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THE OIL INDUSTRY - A WHIPPING BOY FOR A WORLD OUT OF CONTROL?

Cheap energy, notably oil and to a lesser extent gas and coal, have brought the world unprecedented benefits in terms of living standards, life expectancy and quality of life. The burning of fossil fuels has given each of us the equivalent of 19 full time slaves without the need to house, cloth, feed and look after their general welfare. It was said that the Roman Empire was afloat on the sweat of the people that Rome had enslaved. Today we do not need to worry about the morality of slavery but nevertheless we do worry. Gradually increasing carbon dioxide levels linked to gradually increasing world ambient temperatures suggest that the activities of the human race may be destabilising the climate in an uncontrolled experiment. When looking round for someone to blame, the oil industry, because of its size, provides an obvious target especially since it supplies products which, when burned, yield carbon dioxide.

In the last 200 years the population of the globe has increased from 1 billion to 6 billion. In recent times, though, there seems to be a general correlation between improving living standards and a decrease in population growth. Cohen (1998), has shown that there is an intimate linkage between population, energy consumption, the environment and the prevailing culture. It is argued that the continued exploitation of fossil fuels provides the only practical way to raise living standards, stabilise population levels and develop economically attractive alternatives for generating energy from renewable sources such as wind, waves and sunlight. We must make the most of the opportunity since fossil fuels are finite resources and with the increasing population levels are unlikely to meet demand over the next 20 to 30 years. Campbell (1997) suggests that oil production will peak before 2010 at approximately 80 million barrels/day and gas at 35 million barrels of oil equivalent/day some 10 years later. Ross (1998) concludes that by 2025 the world will require, in addition to the equivalent of 50 million barrels from renewables, a minimum of 200 million barrels per day of oil equivalent energy to be delivered by coal, oil and gas. This is a 50% higher level of fossil fuel burn than today and, if Campbell is right, very difficult or impossible to achieve.

We need to take action now. A recent paper in Nature by Parry et al (1998) shows, even if emissions were restricted to a greater extent than Kyoto, we will continue to experience global warming and climate change. We need to use the bounty of fossil fuels to ameliorate the worst effects of climate change, develop greater energy efficiency and new sources of energy. Finally, the real problem of the rapidly increasing global population can only be tackled by giving every person on the globe a stake in its future through a spread of democracy, a continued improvement in living standards particularly in the poorest countries and a realisation that in this, as in everything, individual choices do matter.