argue that we need to 'follow the science' on climate while simultaneously ignoring the evidence for how essential nuclear energy is to this fight. To truly protect the planet, stop climate change, and protect all life on our planet, we need to aim for energy abundance and continued growth, not idolise scarcity and poverty. To do this, we need to truly follow the science and use more technology, not less. Again, none of this means that nuclear energy should be eligible for any kind of government favouritism. But it should be given a fair chance to pass the market test, and where it is given such a chance, it usually passes with flying colours.

Smoking

Christopher Snowdon

The risks of smoking could hardly be better known. Combustible tobacco is estimated to kill 80,000 people each year in the UK alone. Smoking has been recognised as the leading cause of lung cancer since the 1950s, and cigarette packs have had health warnings on them since the 1960s. These have been followed by educational campaigns, graphic warnings, plain packaging, a smoking ban and a host of other policies designed to deter anyone from ever taking up the habit.

Despite public understanding of the risks being almost universal and despite exceptional levels of regulation and taxation, it is estimated that 1.1 billion people smoke cigarettes globally, including six million in the UK. It would appear that a large minority of the population are unresponsive to 'public health' messaging and continue to consume nicotine in the most dangerous way because they enjoy it or are addicted to it or both.

Fortunately, there are now a number of low-risk alternatives available to people who want to avoid the health hazards associated with cigarettes but want to consume nicotine. They include e-cigarettes (vapes), snus, nicotine pouches and heated tobacco. Not only have these products been proven to be much less harmful than smoking, but they have substantially reduced smoking rates in countries where they have become popular. Last year, Sweden became the first country to become technically 'smoke-free' (i.e. with a smoking rate below 5%) thanks to the use

of snus. In Japan, cigarette sales almost halved between 2016 and 2023 as heated tobacco products became popular (Cummings et al. 2024). In Britain, where vaping is commonplace, the smoking rate has nearly halved since 2011 and the rate among 18–24-year-olds – who used to be the most likely to smoke but are now the most likely to vape – has dropped by 60% (ONS 2024).

You would think that anti-smoking campaigners would be delighted to find something that gets millions of people to stop smoking and offers an alternative to those who otherwise would have started. But you would be wrong. Although some 'public health' professionals have embraced reduced-risk products, the response from the global tobacco control movement has been suspicious and hostile from the start. E-cigarettes have been banned in 34 countries, snus is banned in all EU countries except Sweden, and some countries have even banned nicotine pouches, which contain no tobacco and are as safe as a nicotine product is ever likely to get. The World Health Organisation encourages member states to subject vapes and heated tobacco to heavy regulation or total prohibition.

In the USA, where vapes are perversely classed as tobacco products, harm reduction is seen as a threat to orthodox tobacco control. The 2024 Surgeon General's report claimed that 'true harm reduction' can only come from a further clampdown on e-cigarettes (US Department of Health and Human Services 2024: 783). In Australia, the sale of all e-cigarettes is banned, including those that do not contain nicotine. Even the UK, widely regarded as a world leader in tobacco harm reduction, has started to go backwards. Its Tobacco and Vapes Bill proposes banning people born after 1 January 2009 from not only ever buying cigarettes but also from ever buying heated tobacco products, snus, shisha and cigarette papers. It also promises a new clampdown on vapes and nicotine pouches, although the exact measures have yet to be announced.

All of this has been actively promoted by pressure groups and academics claiming to be acting in the name of 'public health'. Why? The veteran tobacco control campaigner Dr Michael Siegel, who supports harm reduction strategies, believes it is a classic case of Not Invented Here Syndrome. Writing in 2015, he said:

> ... the concept of using a cigarette-like device that delivers nicotine without using or burning tobacco as a smoking cessation strategy came from *outside* the tobacco control movement. We did not think of it. We did not develop it. It was essentially thrust upon us suddenly and without warning. And it is precisely *because* the strategy appeared to be so successful, with exponential growth of the market, that we felt threatened. It is *because* this technology has the potential to completely transform the nicotine market by producing drastic reductions in combustible tobacco use and an unprecedented improvement in the public's health that we feel a threat to our status. After all, we have been working for decades to reduce smoking and now suddenly *outsiders* come along and develop a new strategy that appears to be more effective, or at least as effective, as the strategies that we developed.[22]

By the time e-cigarettes went mainstream in 2012, tobacco control academics were openly talking about 'endgame strategies' (e.g. Thomson et al. 2012). The institutional preference was for increasingly draconian laws on the sale and consumption of cigarettes until the smoking rate was low enough for full prohibition to be politically feasible. Options included incrementally reducing the number of shops that could sell cigarettes, steadily restricting the quantity of tobacco that was allowed to be sold, reducing the amount of nicotine in cigarettes to almost zero, and gradually increasing the age at which

