



Heads in the Sand? Or, Why Don't Governments Talk about Peak Oil?

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There is a train crash about to happen from an energy point of view. But politicians everywhere seem to have entirely missed the scale of the problem... [G]overnments and multilateral agencies have failed to recognize the imminence and scale of the global oil supply crunch, and most of them remain completely unprepared for its consequences.¹

Anyone aware of peak oil has had to wonder (at least briefly) why the world's governments seem to be ignoring the issue. The official silence is difficult to fathom in light of the fact that the IEA has decidedly come down on the side of a likely peak by 2030, while Fatih Birol (the Agency's Chief Economist) suggests it's more likely a "plateau" from 2020, or even earlier – a claim recently published in the influential magazine, *The Economist*.² As the UK's Energy Research Council points out, "The growing popular debate on 'peak oil' has had relatively little influence on conventional policy discourse. For example, the UK government rarely mentions the issue in official publications anddoes not feel the need to hold contingency plans specifically for the eventuality of crude oil supplies peaking between now and 2020'.³ The report notes that "the UK is one of many countries that are failing to give serious consideration to this risk."⁴ But are governments really ignoring peak oil? Are they unaware of it? Or are they aware and taking steps to deal with it – even while they keep silent on it in public? Indeed, is their silence a policy choice itself?

This research note is an attempt to map out the range of reasons for governments' silence on peak oil. These reasons can be seen along a continuum, from ignorance ("we don't know"), to disbelief, to conspiratorial silence ("we know well, and have plans, but we're not sharing them"). This post surveys some of the more common ideas regarding governments' lack of attention to the issue, in the hope of spurring comments from readers regarding which of the scenarios is more plausible in light of available evidence.

It is worth noting that it is not only governments who have ignored peak oil. As Charlie Hall and John Day point out, population and resource concerns have "largely disappeared, at least until very recently, from most public discussion, newspaper analyses and college curricula. Our general

feeling is that few people think about these issues today... Even ecologists have largely shifted their attention away from resources to focus, certainly not inappropriately, on various threats to the biosphere and biodiversity. They rarely mention the basic resource/human numbers equation that was the focal point for earlier ecologists.”⁵ Governments are not alone, then, in avoiding the issue of resource constraints in general, and peak oil in particular. But given the emergence in the last decade of a well-developed discourse on peak oil, why are they still not talking about it?

Exploring the Range of Possibility

Governments just don't "get it"

Politicians and bureaucrats are busy people, who may have little opportunity to explore issues in depth, and especially in parliamentary systems ministers are often not experts on their portfolio. Thus they may be unaware of the possibility of peak oil, because they have not spent the time required to read the arguments or look at the data behind the claims that oil production is about to (or already has) hit its peak. This view of the situation seems common among those who continue their efforts to engage local officials, who similarly have to attend to a range of problems: convincing these officials of the importance of peak oil seems to be both necessary and effective. At the national level, one would think that bureaucrats and leaders are aware of the issue, but some still see ignorance as the problem. As Oil Drum writer Heading Out suggests, the US Department of Energy *seems* to have little concern about supply constraints, and “the Secretary [of Energy] seems woefully unaware of the underlying fragility of the energy supply situation”.⁶ Richard Heinberg and Julian Darley have recorded an excellent lecture for policy makers, one that seems designed for an audience that is largely unaware of the problem or its scope.⁷

They are overly committed to neoclassical economics

However, information alone is often not sufficient for conviction. Politicians and bureaucrats, among others, may be committed to a way of thinking that *ensures* their ignorance of peak oil. Excessive training (or faith) in neoclassical economics, for instance, might incline one to take seriously Robert Solow's notorious suggestion that “the world can, in effect, get along without natural resources”. This view represents what seems to be a virtually unbreakable faith in technology and the market mechanism's capacity to provide substitutes for declining fossil fuel energy services. Many officials seem to believe, as the IEA has long argued, that more investment will lead to more oil production, and that there is therefore no “physical limit to oil availability” in the near term.⁸ Of course, with sufficient investment, peak oil may be stalled to some extent, for a short while – but whether such investment is available (given the economic downturn) or forthcoming (given price volatility and above ground factors) remains uncertain.

