

# WHAT COMMON SENSE DICTATES

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When I learned that this year's theme was "common sense", I naturally began to think about what common sense is. There have been many attempts to define it, from Thomas Paine's famous pamphlet of 1776, to philosopher G. E. Moore's 1925 essay.

Over the past few hundred years, many of our greatest thinkers have been rather unkind about common sense. Albert Einstein, for example, once wrote, "Common sense is just the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen."

It is certainly a tricky concept. One definition I came across was "sound practical judgement", which sounded reasonable. Another was, "knowledge held by people in common". But I quickly realised that attempting to find a generally accepted gloss is doomed to failure. Identifying a particular fact as "common sense" is impossible: there will always be a regular person who does not know it. Perhaps this is the reason philosophers and scientists shy away from the expression, calling it "murky" and "vague".

But there is value in the idea of common sense. In its defence, Thomas Jefferson once wrote, "I can never fear that things will go far wrong where common sense has fair play." And when I think about the many crises we currently face in the world today, about which I will speak in a moment, it occurs to me how many of them could have been averted, if we had only employed a modicum of common sense.

If we had only looked ahead, into a world where fossil fuels were exhausted, surely common sense would have dictated that we break our out-of-control oil addiction and invest heavily in renewable energies? If we had only looked ahead, into a world teetering on the brink of nuclear disaster, surely common sense would have dictated that we enforce worldwide nuclear disarmament? If we had only looked ahead, into a

world destabilised by conflict, surely common sense would have dictated some other path besides waging illegal, immoral and unwinnable wars?

“To see what is in front of one’s nose requires a constant struggle,” wrote George Orwell. But that is precisely the challenge set for us by common sense. We are at an unprecedented moment in human history, on the precipice of not one or two global catastrophes, but many. The world today stands at the tipping points of nuclear disaster, armed conflict and climate chaos. So far we have been unable to prevent our planet and our civilisation from descending down a dangerous path. Perhaps what we need now, in order to save our planet and ourselves, is a heavy dose of good, old-fashioned common sense.

### **The nuclear threat**

In January 2007, an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* called “World Free of Nuclear Weapons” said: “Nuclear weapons today present tremendous dangers, but also an historic opportunity. U.S. leadership will be required to take the world to the next stage – to a solid consensus for reversing reliance on nuclear weapons globally as a vital contribution to preventing their proliferation into potentially dangerous hands, and ultimately ending them as a threat to the world.”<sup>1</sup>

Now who would have thought that I would be quoting Henry Kissinger, George P. Schultz, William J. Perry and Sam Nunn? But perhaps you should not be surprised: the nuclear issue is not a partisan political issue. Some of you may know that Ronald Reagan was strongly opposed to nuclear weapons. Reagan called for the abolition of “all nuclear weapons”, which he considered “totally irrational, totally inhumane, good for nothing but killing, possibly destructive of life on earth and civilisation”.

The strategy of defending the manufacture and stockpiling of nuclear weapons, as an effective deterrent to others, is now recognised as a flawed argument. If they were once justified, as a means of American-Soviet deterrence, they are no longer.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Kissinger, George P. Schultz, William J. Perry and Sam Nunn, “World Free of Nuclear Weapons, *Wall Street Journal*, January 2007

Mohammed El-Baradei, Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, has been quoted as saying, “We need to treat nuclear weapons the way we treat slavery or genocide. There needs to be a taboo over possessing them.”

It is not only that our governments are violating international agreements that they themselves signed by manufacturing more nuclear weapons. They are also acting with shocking arrogance and carelessness when it comes to handling the weapons they have already. Even the supposedly most advanced nations can be alarmingly lax when it comes to security precautions.

Senator Carl Levin, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, called the unbelievable US Army security failure in August 2007, in which six nuclear warheads were inadvertently removed from their bunkers and flown from North Dakota to Louisiana, “unprecedented”. Owing to “a lack of attention to detail and lack of adherence to well-established Air Force guidelines, technical orders and procedures”, for thirty-six hours, no-one knew where the warheads were, or even that they were missing.