22 M. Siegel 'Why are Anti-Smoking Groups and Agencies Lying to the Public About E-Cigarettes: A Political History Explanation', The Rest of the Story (blog), 2015 (http://tobaccoanalysis.blogspot.com/2015/09/why-are-anti-smoking-groups-and.html).

cigarettes could be bought. Some anti-smoking campaigners warned that 'a move towards prohibition is misguided, for both political and practical reasons' (Hanauer 2009), and even the most enthusiastic prohibitionists acknowledged that people would need access to 'non-smoked nicotine delivery devices' if the 'endgame' was to have any success (Daynard 2009).

All of the endgame policies focused on the supply side and there was a recognition that they were likely to cause unintended consequences such as 'increased smuggling, theft, illegal sales and short-to-medium-term aggravation of some social inequalities' (Thomson et al. 2010). Skip forward a few years and we can see the rising prevalence of these problems in countries that have very high tobacco taxes – most dramatically in Australia, which has the highest cigarette taxes in the world and has banned vapes, heated tobacco, snus and nicotine pouches, and is now in the midst of a violent 'tobacco turf war'. Until recently, New Zealand had a higher smoking rate than Australia but that all changed when the Kiwis legalised vapes in 2020. New Zealand's smoking rate has since halved and is now just 6.8%, nearly as low as that of snus-friendly Sweden and one of the lowest in the world.

Despite the obvious success of reduced-risk nicotine products in numerous countries, the bulk of tobacco control activists remain wedded to the neo-prohibitionist model and are opposed to the harm reduction approach. A free market solution has encroached on what they see as their turf, but it is not necessarily a solution to what they see as the real problem. If you take issue with people enjoying themselves, they are not the solution. If you are against habit-forming activities, they are not the solution. If you want to destroy the tobacco industry, they are not the solution. And if you just don't like anything that looks like smoking, vapes and heated tobacco are not the solution. They are only the solution if you want to improve the health of the nation in a pragmatic

way that does not require coercion or government spending. For everyone else, there is an endgame plan that you can stick to, regardless of the consequences.

Food

Zion Lights

For thousands of years, humans have used breeding techniques to modify organisms by crossing compatible plants and selecting desirable traits from their offspring, such as sturdy roots or disease resistance. Many types of food and livestock have been selectively bred to enhance specific characteristics. In the last few decades, advancements in biotechnology have enabled scientists to directly modify the DNA of microorganisms, crops and animals, which achieves the desired traits without lengthy and often inefficient traditional breeding programmes.

Now, almost all the plants we cultivate, including corn, wheat, rice, and even Christmas trees, have been genetically modified through breeding to last longer, look better, taste sweeter and/or grow more vigorously in dry soil. We call these Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs).

Since the crops were first planted two decades ago, humans have consistently consumed genetically engineered foods and worn genetically engineered clothing, and there has never been a single case of illness as a result. The scientific consensus is that foods derived from genetically modified crops are as safe to eat as any other food.[23] GMOs also provide environmental benefits by promoting more sustainable agricultural practices, reducing

23 'Is it safe to eat GM crops?', *The Royal Society,* May 2016 (https://royalsociety.org/news-resources/projects/gm-plants/is-it-safe-to-eat-gm-crops/)

agrochemical dependence and contributing to food security. So why do so many people feel that gene-editing techniques are bad, and where do their fears come from?

Despite having lived with them for years already, public opinion began to turn against GM technology in the 1990s thanks to concerted efforts by NGOs and activists to convince people that biotechnology was a threat. In 1996, during the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) crisis, which was commonly known as Mad Cow Disease, Greenpeace argued that Monsanto's transgenic soy, 'mad soy alert', was also a risk to human health.

These arguments played into the concerns of a broader political and cultural movement in the second half of the 20th century, which was characterised by growing suspicion and resistance towards governments, corporations and globalisation. As people lost faith in the authorities around the handling of BSE, activists were able to leverage these feelings to demonise GM technology, anchoring on the idea that those in power were 'messing around' with our food, at great risk and cost to human health.

Anti-GMO activists were successful in lobbying companies directly to put them off developing or investing in biotechnology and influencing government policy. The French government, which was supportive of agricultural biotechnology at the time, was compelled to revisit its stance. French biotechnician Marcel Kuntz described this period as 'the defining crisis for the fate of GM plants in Europe… One of the reasons being that the "mad cow" crisis was associated in the public perception with "modern" agriculture and "unnatural" practice' (Kuntz 2014).

