

# 'Polluter elite' needs to act first on climate change

April 14 2021, by Andy Dunne

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Among other recommendations the report calls for frequent flyer levies to curb emissions. Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

A new report by the Cambridge Sustainability Commission on Scaling Behavior Change calls on policymakers to target the UK's 'polluter elite'

to trigger a shift to more sustainable behavior, and provide affordable, available low-carbon alternatives to poorer households.

While efforts to address the [climate crisis](#) requires us all to change our behaviors, the responsibility is not evenly shared. Evidence reviewed by the Cambridge Commission shows that over the period 1990–2015, nearly half of the growth in absolute global emissions was due to the richest 10%, with the wealthiest 5% alone contributing over a third (37%).

In the year when the UK hosts COP26, and while the government continues to reward some of Britain's biggest polluters through tax credits, the Commission report shows why this is precisely the wrong way to meet the UK's [climate](#) targets.

Professor Lorraine Whitmarsh, environmental psychologist at the University of Bath and Director of the Center for Climate Change and Social Transformations at Cardiff University, who was one of the 31 Commissioners who contributed to the report explained: "This report is critical in highlighting the importance of fairness in designing [climate change policies](#)—the public will only accept policies that don't unfairly penalize lower income groups and those working in polluting industries.

"We need policies that target the most polluting activities, like flying and diet, and the 'polluting elite' with the highest carbon footprint. This includes policies like frequent flyer levies, and incentives for healthy diets and home insulation, which curb pollution but also help improve wellbeing across society."

Today's report recommends that the wealthiest citizens—the 'polluter elite' – must make the most dramatic changes to their lifestyles to keep the 1.5C target alive. To meet this target, the richest 1% of the global population needs to reduce their emissions by a factor of at least 30 by

2030, while the poorest 50% of humanity could increase their emissions by three-times their current level.

It shows that a combination of efforts to dramatically reduce the carbon footprints of the richest and to build affordable and low carbon infrastructures around housing, transport and energy for poorer households offers the best way forward. It goes on to say that, far from being competing approaches, changes to individual behavior and systemic change are linked and can be positively self-reinforcing.

The Commission found that alongside shifts in policy, service provision and technological innovation, far-reaching changes in lifestyles are also required if we are to avoid dangerous levels of global heating. After a long period of neglect, sustainable behavior change is now considered an essential element of reaching ambitious climate goals, with governments including it as part of their climate policy initiatives to meet net-zero by 2050.

The Commission addressed what have been deeply divided views about how best to achieve carbon cuts, between those concerned about making individuals responsible for emissions they cannot control, and others who suggest climate targets will not be reached without action by households and individuals. It found that transition to a low carbon economy needs to be accelerated and deepened, and for that to happen social 'buy-in' is key: a sense that this is a collective effort to deal with an existential threat.

The Commission also concludes that the debate about behavior change needs to move on from looking at what individuals and households do, to dealing with the causes of over-consumption of carbon. This includes factors ranging from excessive working to efforts to control the bombardment of advertising glamourising frequent air travel, large cars and large houses.

For this reason, the Commission's report suggests a series of intervention points for scaling change. These include immediate steps to target the elites leading high emission lifestyles, and to develop new infrastructure to make low-carbon choices easier for poor households through measures targeting behavior hotspots around travel, energy, housing and food such as:

- frequent flyer levies
- bans on selling and promoting SUVs and other high polluting vehicles
- reversing the recent announcement to cut green grants for homes and electric cars
- building just transitions by supporting electric public transport and community energy schemes.

Medium to longer term goals identified by the Commission include a re-balancing of institutions to sever ties between polluting industries and our political system, through both party donations and revolving doors, scaling up citizen-led climate action through Citizen Assemblies and democratic engagement, and challenging dominant trends around a five-day working week and unpaid care work.

**More information:** Changing our ways? Behaviour change and the climate crisis. [www.rapidtransition.org/wp-con ... ur-change-report.pdf](http://www.rapidtransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/ur-change-report.pdf)

Provided by University of Bath

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