They are hindered from realization due to cognitive biases

Faith in the market may be supported by innate avoidance or denial mechanisms which preclude us from witnessing any potential disruptions to our welfare. Nate Hagens has argued here “that despite facts, we exhibit certain cognitive biases that prevent us from acting on complex or frightening subjects outside of our day to day realities.”⁹ This category would include the notion of “cognitive dissonance” and other psychological factors that save us the trouble of facing difficult facts or “truths”, including that of our own mortality. The sheer difficulty of believing, or grasping, as consequential a figure as Hubbert's Peak, is well supported by anecdotal evidence among peak

oilers who commonly report a “glazed-over” response to their efforts to present the case in classrooms, at town council meetings, among environmentalists, or at the local pub (careful out there).

Surely most of us are justified in feeling that we live the good life, and we appreciate this image being reinforced with promises of an abundant future. Albert Bartlett (1994) has observed the general complacency about the future and writes:

There will always be popular and persuasive technological optimists who believe that population increases are good, and who believe that the human mind has unlimited capacity to find technological solutions to all problems of crowding, environmental destruction, and resource shortages. These technological optimists are usually not biological or physical scientists. Politicians and business people tend to be eager disciples of the technological optimists.¹⁰

So let's allow that government personnel may, like the rest of us, have a hard time hearing bad news, and tend to steer our attention to good news. (The Oil Drum readers are exceptional, no doubt.)

They have been misled by the EIA and IEA

Some claim that this market-based disregard of peak oil is in part the fault of governments' energy and resource agencies, which tend to be dominated by economists. The US Energy Information Administration and the IEA are two that have been widely fingered for inappropriately optimistic production scenarios. According to Dave Hughes, “One of the reasons politicians, television news anchors and newspaper columnists are so reassuring about our energy future is that the people they get their information from are just as bullish... [The EIA and IEA] invariably paint a view of the future that is barely distinguishable from the past.”¹¹ As Global Witness notes, “Governments and industry from all across the globe have come to rely on... [the IEA] to provide a consistent basis on which they can formulate policies and design business plans.”¹² The IEA's flagship publication, the World Energy Outlook, is widely accused of offering overly optimistic statements regarding future production trends.

But in fairness, the WEO has also indicated for a number of years that a peak in conventional production is imminent, and as noted, Fatih Birol has been quoted as suggesting it is likely to arrive by 2020. The IEA-WEO has also consistently warned that future supply is dependent upon adequate investment, with its warnings in this regard becoming more stark in recent years. Indeed, the 2009 WEO estimates that investment in energy production is down by some 20% in some sectors: “Energy companies are drilling fewer oil and gas wells, and cutting back on refineries, pipelines and power stations... The financial crisis has cast a shadow over whether all the energy investment needed to meet growing energy needs can be mobilised.”¹³ Still, the *Guardian* reports that IEA insiders claim the agency has, under pressure from the US, especially, consistently overstated future supply projections.¹⁴

Blame it on the Media

No doubt the media also plays an important role, not only in educating politicians themselves, but

also in informing the public of important issues, and thereby helping to set the terms of political debate. But the media has not picked up the story of peak oil in any significant way (though recent moves by the UK's *Guardian* may put them at the vanguard). Project Censored named peak oil among its "Top 25 Censored Stories of 2006".¹⁵ In an egregious example, the New York Times appears to have completely ignored the release of the 2009 WEO, as well as the previous week's revelations regarding the IEA whistleblowers reported in the *Guardian*. Instead the Times gave a blog cover story to reporting of CERA's optimistic scenario, entitled "No Peak in Oil Before 2030, Study Says."¹⁶

While there have been a smattering of stories on peak oil in major papers and TV stations, there has been little consistency, such that readily distracted viewers and readers can, it seems, just "forget" that story until it comes up at a cocktail party ("Oh yes I *heard* about that. Dreadful, isn't it?") The absence of sustained media attention leaves the public largely uninformed, thus allowing "more room than is healthy for politicians to dodge, procrastinate or back-pedal on the policies needed to navigate the dangers facing us."¹⁷

Yet the so-called "CNN effect", or the claim that media presentations lead to public demand that then leads to government action, is inconclusive at best. Research suggests that the media is as much moved by governments' (and readers') concerns than the other way around. Thus the media may be waiting on signals that are not forthcoming. On the other hand, advertisers too may be wary of being part of the emergence of this story, contributing another reason for avoiding the issue in favour of business as usual.