In 1992, an English professor at Boston College, Paul Lewis, coined the term 'Frankenfood' to describe GMOs. In a letter to the *New York Times*, Lewis wrote, 'If they want to sell us Frankenfood, perhaps it's time to gather the villagers, light

some torches and head to the castle'.[24] Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth ran with this messaging. The story was built on that of Victor Frankenstein: beware the dodgy scientists doing unnatural things to human lives.

Oddly – and instructively – the 'fish-tomato' hybrid became a core graphic to demonstrate the Frankenstein-like danger of GMOs, depicting a tomato with fins or fish-eyes, but no such GM product actually existed. The Flavr Savr tomato – the first genetically engineered food available to purchase in grocery stores – was not a 'Frankenfood', as it had an introduced copy of one of its own genes to keep it fresh for longer. So where did the fish-tomato caricatures come from? A separate experiment that used a gene from the winter flounder to make a frost-tolerant tomato never left the lab. Nevertheless, it became a rallying cry for activists. The idea of mixing genes like this led to feelings of revulsion.

Then came the newly released film *Jurassic Park*, which featured a genetic experiment gone awry, and further developed the message: those in power are playing with your health to make money.

Environmental activists often suffer from the logical fallacy known as the 'appeal to nature', which is the idea that 'natural' things are inherently good and better for us, while unnatural things – those that have been influenced or changed by humans – are inherently bad. It is a vague perspective, since arguably humans are themselves 'natural' and cannot exist without impacting the world around us, but what is important here is not the logic (or lack thereof) of the fallacy, but the feelings behind it,

24 'Geneticists latest discovery: Public fear of frankenfood', *The New York Times*, 28 June 1992 (https://www.nytimes.com/1992/06/28/us/geneticists-latest-discovery-public-fear-of-frankenfood.html?pagewanted=all)

which tie into the idea of the land being a natural or pure entity that has been harmed by the presence of humans.

For similar reasons, activists are often against industrialised agriculture, which they blame for deteriorating food quality, outcompeting small farmers and damaging the environment. Biotechnology also symbolises the negative aspects of globalisation: the destruction of local cultures and economies and the trend of commodifying everything. Essentially, GMOs are seen as supporting the capitalist system, which these groups are against.

This perspective was summarised succinctly by former Greenpeace France director Bruno Rebelle, whose opinions of GMOs presented at EU events directly influenced policy:

> We are not afraid of GMOs. We are only convinced that it is the wrong solution … GMOs may be a wonderful solution for a certain type of society. But it is precisely the kind of society we do not want. (Kuntz 2014: 165)

Ironically, the research that produced GMOs did not begin with large multinationals but with small labs at academic startups. Eventually, a few larger firms (like Monsanto) became involved. This was also seen negatively, as 'The Man' – faceless wealthy corporation – getting involved with our food.

Activists attacked on all fronts. As well as lobbying companies and governments, they destroyed experimental agroecological trials, making investment in biotechnology risky and expensive. There was worldwide renunciation of the cultivation of GMO crops, with only a few countries as exceptions. A difference can be seen in an area that activists did not target – medical biotechnology – for which public support remains high – in the 57-91% range in the US and EU – while support for food

biotechnology is on average 30 percentage points lower (Weldon and Laycock 2009).

Activist fearmongering has had tragic consequences for the world's poorest people, as demonstrated by the case study of Golden Rice. Lack of vitamin A is the world's leading preventable cause of childhood blindness, especially common in Africa and Southeast Asia. Every year, up to 500,000 children go blind due to vitamin A deficiency, and half of them die within 12 months of losing their sight.[25] Scientists developed a simple solution: add beta carotene to ordinary rice. Dubbed Golden Rice, a single small bowl of around 100g can provide the recommended nutrient intake of vitamin A for children and adults (Dubock 2019). In many countries, children consume only rice daily, which means that this genetically modified rice could save millions of young lives from malnutrition, hunger and blindness.

Anti-GMO protesters disagreed. In 2013, activists destroyed crops on an experimental field trial of Golden Rice in the Philippines, arguing in favour of diversity of diet instead.[26] The reality is that people who live on three bowls of rice a day simply do not have access to other foods in the underdeveloped regions in which they live. Converting a single crop is much faster and easier than trying to implement and sustain a diversity of diets across vast geographic areas.

Sadly, although Golden Rice was developed over 20 years ago, it has not been readily adopted by the countries that need it most.