Each of the warheads contained ten times the yield of that dropped on Hiroshima at the end of the Second World War. No breach of nuclear procedures of this magnitude had ever occurred before. Surely it is only a matter of time before an error like this becomes a disaster. Commentators have blamed this failure on the US Army’s reduced nuclear focus in recent years. Why, I would argue, not go the whole way? Why not do away with nuclear weapons altogether? That would surely be what common sense dictates.

But that’s not all common sense dictates.

1. It dictates that world governments should commit to ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and end the production of fissile material for weapons use.
2. It dictates that all nuclear weapons are taken off “high alert”.
3. It dictates that an international treaty is agreed to prevent the arms race in space.

4. It dictates that all nuclear states should guarantee never to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states.
5. But moreover, it dictates that nuclear weapons should be swiftly and permanently eradicated from every corner of the Earth.

The tolerance for error when it comes to nuclear weapons is very low – in fact, it is zero. But zero tolerance cannot realistically be achieved, which is another reason why immediate and worldwide disarmament is such an important, and a pressing, priority. Governor Schwarzenegger said, “Mistakes are made in every other human endeavour. Why should nuclear weapons be exempt?”

My good friend David Krieger, President of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, noted in an article earlier this year that “even Edward Teller, father of the H-Bomb, recognized, ‘Sooner or later a fool will prove greater than the proof, even in a foolproof system.’” That is just common sense.

In order to affect real change globally, we now need one of the major powers to take the plunge. The question has now become: “Who’s going to give them up first?” When they consider their responses to our pleas, politicians would do well to keep in mind the words of two men.

The first is Dwight D. Eisenhower, who pledged America’s determination “to devote its entire heart and mind to find the way by which the miraculous inventiveness of man shall not be dedicated to his death, but consecrated to his life.”

The second is a man who knows as much about nuclear weapons as anyone, Mikhail Gorbachev. He said that “that the infinite and uncontrollable fury of nuclear weapons should never be held in the hands of any mere mortal ever again, for any reason.” That, as I am sure Mr Gorbachev would agree, is not only what morality, but also what common sense, dictates.

### **Armed conflict**

One of the most obvious and flagrant affronts to common sense is war, particularly the threat to human security posed by illegal, immoral and unwinnable wars, such as

those in Iraq and Afghanistan. The concept of “pre-emptive strike” is not just contrary to common sense; it is utter “non-sense”. Such crimes against peace, as defined at the Nuremburg trials, should never be tolerated in a democracy.

Common sense tells us that we should never have started these wars. And common sense tells us that we must get out now. It further dictates, in the interests of peace and security:

1. That an international arms trade treaty is set up;
2. That war criminals are prosecuted to the maximum extent permitted by international law;
3. That crimes against humanity are treated with the utmost seriousness;
4. That cluster munitions are banned worldwide;
5. That torture is stamped out;
6. That the extraordinary renditions and “disappearances” that the global community has so shamefully allowed the US to repeatedly perform in recent years must stop immediately, and must never be allowed to happen again

### **Climate chaos**

Each of us is concerned about the looming threat of climate chaos. As well we might be: the problem of climate chaos touches every area of our lives – peace, security, human rights, poverty, hunger, health, mass migration, and economics. Climate change is not an isolated environmental issue; everything is inextricably linked.

David Wasdell, Director of the Meridian programme, in a book he co-authored called *Planet Earth, We Have A Problem*, says about the impending climate tipping point:

“If we go beyond the point where human intervention can no longer stabilise the system, then we precipitate unstoppable runaway climate change. That

will set in motion a major extinction event comparable to the five other extinction crises that the earth has previously experienced.”<sup>2</sup>

That is the scale of the threat we are facing.

Bill McKibben has now introduced the world to “the most important number on Earth”: 350<sup>3</sup>. Quoting James Hansen, he explains that we cannot allow CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations to go up to 450 or even 400 parts per million, as policymakers currently envisage, but we must rapidly lower them to 350 parts per million, “if we wish to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed”. If we do not make 350 the most important number on Earth, future generations will be faced with surviving on an overheated planet.