They get it, but they can't talk about it

If we presume that government agencies have actually paid attention to the IEA's publications, and in some cases their own advisors, we have to approach the other end of the spectrum: This is a view of policy makers that sees them as largely aware of peak oil, and simply not being willing (or able) to discuss the issue. In a contrasting view to that of *Heading Out*, a former colleague of Energy Secretary Chu, David Fridley, has been quoted as saying the Secretary "knows all about peak oil, but he can't talk about it. If the government announced that peak oil was threatening our economy, Wall Street would crash. He just can't say anything about it."¹⁹

Sadad al-Husseini (former VP of Saudi Aramco) suggests that those "who are not expressing a concern [publicly]... are doing that with a good intention: they feel like somehow this is a reality that the public at large can't handle... [that] being in ignorance of these realities is better than knowing them... and that somehow they will be solved. But in reality, if you don't have a public understanding of the issues you will never have the public support for the solutions... So it's important to actually talk about the facts..."²⁰ This view suggests, then, that governments know but keep quiet about peak oil because the knowledge is itself seen as a threat to stability (economic, emotional, social, political). Thoughtful of them, surely – but their silence also stands in the way of efforts to prepare people and economies for the coming transition, and so increases the likelihood that transition will be conducted *as a reaction* to circumstances that could have been anticipated and planned for (if not avoided).

Colin Campbell has insisted that this is not the result of some "great conspiracy": the fact that companies and governments generally don't advertise that "the North Sea is finished", for instance, is more a matter of "practical daily management."²¹ But that does not mean that leaders are not cognizant of the coming changes:

Campbell: “I think behind the scenes they are beginning to plan and prepare in sensible ways. You’ll find the oil companies, for example, are selling and disposing of secondary marketing chains, secondary refineries and so on, because they know full well that the supply is going to lead to surplus refining capacity. I think if you look elsewhere, the airline businesses is changing radically because it’s so dependent on cheap oil. We see hidden messages that do deliver the correct reading of all of this, but it’s not something people really want to talk about.”²²

They are actively avoiding the issue

The growing chorus of reports, websites and media reports regarding peak oil has forced governments to actively resist discussing the issue. For example, recent efforts by Australia's Green Party to convene task forces have been voted down in the national Senate and state legislature, though the latter was by a close margin.²³ Jeremy Leggett, who edited the UK Industry Taskforce Report (“The Oil Crunch”²⁴), says that despite “a number of meetings with very senior people in government”, efforts to get the British Government to respond to the Taskforce's concerns have met with little success. Indeed, the government seems to have made up its mind in advance: the Taskforce had initially invited the Department of Trade and Industry to conduct the study as a joint industry-government initiative. The DTI reportedly replied, “and this is the exact words used: 'it would be too risky to do that'. Their argument was... basically, there isn't any risk, so why do a risk assessment, because if you do that you might scare the horses unnecessarily.”

On the other hand, the government has widely embraced the Wicks review, which (according to Leggett) “dismisses peak oil out of hand”. Though the Taskforce had earlier met with the authors, the Wicks review does not mention the Taskforce and ignores all the evidence and arguments made by the Taskforce in that meeting. “It takes my breath away”, says Leggett. “This is gross irresponsibility, and a form of betrayal of national interests, and I think the people involved in this will really live to regret it.”²⁵

But what if Leggett is missing something still?

They're on it, don't you worry

What if the silence on peak oil is not a betrayal of national interests, but a policy choice informed by national interests? What if, with Mike Ruppert, we accept that there are “conspiracy facts”, and that the silence on peak oil is one of them?

