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Is it Moral to use Taxes to Support Fossil Fuels?

The following is a piece written by OxCAN member, Dr Quintin Rayer in support of the UK Parliamentary Petition to End Financial Support for Fossil Fuels.



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For individuals concerned about dangerous climate change, this raises an interesting parallel with the fossil divestment movement[1]. In this context, the work of the moral philosopher [Henry Shue](#) seems particularly relevant. Shue (2017) explored the question of moral responsibility. He noted that society distinguishes responsibilities into positive and negative, general, and special, and backward-looking and forward-looking. Once it became clear no later than the 1960s that continuing CO2 emissions would progressively undermine the climate, the major carbon producers could see that they were marketing harmful products. Shue argued that the negative responsibility to “do no harm” required them to reduce that harm rapidly either by modifying the product to capture its dangerous emissions or by developing safe substitutes, such as developing carbon-free energy. The seriousness of the harms brought by climate change made this responsibility especially compelling.

This argument would also appear to apply to governments and other parties actively supporting the use of fossil fuels.

Ceasing to contribute to harm would include:

- For fossil fuel firms, ceasing exploration for additional fossil fuel reserves
- For governments, ceasing to provide financial support or subsidies for fossil fuels

Shue made a further observation that would also apply to both carbon producers and government support. He saw the half-century of failure by corporate carbon producers to reduce the harms caused by their products as giving them additional responsibility to correct the damage done by their decades of neglecting the negative responsibility. Shue also noted that if major carbon producers wish to make more than a minimal positive social contribution, their distinctive capacities of political power, wealth, and expertise qualify them for leadership in the transition to an energy regime that would be safe for future generations. Points that apply equally to government.

Essentially – why would we want our taxes spent on, or tax concessions granted to, activities that are proven to harm the planet? Those taxes could be a resource to help transition to a low carbon future.

For OxCAN alumni who would like to follow up, or maybe support the petition, the details are in the box below.

Reference: Shue, H. (2017). Responsible for what? Carbon producer CO2 contributions and the energy transition. *Climatic Change*, 144, 591–596. doi:10.1007/s10584-017-2042-9 (link: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10584-017-2042-9>).



“End all forms of financial support for fossil fuels”

“A 2019 report by the European Commission found that in 2016 the UK provided over £10 billion in financial support to fossil fuels. Given the evidence of the impact of carbon emissions on the climate and environment, the Government should end all forms of financial support for fossil fuels.”

This petition can be supported on-line by any British citizen or UK resident. If a petition gets 10,000 signatures, the government will respond; at 100,000 signatures, it will be considered for debate in Parliament. The deadline for the petition is 8th January 2021.

<https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/317933>

[1] Fossil divestment is an investment approach that involves severing ties with fossil fuel companies and selling or refusing to own their stocks and bonds, because of the damage their activities are causing to Earth’s delicate climate balance.



opportunities

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