25 'Vitamin A deficiency', *World Health Organization* (https://www.who.int/data/nutrition/nlis/info/vitamin-a-deficiency)

26 'Golden rice GM trial vandalised in the Philippines', *BBC*, 9 August 2013 (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-23632042)

In 2016, a third of living Nobel laureates, including James Watson, who co-discovered the basic structure of DNA, signed an open letter to Greenpeace and world leaders, calling the NGO's scare campaign a 'crime against humanity' and calling on them to stop opposing Golden Rice. They wrote:

> Organizations opposed to modern plant breeding, with Greenpeace at their lead ... have misrepresented their risks, benefits, and impacts, and supported the criminal destruction of approved field trials and research projects.
>
> Scientific and regulatory agencies around the world have repeatedly and consistently found crops and foods improved through biotechnology to be as safe as, if not safer than those derived from any other method of production. There has never been a single confirmed case of a negative health outcome for humans or animals from their consumption. Their environmental impacts have been shown repeatedly to be less damaging to the environment, and a boon to global biodiversity.[27]

If the true aims of anti-GMO activists were to benefit humans and nature, they would have embraced biotechnology. But the technology does not fit in with their ideology. They continue to lobby against permissive approaches to GMO to this day and have spread their scare stories worldwide. As a changing climate now threatens food security, biotechnology may well be our best resource for continuing to feed millions of people, address poverty and prevent food systems from collapsing. Early experts on food technology predicted a future in which genetic engineering would solve major problems in agriculture, nutrition, sustainability and food security, but, sadly, their visions were never given a chance.

27 https://www.supportprecisionagriculture.org/nobel-laureate-gmo-letter_rjr.html

Nobody is forced to consume GMO products, and their opponents should be free to avoid and boycott them as they see fit. But they should not have the right to force their preferences on other people.

Housing

Kristian Niemietz

Britain's housing crisis and the rise of YIMBYism

Britain has a very low level of housing supply (Niemietz 2024).

Britain has fewer housing units per 1,000 people than most OECD countries: England alone would need to build another 3.4 million homes just to catch up with the EU average. To make matters worse, those housing units are also among the smallest in the OECD. This means that if we measured housing supply as the total residential floorspace per capita, the UK would be at the bottom of the OECD league table, or very close to it.

Britain also has exceptionally high housing costs, relative to income levels. We spend a greater proportion of our budgets on housing costs (actual or imputed) than people in almost any other OECD country.

One does not need a degree in economics to figure out that those two facts – low supply, high prices – are not unconnected. Housing in Britain is expensive because there is too little of it. It may sound too simple to be true, but that really is the essence of it.

Economists who specialise in the subject have been saying this for decades (see e.g. Barker 2003; Barker 2004; CBRE 2024), in

some cases many decades (Evans 2025 [1988]; Ehrman 1990). They have pointed to overly restrictive land use planning policies and the way they interact with organised anti-development obstructionism ('NIMBYism'), as the source of the problem. The argument is now finally cutting through. In recent years, we have seen the emergence of a countermovement to NIMBYism: a pro-development 'YIMBYism'. YIMBYism can be described as a coalition of people from very different parts of the political/ideological spectrum who may not agree on much else but who do agree that Britain needs a supply-side revolution to solve its housing crisis, as well as much else. The current government appears to be sympathetic to this diagnosis as well, although whether they will actually follow through with much meaningful action remains to be seen. But it is fair to say that YIMBYism has seen a rapid ascendancy and has established itself as a recognisable political force.

One would expect that in the world of housing policy, and especially among housing correspondents, campaigners and policymakers who specialise in affordability issues, the rise of YIMBYism would be warmly welcomed. And for the most part – it has. But there have also been plenty of hostile reactions. Indeed, a number of housing commentators have built up a public profile on little else than anti-YIMBYism: denying that Britain even has a housing shortage or that the supply-side matters at all.

Anti-YIMBYism

An anti-YIMBY is not the same as a NIMBY. Anti-YIMBYs agree with YIMBYs that Britain has a housing affordability crisis, and they see it as an urgent problem that government policy has the power to address. But they are fixated on non-supply 'solutions'.

A prominent example is the economist Ian Mulheirn, who was, until recently, the chair of the board of Generation Rent, a campaign group that describes itself as 'the voice of private renters across the UK' (Generation Rent 2024). Logically, one should expect a group like that, or anyone associated with them, to be fiercely pro-YIMBY. One would be wrong. Mulheirn writes[28]:

> [W]hat nobody appears to question is whether there actually is a housing shortage. [...] [W]hat if it isn't true? My reading of the evidence suggests it isn't. [...] [T]he UK does have enough housing; housing costs are not high by the standards of the last 25 years, [...] and additional supply, while welcome, will not have much impact on house prices or housing costs.