Among the six irreversible tipping points Hansen mentions are massive sea level rise and huge changes in rainfall patterns. If we do not return to 350 quickly, from our current level of 385, we will pass these tipping points very soon. The first of them, the melting of the polar ice caps, may already be behind us.

Despite the clear and urgent alarms sounded by our most respected scientists, the developed world continues to feed its out-of-control oil addiction. Now the oil companies are even prospecting in the arctic oceans where the ice has melted due to climate change – yet it is increasingly clear that extracting most of the remaining fossil fuels is not plausible if we want to maintain a stable climate. The reality is that we are locked into an inefficient, pollution-based economy, which is undermining public health and the environment, aggravating inequality and threatening the chances for future generations. That is not common sense.

At the United Nations Framework Conference on Climate Change in Bali last December, I spoke of climate chaos in terms of global justice. That is how I see the issue: we need to fight climate change along with global inequality if we want to find lasting and sustainable solutions. To attempt to address the causes of climate change,

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<sup>2</sup> Wasdell, David, et. al., 2007. *Planet Earth, We Have A Problem*, The Meridian Programme

<sup>3</sup> McKibben, Bill. 2008. *The World at 350: A Last Chance for Civilisation*.

we must not overlook the needs of developing countries. There is no denying it: the rich world is causing climate change and the poor world is suffering the consequences.

Given the scale of this potential disaster before us, we have no choice but to embark upon a global renewable energy revolution, by replacing our carbon-driven economy with a renewable energy economy. The challenge we are facing now is how to switch to a more secure, lower-carbon energy system that does not undermine economic and social development, and addresses the threats of climate change and global inequality. We must bring about fundamental change in our energy systems, with a renewed focus on energy security and lower, if not zero, carbon emissions. We must assist countries in the Global South by giving them privileged access to renewable energy technologies. That is what common sense dictates.

Whilst conventional fossil and atomic energies continue to endanger our health, threaten the survival of the planet, risk sparking conflict over declining resources, and require high water consumption and ever-increasing costs, renewable energy sources do not bring with them these negative effects. They are the only solution to the three key global energy challenges: energy security, cost efficiency and environmental protection. The task now is to create and implement policies that make investment in renewable energies an attractive proposition at national and international levels. If we are to avert the tipping point, we must take significant and painful steps, and we must take them now. We can no longer solve the climate crisis one light bulb at a time.

The arguments that renewable energy does not provide sufficient or affordable alternatives to traditional energy sources have been exposed as flawed and false. Furthermore, the cost of finite conventional energies will continue to rise as the sources dry up. Renewable energy costs will generally go down, as they consist almost exclusively of technology costs. Mass production and technological innovation will bring dramatic decreases in cost. So we should not see the promotion of renewables as a burden: we should see it as a unique, even unprecedented economic opportunity – one that will reward those who get on board early. Surely that's just common sense?

We all fear that, after the near-failure of the Kyoto protocol, the Copenhagen process negotiations are doomed to failure as well. But that needn't be so. Furthermore, we must not allow this process to become "lip service": the caps should not be set at what governments are prepared to do, but at what it is imperative we must do, taking into account what science tells us. We must take heed of the warnings in the latest scientific findings if we are to avert climate disaster. Governments must take responsibility for implementing the solutions. Common sense must prevail.

I would like now to suggest six more consequences of clear thinking and common sense. Let us ask ourselves the question, "What does common sense dictate we must urgently do to avoid climate disaster?"

1. Common sense would dictate that we stop focusing on the Kyoto protocol and its likely successors. Kyoto has proved to be an inflexible and bureaucratic instrument that allows for evasive tactics by governments and industry. Caps set in treaties defined by compromise will invariably represent inadequate commitments
2. Common sense would dictate the establishment of an International Renewable Energy Agency, or IRENA, to foster and promote the adoption of renewable energies worldwide. Only renewable energy can safely and efficiently satisfy global energy demand
3. Common sense would dictate that we demonstrate, through appropriate case studies, that the world's cities – in which 50% of the global population lives – can be operated solely on renewable energy
4. Common sense would dictate that we spread Feed-In Tariff legislation throughout the grid-connected regions of the world as a key tool for accelerating the renewable energy revolution
5. Common sense would dictate that we transform taxes on energy into taxes on emissions, fuelling the supply and demand of emission-free energies