“Most people have... a serious misconception: That misconception is a belief that there is an urgent need to somehow make key decision makers and leaders of American and global life aware of the immediate problems of Peak Oil and Natural Gas. Nothing could be more off base. The world's key decision makers have been aware of and planning for this crisis for years.”²⁶

Ruppert's claim is that governments are informed, and are taking the matter very seriously: that

is to say, they are not (as per appearances) ignoring peak oil at all. But in the absence of a discourse that reveals that awareness, and that discusses the policy moves being made to meet it, how are researchers to approach the issue? Where are we to look for evidence that governments “have been planning for this crisis for years”? One thing is clear: we cannot look to the statements of political actors as a reflection of their knowledge or beliefs regarding peak oil (or other issues). Political speech is an activity, directed at moving audiences: it is not a reliable window on the minds of political actors. A more realistic view, then, says we need to look not at what actors say, but at what they do, and to see whether an interpretation of their actions as responses to peak oil stands up to scrutiny.

Actions speak louder than words...

Middle East Adventures

“[T]he notion that the war with Iraq had nothing to do with oil is simply preposterous. The US attacked Iraq (which appears to have had no weapons of mass destruction and was not threatening other nations), rather than North Korea (which is actively developing a nuclear weapons programme and boasting of its intentions to blow everyone else to kingdom come) because Iraq had something it wanted. In one respect alone, Bush and Blair have been making plans for the day when oil production peaks, by seeking to secure the reserves of other nations.” (George Monbiot, December 2003)²⁷

It is generally recognized that the first Gulf War was “all about oil”, even while many cling to the claim that the second, and the invasion and occupation of Iraq, was not about oil. Chapter 4 of Richard Heinberg’s *The Party’s Over* opens with a four-page summary of the beginning phases of the war on terror: the oil connections of the Bush administration, the pre-existing plans to invade Iraq, the ample evidence that Bush and Co. were well informed about peak oil (including the fact they had Matthew Simmons on staff), the convenience of 9-11 for justifying the pursuit of an aggressive and oil-related foreign policy. The view that the ongoing War on Terror is itself largely about oil is widely acknowledged not only by many peak oilers (Campbell, Heinberg), but also by an increasing number of academic scholars.²⁸

Not surprisingly, the US has been flagged above all for “covert awareness” of peak oil. In 1999, former Vice President Dick Cheney told an audience that the world would need the equivalent of five Saudi Arabias to meet projected demand, and that “the prize” was still the Middle East oilfields.²⁹ In January 2008, Bush noted that the Saudis could not very well be asked to pump more oil if they didn’t have the capacity, suggesting that even he recognized production limits in the Oil Kingdom³⁰. (Might he have actually been listening to Matt Simmons?) While official US security literature seems largely free of discussions of peak oil,³¹ the close correlation between American foreign policy concerns and the oil-rich parts of the world suggests a familiar lubricant is behind recent moves on what Zbigniew Brzezinski called the *Grand Chessboard*, and what others see as a New “Great Game”.

Response to economic collapse of 2008

There is little doubt that the current recession/collapse was in part instigated by peak oil and high prices, exacerbated by high levels of indebtedness which left many consumers in a poor position

to navigate an energy price spike.³² Those who have been watching peak oil coming have long warned of the economic consequences: Kenneth Deffeyes, in *The End of Suburbia* (2004), suggested the peak would result in “seven trillion dollars wiped from the stock market; two million jobs gone; state and municipal budget surpluses GONE.” Leggett subtitled his 2005 book, *The Empty Tank*, with a warning of *The Coming Global Financial Catastrophe*.³³

To the degree that governments have been aware of peak oil, they have also been aware of declining opportunities for economic growth, and the likelihood of a financial shock. The licenses given by government agencies for banks and investors to pursue carnivalesque capitalism – including the invention of a range of novel instruments that depended on continuous growth (in order to service the debt they were composed of) – may also be seen as a plan of sorts, in that if leaders were aware of the coming crisis, they may have sought to enable conditions that could hold it off, at least for awhile, while being fully conscious that they were “gutting the economy” and shackling future generations.³⁴

The ongoing borrowing binge, dressed up as a Keynesian stimulus, seems to many an utterly unsustainable corporate welfare scheme being loaded on the backs of generations yet to come. If governments realize that the old game of capitalism cannot be sustained under conditions of declining energy, then the future of capitalism – at least under existing rules – becomes somewhat irrelevant. In that case, perhaps the only thing to do is seek to gain whatever can be withdrawn from the system prior to a major rule-change. Whether these advantages will still hold under whatever new rules emerge remains an open question.