In fairness, this does not represent the view of Generation Rent as a whole. The group has, in fact, recently begun to strike a more YIMBY-ish tone:

> [T]he more we build, the more affordable rents get – but to help those struggling the most, we need to do a lot more. [...]
>
> The evidence [...] shows a clear relationship between housebuilding and affordability. Areas where building failed to keep pace with the local population saw rents rising faster than incomes.[29]

However, Generation Rent have been around for over a decade, and if we look at their policy and campaign output before

28 Ian Mulheirn 'Part 1: Is there *really* a housing shortage?' Medium blog, 16 January 2017 (https://medium.com/@ian.mulheirn/part-1-is-there-really-a-housing-shortage-89fdc6bac4d2).

29 'Homes, not landlords, are the key to rent affordability', Generation Rent, *News*, 1 August 2024 (https://www.generationrent.org/2024/08/01/homes-not-landlords-are-the-key-to-rent-affordability/).

2024, we find almost nothing on supply-side issues.[30] The rise of YIMBYism has happened without them, and has completely passed them by.

Another example is Nick Bano, a barrister who specialises in representing private renters at the sharp end of the housing crisis, a journalist who writes on housing-related matters and author of the book *Against Landlords: How to Solve the Housing Crisis*. With a biography like that, one might expect Bano to be the perfect YIMBY. Yet he is anything but:

> The forthcoming general election is […] likely to be dominated by claims about a housing shortage and a dire need to build more homes. Housebuilding is an article of faith across the political spectrum.
>
> The evidence, however, does not support this thinking. Quite the reverse. Over the last 25 years, there has […] been a constant surplus of homes per household […]
>
> In terms of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, the UK has roughly the average number of homes per capita […]
>
> It is impossible to make a case for unique levels of housing scarcity in Britain[31]

Bano believes that the real driver of housing costs is private 'landlordism'. Landlords, he believes, simply have the power to drive up prices as they see fit, irrespective of market conditions.

30 Generation Rent 'Our Impact' (https://www.generationrent.org/about-generation-rent/#policy-wro).

31 Nick Bano 'The end of landlords: the surprisingly simple solution to the UK housing crisis', *The Guardian*, 19 March 2024 (https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2024/mar/19/end-of-landlords-surprisingly-simple-solution-to-uk-housing-crisis).

The solution, then, is not to increase the housing stock but to drive private landlords out of the market.

Another example of an anti-YIMBY commentator is Phineas Harper, a writer, curator and occasional *Guardian* contributor, who argues:

> The yimbys claim that increasing the supply of new homes relative to population growth will cause prices to fall back to affordable levels. However, the theory does not appear to work in practice. […] [W]e are […] building new homes faster than the population is growing. […] [W]e actually have more homes per capita right now than we did 50 years ago.
>
> If the yimby hunch that house values fall when the supply of new homes outstrips population growth were correct, we should have seen overall prices come down since the 1970s. In fact, Britain has experienced the exact opposite; five decades of astronomical property-price inflation. […] [I]ncreasing the supply of new homes relative to the population simply doesn't bring down prices as yimbys claim.[32]

Harper does not put forward an alternative theory of what does drive housing costs, if it is not supply – just that supply has nothing to do with it.

The housing correspondent of *The i* newspaper, Victoria Spratt, regularly presents a more carefully worded version of the same argument, hedging her bets by qualifying it some way: '[I]ncreasing the supply of housing won't **necessarily** lower prices'[33]; '[M]ore supply of homes will not **automatically** equal

32 Phineas Harper 'Yimbys hear this – simply building more homes won't solve our housing crisis', *The Guardian*, 29 September 2024 (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/sep/29/yimbys-building-homes-solve-housing-crisis).

33 Twitter/X, 9 July 2024, https://x.com/Victoria_Spratt status/1811096310990176576

more affordable homes'[34]; 'More supply of homes [...] will not **automatically** and, crucially, **quickly** make housing more affordable'[35]; 'Britain's house price inflation was not **only** caused by supply-side problems'[36], 'Spratt observes that the problem is not **simply** about supply[37], etc [emphasis added].

Spratt never literally says that we should not bother building houses, because supply is irrelevant anyway. But emphasis and context matter. As a package, and given the context in which this debate takes place, Spratt's interventions still end up promoting supply-side scepticism.

The reader may, at this stage, wonder: why does any of this matter? Most housing policy commentators are clearly closer to the YIMBY end of the spectrum than to the anti-YIMBY end. Anti-YIMBYs have managed to attract attention, but they have not managed to fundamentally shift the terms of the debate: indeed, part of their appeal is that non-supply explanations are now seen as 'heterodox'.

