

PEAK OIL AND THE PEACE MOVEMENT

It is widely agreed in the peace movement that the US-led wars against Iraq have been largely motivated by determination to control oil supplies and the currency in which oil is traded. Oil is regarded as a 'strategic resource', that is, essential to the functioning of the US, and by implication, worth going to war for. The Carter Doctrine of 1980 made clear that the US would use 'any means necessary, including military force' to maintain uninterrupted supplies of oil (1). This last war against Iraq, which, the world was told, would be short, sharp and welcomed by the population, grows uglier by the day three years later.

The US, of course, is not the only large economy dependent on imported oil. All are, with the exception of Russia, and the political distortions that follow from that fact are well described in "Petrotyranny" by John Bacher (2).

But supplies of oil, whether secured by military means or not, will run short. Oil is a nonrenewable resource, and there is a wide consensus that we are, as near as we can tell, approximately at the peak of its supply. This is often referred to as 'Peak Oil'. The demand for oil, from all large economies, but especially from the growing economies of China and India, is increasing fast. This creates a growing global hunger for oil.

It is often supposed that alternative energy resources, such as wind, solar, geothermal, hydro- will adequately substitute, and keep oil dependent economies carrying on business as usual. They will not. Oil is unique in the amount of portable energy it supplies per unit weight and volume. The energy in one barrel of oil is equivalent to 12 years of human labour (3). Nothing else comes close to it. There will not be business as usual. If coal is substituted, it will speed global warming and all the ecological disasters that entails. That will certainly not be business as usual. Nuclear power, now being energetically pushed (and accepted) across the world, has features of dangerous wastes, risks of terrorism and of nuclear weapons proliferation that make it unacceptable to many in the peace movement. Even then, it cannot replace the economic role of oil.

The other renewable energy resources....

The implications of this are that the world has shocks ahead – shocks to the financial system and therefore to human well-being. Shocks to the financial system are always differentially transmitted to the

poorest, within and between countries. There are likely to be violent political struggles ahead to control the dwindling stocks of an increasingly valuable commodity. Beyond Iraq, Iran; the US against China, China against Japan over disputed undersea oilfields; civil wars within oil-producing countries over control of oil; civil wars in countries with serious political divisions, stimulated by financial strain.

If there is war ahead, what will it be like in an oil-scarce world? At first, it will be no different, as funds for highly oil-consuming militaries are withdrawn by states from human well-being needs. It is possible that later, the risk of use of nuclear weapons will increase, in order to inflict the damage that would have required fleets of long-range bombers that now have no aviation fuel. It may also be that populations, hard hit by financial shocks that have caused malnutrition, will be more vulnerable to the severe health risks of war-induced movement as refugees.

Humans are notoriously bad at long range planning. The optimal time to move to avoid this shock and all its risks of violence has passed. Only a very few states have made a serious plan for post-peak oil scarcity. For example, with a combination of energy-conservation measures, energy efficiency improvements, urban planning, and renewable energy resource development, Sweden aims to cut its fossil fuel use by 50% by 2050. There are a myriad possible solutions to the energy scarcity problem. None will prevent the coming shocks, but an intelligent combination of them may do much to lessen the impact, and reduce the risk of war.

A task of the peace movement is to prevent war. We have become impressively mobilized over immediately imminent wars such as the US-UK against Iraq. We need to mobilize now against further highly likely oil wars, and wars precipitated by the financial shocks of Peak Oil.

A major point to note is that action to mitigate the negative effects of Peak Oil is identical with action to lessen the effects of greenhouse gases causing climate change – our other demanding challenge.

Possibilities for action are:

- Inform ourselves of the phenomena of Peak Oil. A recommended source is www.beyondpeak.org
- Take political action at a global level: Endorse and publicize the Energy Future Protocol -

- Work to help the transition to a non-fossil fuel economy – support a carbon tax
- Demand that our governments, federal provincial and local, institute planning for the post-Peak Oil times ahead. Act on particular issues such as plans for highway expansion rather than public transport

References

1. Klare M. Blood and Oil: the dangers and consequences of America's growing dependency on imported petroleum. New York: Henry Holt, 2004.
2. Lerch, Daniel