This does not bode well for hopes that leaders will make any positive decisions regarding energy futures: it suggests they see no future (surely true, in that 4-year-electoral-cycle kind of way). To the extent there is a future, it is a low carbon one, and any steps in that direction are surely positive indications that governments are in fact taking steps to address energy insecurity. A great many programs have emerged in recent years, partly in response to energy prices, and often dressed up in terms of reducing emissions. Incentives for biofuels production, including government mandated production levels, may help ensure some growth in this sector, which makes a small contribution to liquid fuel supply. Solar, wind and geothermal will contribute to growth in electricity production, and a number of European states are moving toward establishing an enhanced grid for transmission of low-carbon electricity.³⁵ Other projects, including massive solar farms in the Sahara Desert, may do much to stem electricity supply concerns and help navigate an energy transition. They are unlikely to help a great deal with liquid fuel supply problems, however.

“Climate” policy

A third peak oil related policy response can be found in government (in)actions to curb global warming. Moves made to address carbon emissions are varied, but many governments seem to be prioritizing low-carbon energy programs as an alternative to fossil fuels. Fatih Birol recently told the US Council on Foreign Relations of his certainty that developing states are interested in climate negotiations – and in reducing emissions – far more for energy security reasons than for climate ones.³⁶ Diplomatically, he did not suggest that major industrial states might be acting for much the same reasons.

To the extent that governments are aware of peak oil, climate change actually gives a presentable face to the necessary policy actions. Presenting these efforts as responses to climate change encourages investments in energy security, allowing them to be legitimized on well-established

environmental grounds. This avoids the political difficulty of presenting peak oil and recommending appropriate policies (and explaining why they haven't done so sooner). While proposed emissions reductions are in line with depletion rates, the global warming agenda is a voluntary one, in which humans can still pretend we are in control of our destiny (and our planet). As fossil fuel scarcity begins to bite, the declining supply (BAD) can be made to look like reduced emissions (GOOD?).

Furthermore, the emerging carbon markets contribute a novel "scarcity" (pollution rights) that may stand in place of natural scarcity. They also enable profits to accrue, via emissions trading and energy development, in the face of growing material scarcity, and these may help offset declining profits from the fossil fuel industry. The benefits will accrue to the ruling class, of course, and its executive may be rewarded – or at least preserved – if it follows its mandate. This thesis is not, of course, unconnected with the thoughts on the financial crisis above.

Conclusions

It is clear that peak oil presents an immense challenge in terms of governance, a challenge that seems to have precluded its uptake in policy and governance circles. This does not mean that states and their leaders are not aware of the problem, although many individuals within governments may not be. If governments are aware, as seems likely, their silence may mean that they fear that the public consumption of the scale of the problem may generate more problems than it solves. It may mean that there is a widespread cognitive barrier to examining the problem and prospects, and (in part as a result) they really don't know what to do.

However, it may also be the case that they are well aware of the problem and are indeed pursuing actions to meet it, in a way; but the distasteful nature of the response requires that the real reasons for decisions be hidden from view. The pillage of Iraq and Afghanistan, the wholesale robbery of the public in order to enrich capitalist classes, and the pretence of "saving the planet" – and the polar bears – may all be seen as unfortunate necessities for power structures seeking to preserve themselves under difficult circumstances.

If political actors seem to be acting with an awareness of peak oil, the fact that they don't discuss it is relevant only on that it stands as evidence that *not discussing it is part of the policy response*. (Ignorance is strength, or some such thing.) But whether sticking our heads in the sand will make the challenges of peak oil any easier for governments – let alone the rest of us – remains to be seen.

Endnotes

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