This is where recent evidence from New Zealand comes into play.

34 Twitter/X, 11 August 2024, https://x.com/Victoria_Spratt/status/1822587454655795352

35 Twitter/X, 14 August 2024, https://x.com/Victoria_Spratt/status/1823813985868898624

36 Twitter/X, 11 October 2024, https://x.com/Victoria_Spratt/status/1844710189171106206

37 Anoosh Chakelian 'How the housing crisis shaped modern Britain', *The New Statesman*, 11 October 2022 (https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2022/10/housing-crisis-shaped-modern-britain).

Evidence from New Zealand

In 2016, the city of Auckland implemented a planning reform called 'upzoning', which meant near-automatic planning permission for a range of (re-)development projects across most of the city. Local YIMBY campaigners would, no doubt, argue that these reforms did not go far enough, and they would have a long list of additional demands, but nonetheless – Auckland does represent a real-world example of a YIMBY-inspired planning reform. Empirical studies have since shown that upzoning has led to an increase in housing supply and a deceleration in rent inflation, leaving rent levels substantially lower than they would otherwise have been (Donovan and Maltman 2024). The YIMBY position has thus been vindicated, and it has become a near-consensus among economists. According to a recent survey among the members of the New Zealand Association of Economists, 95% of them agree that land use restrictions have a negative impact on housing supply and affordability.

But there are, of course, always some dissenters: in economics, there is no such thing as unanimity. In particular, two New Zealand economists have written a polemical response to the studies on upzoning, mostly quibbling with minor methodological issues that had already been addressed in the papers themselves (ibid.).

If this were a purely academic debate, this would not be a problem. Especially in areas where there is so much agreement, dissent – even if it is nitpicky and over the top – is a valuable antidote to groupthink. The problem, though, is that it is *not* a purely academic debate. It takes place in a particular policy context and feeds directly into it.

The YIMBY position may represent a near-consensus among economists, and it may be the dominant position in the world of housing policy commentary. But YIMBYism has little influence outside of those bubbles, and as a political force, it is certainly no match for a strong NIMBY lobby. This means that YIMBY reforms take extraordinary amounts of political willpower.

Again, supply-side sceptics are not NIMBYs. It is not their intention to furnish NIMBY campaigns with ammunition. But that is precisely what they end up doing, whether they want it or not. Their assertion that housebuilding has no benefit is grist to the NIMBY mill. NIMBY campaigners will gratefully pick up such claims and weaponise them for their purposes.

This is what currently seems to be happening in New Zealand. Rather than learning from Auckland's success and emulating it, housing policymakers elsewhere in the country are holding back, in part because they give undue weight to the critics of the upzoning studies (Donovan & Maltman 2024: 6-7). As Donovan and Maltman (2024: 32) explain:

> assigning equal merit to 'both sides' of the debate on zoning reforms strikes us as a false equivalency. […] [I]t is unreasonable to delay […] action on the pretence the 'jury is out' on zoning reform. Rather, the jury is in: Auckland's upzoning worked.

In other words, anti-YIMBYs may be a minority among housing commentators, but what they say still matters, because this is an area where a polemical blog post can count for more than three peer-reviewed studies. It is therefore worth highlighting just how flawed their analysis is, and how inadequate their proposed alternative, non-supply 'solutions' are.

Anti-YIMBYism: flawed diagnosis, flawed 'solutions'

Anti-YIMBYs are right when they say that there are more housing units than households in the UK. It is also a meaningless truism. The population will always squeeze into whatever housing stock there is, however inadequate. If an earthquake destroyed a quarter of the housing stock (and if it was not rebuilt), this does not mean that a quarter of the population would be permanently homeless. Rather, people would move in with relatives, and rents and house prices would soar even more, making it profitable to convert underused rooms, basements, attics etc into self-contained housing units. The ratio of housing units to households would revert to somewhere near the pre-earthquake level, so on this measure, everything would be fine, even though housing conditions would clearly be much worse than before.

Anti-YIMBYs are also right when they say that the number of housing units per 1,000 people has gone up since the 1970s. However, the UK is a much richer country than it was in the 1970s. We know, empirically, that as countries grow richer, people demand more housing space, and when that extra housing space is not provided, they will bid up the price of whatever housing space there is. Britain has a housing stock that would be perfectly adequate for a middle-income country. It is just not adequate for a country of Britain's income level.