6. Common sense would dictate that we embark upon a global programme of forest protection and reforestation. The potential for 10 million km<sup>2</sup> of new forests currently exists that could help stabilise CO<sub>2</sub> concentration at 350 ppm
7. Common sense would dictate that we establish a new international initiative to combine biosphere protection with restoration. We must put an end to the decline in terrestrial biodiversity
8. Common sense would dictate that we acknowledge that nuclear power does not protect the climate. The water consumption of nuclear plants is tremendous. There is no reason why we should fight the dangers of climate change with the dangers – and financial burdens – of nuclear energy
9. Common sense would dictate that we eschew “carbon capture and storage” technologies. In most cases they are not likely to be efficient or cost-effective, and the storage of CO<sub>2</sub> can even be dangerous
10. Common sense would dictate that companies whose practises put the environment and human life at risk are held accountable

Fortunately, at least one of these consequences of common sense has been embraced by one major government, that of Germany. The international renewable energy agency, or IRENA, proposed by German MP and “solar champion” Hermann Scheer, will be a crucial instrument in the renewable energy revolution. It is both necessary and urgent. It is my belief that if we are to embark on a global renewable energy revolution, we cannot do it without this new agency. The establishment of IRENA is a victory for common sense.

Some more pessimistic scientists warn that we have already passed the tipping point of climate change, and that human intervention is now futile. Although I am not totally convinced that, even if we act now, we can save our world and ourselves from climate chaos, so long as it seems possible then it is an overriding moral imperative to try.

In October of last year, Barack Obama called climate change “one of the greatest moral challenges of our generation”. He is absolutely right. Our lives and the lives of our children and their children are at stake. We are already running the risk of condemning future generations to the ravages of global warming. If we do not act now, the battle will be lost.

## **Conclusion**

Voltaire claimed that, “Common sense is not so common.” I think what he meant by that is although we all have it, not many of us actually use it. But I believe each of us has the power to look ahead, to a world ravaged by climate change, whose inhabitants are thirsty, starving and plagued with disease; whose flora and fauna have withered and died; whose oceans threaten to engulf human settlements on every continent, and say: this cannot be our future. By virtue of little more than our innate sense of right and wrong, and through the gift of common sense – both of which I believe to be shared by every human being – we can make a difference in the world.

Thinking about common sense in this way shows us what the expression really means: it is equivalent to that innate sense of right and wrong that each of us shares. Some call it consciousness, some conscience, some common sense. What matters is that this intrinsic natural law connects people all around the world, regardless of their race, or religion or culture. We each share a tacit knowledge of what we ought to do, even if we don’t always do it. The easy bit is finding and listening to our voice of reason. The difficult bit is acting on what we hear.

What happens tomorrow is decided today. If we want to live in a world we are proud to pass on to future generations, we must affect a Copernican revolution in our outlook. Each and every one of us must be prepared to make fundamental, lasting and immediate change in the way we live. This cannot be about egos or agendas; it must be about a holistic change in the way we see the world and the way we see ourselves.

We cannot go on blithely disregarding what morality – and common sense – require of us. We are not just aiming for a set of goals. This is not a checklist by which our

success can be measured. It's no good to have four out of five, or nine of ten. We have to aim for a virtuous circle of morally sound principles and practices.

We are reaching a threshold from which there will be no return. At the World Future Council, which I chair, we say this: first and foremost, we must define what is necessary to safeguard the future of life, then to extend the boundaries of what is politically, economically and culturally possible to achieve the desired outcomes.

If we do not hold our politicians accountable for their decisions under these terms; if we do not fight for universal respect for human rights, civil liberties and dignity; if we do not disarm and destroy our nuclear weapons; if we do not embark upon a renewable energy revolution to reach zero emissions; if we do not walk away from our out-of-control oil addiction; if we do not reach 350 – we may not have a world left protecting before very long. That is what common sense dictates.