Finally, anti-YIMBYs are right when they say that Britain does not have a *uniquely* low level of housing supply. It is not unique: one can find other examples of high-income countries with very constrained housing stock. It is just that these countries also suffer from housing affordability problems similar to Britain's. Far from weakening the YIMBY case, such international comparisons strengthen it.

Since anti-YIMBYs start from a false diagnosis, it is unsurprising that their alternative 'solutions' to the housing crisis are nothing of the sort. One 'solution' that frequently comes up is rent controls. Rent control, though, is another issue on which the jury have reached a verdict. There are around 200 empirical studies on the subject. They show, as conclusively as economic literature can realistically get, that these controls reduce the supply and the quality of rental housing, reduce residential mobility, lead to a misallocation of the housing stock, drive up housing costs elsewhere in the sector and lead to a decline in construction rates (Kholodilin 2024).

Another 'solution' that anti-YIMBYs sometimes trumpet is an increase in the share of public or social housing, which can be achieved without additional construction (i.e. by transferring private housing into the public or social sector). In this analysis, Britain does not suffer from a *general* shortage of housing but, more narrowly, from a shortage of non-market housing. This argument fails for the simple reason that Britain has no such sector-specific shortage. Social housing accounts for one in six housing units, which is more than twice the EU average.

One could make a case for increasing the stock of social housing by simply building more of them. But this leads us back to square one. The construction of social housing runs up against the same planning constraints and the same organised NIMBYism as the construction of any other type of housing.

Conclusion

In 1872, Friedrich Engels wrote a short book called *Zur Wohnungsfrage*, later published in English as *The Housing Question*, which was about the housing problems of working-

class people in the Victorian era. Except – it was not really. Engels discussed a number of proposals made by other housing reformers, dismissed them, and concluded that the real problem was capitalism. His 'solution', then, was the same as his solution for everything else: a socialist revolution.

In other words, although the book had 'housing' in the title, Engels was not really interested in the specifics of the housing market. He used the issue as just another excuse to bash capitalism and reason himself to the same place he would have ended up from any other starting position. Today's anti-YIMBY housing commentators are the heirs of this style of reasoning. They claim to write about housing, but they are not really. They use the issue as just another excuse to bash 'neoliberalism', and they oppose YIMBYism because YIMBYism is a solution to the housing crisis that is perfectly compatible with a capitalist economy.

YIMBYism is not just one possible solution among many, though. There is no feasible solution to the UK's housing crisis that does not involve a major expansion of the UK's housing stock. By rejecting it, anti-YIMBYs just end up shoring up NIMBY power and perpetuating the housing crisis.

Conclusion

> 'Your proposition may be good,
> But let's have one thing understood:
> Whatever it is, I'm against it.'
>
> – Groucho Marx

All of the case studies involve seemingly sincere activists eschewing practical solutions to problems they have spent years trying to tackle. Instead, they remain wedded to an approach that is inferior at best and obsolete at worst. They are effectively undermining their own cause. Why do they do it?

An economist looking for self-interested motives would not come away empty-handed. No doubt the wind energy companies lobby against biomass, and the biomass industry lobbies against nuclear. The pharmaceutical industry has certainly lobbied against e-cigarettes (Paun 2019), and it would not be surprising if there are vested interests lobbying against Wegovy today. Moreover, there are institutional interests. Who needs a legion of academics and bureaucrats working on obesity and tobacco control if the problem can be solved by the market?

There is some truth in this, but it only takes us so far. It would be lazy and inaccurate to dismiss all the pressure groups discussed in this paper as 'shills'. And even if some of them have a conflict of interest, it would not mean that they are insincere in their beliefs. For every campaigner engaged in political action against GM foods and nuclear energy, there are probably a thousand people sitting at home who share the same views (and who are nevertheless concerned about world hunger and climate change).

And while vapes and Wegovy might threaten the job security of some people working in public health, building more houses and embracing nuclear power would not be an existential threat to the Campaign to Protect Rural England and Greenpeace.

Perhaps it is simply a question of ignorance. It could be argued that opposition to nuclear power, e-cigarettes and GM food, in particular, is due to activists being misled about the scientific evidence. There is certainly plenty of misinformation surrounding these technologies. The public greatly overestimates the risks of e-cigarettes and nuclear energy, for example. But that is largely thanks to the activists themselves. No one has done more to spread unfounded scare stories about nuclear energy and GM crops than environmental activists, and most of the fearmongering about vaping stems from public health academics, anti-smoking groups and public health agencies (although less so in the UK than in most countries). If activists are misled, it is because they have misled themselves.

Where does this leave us? The most charitable reading is that the pursuit of costly and unrealistic answers to problems that have pragmatic solutions is a variant of the sunk cost fallacy and a form of conceptual conservatism. Campaigners have spent so long travelling in a certain direction that they feel their efforts will have been wasted if they take a short cut or turn around. Changing your mind can be difficult, especially when it puts your whole identity – and even your career – at risk. One of the authors of this report, Zion Lights, was brave enough to change her mind, not about the problem but about the solution. She is now a pariah among her old comrades at Extinction Rebellion for supporting the pragmatic solution of nuclear energy to tackle climate change rather than the wholly impractical 'solution' of reverting to a Dark Ages economy with added communism.

A more cynical interpretation is that the opponents of pragmatic solutions were always more interested in the institutional preference than in solving the problem. In other words, they had a goal in mind and went looking for a cause to justify it. This, I think, applies to some, but not all, of the campaigners discussed in this paper. Furthermore, there is a well-known tendency among pressure groups to become more extreme over time. When a group succeeds in shifting public opinion and the government introduces the legislation it has asked for, its members are reluctant to pack up their tent and congratulate them on a job well done. Instead, they step up their demands. Moderate members leave, and more zealous members join. The result is that the group deviates from its original purpose and may even start taking positions that are antithetical to it.

If you had told anti-smoking campaigners in the 1980s that the tobacco industry would one day produce nicotine products without the smoke that would be so popular with consumers that cigarettes were likely to become obsolete in the 21st century, they would have bitten your hand off. If you had told temperance campaigners that the alcohol industry would spend huge amounts of money developing alcohol-free products that consumers really liked and that it would spend even more money advertising them, they would have thought they were dreaming.

What changed? In the intervening decades, a smoke-free world became synonymous with destroying the tobacco industry and, seeing the success of the anti-smoking lobby, other campaign groups created bogeymen of Big Alcohol and Big Food. When, in 2006, a journalist asked the veteran anti-smoking activist Stanton Glantz what his ultimate goal was, he was surprised by the answer: '… he didn't say, "to have fewer people get sick and die from smoking." The first words out of his mouth were,

"To destroy the tobacco industry."[38] Needless to say, Glantz is now one of the world's most fanatical opponents of e-cigarettes, heated tobacco and other reduced-risk nicotine products.

There is no single answer for why single-issue campaigners reject innovative solutions. Activists join pressure groups for different reasons. Extinction Rebellion, for example, may be attractive if you want the government to show more urgency in cutting greenhouse gas emissions, but it may also appeal to you if you dislike consumerism and want degrowth. A person might join an anti-tobacco or anti-alcohol group because they feel passionately about other people's health, but they might equally be a fun sponge who objects to people enjoying themselves.

Or they might simply be opposed to multinational companies making lots of money. It is notable how many of the activists in our case studies define themselves as being anti-industry. Big Food, Big Tobacco, Big Alcohol, Big Pharma and even Big Farmer are the villains of the piece. There may be perfectly good reasons to object to the behaviour of certain businesses, but once an activist develops an animus for an industry, there is a tendency to oppose anything that might benefit it. Building more houses becomes suspect because it would line the pockets of housing developers. Tackling obesity with weight-loss drugs becomes objectionable not only because it would increase the profits of Big Pharma but also because it would 'let junk food companies off the hook'.

As Kristian Niemietz has written elsewhere, 'anti-producerism' is usually a cover for anti-consumerism[39]. Focusing on the firms

38 J. Nocero 'If It's Good for Philip Morris, Can It Also Be Good for Public Health?' *New York Times*, 18 June 2006 (https://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/18/magazine/18tobacco.html).

39 K. Niemietz (2024) The case against anti-producerism (IEA blog) (https://iea.org.uk/the-case-against-anti-producerism/)

that produce a supposedly demerit good removes agency from the buyer and places the blame on the seller. Taken to its logical yet preposterous conclusion, this leads to seemingly educated people claiming that just 57 companies are responsible for 80% of global greenhouse gas emissions (unsurprisingly, all of them sell fossil fuels or cement). This is silly, and the climate activists know it. Their problem is not with companies digging up fossil fuels but with ordinary people using them to heat their homes and drive their cars.

At the heart of the dispute between pragmatists and idealists are conflicting visions of the good life. Some environmentalists want to enjoy the benefits of modernity without pumping so many greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Other environmentalists romanticise the pre-industrial world of organic farming and minimal consumption. Some public health campaigners are happy for adults to use mild stimulants or intoxicants but would like to reduce the risks associated with them. Others see them as vices to be eradicated. Despite having very different ideas of what the final destination is, they appear to be homogenous when they are moving in the same direction. It is only when a new road opens up that you can tell them apart.

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