



Protesters wearing gas masks staged a “die-in” surrounding a giant neon gas mask banner in George Square ahead of a Glasgow Council Environment Committee meeting on Tuesday 20th March. [Image](#) by [Ian Macnicol / Friends of the Earth Scotland](#) | Flickr | CC BY 2.0

When ‘oil’ spells murder

Julian Cribb

Hollywood action star and former Californian governor [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) called it when he recently accused big oil companies of first degree murder – knowingly killing millions of people around the world with their products.

While legal experts rate his actions as largely a stunt to raise awareness of the deadly effects of fossil fuels, a tsunami of lawsuits is nevertheless rolling out around the world against oil, coal and gas companies and the governments that support them. At the latest count there were more than 1200 legal actions going forward globally over climate-related issues, according to a [database assembled by Columbia Law School](#).

Two of the most prominent are:

- [The People of the State of California v. BP et al.](#), in which the cities of San Francisco and Oakland are suing five major oil companies (BP, ExxonMobil, Chevron, Conoco Phillips and Shell) for causing a public nuisance by extracting and selling oil, coal and gas while misleading the public about the known harms that these products cause; and

- [*Juliana v. the United States*](#), in which a group of American youngsters are suing the Trump administration for failing to protect them against the harms of climate change. The Trump regime tried, and failed, to get their case thrown out unheard.

Outside the US, hundreds of legal actions are rolling out in countries as diverse as Britain, Pakistan, India, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, New Zealand, the Philippines, Colombia, Norway, Canada, the Ukraine, Nigeria, Belgium and Brazil, to name but a few.

The argument that oil and coal spell death for millions, and that the problem is getting worse not better, is underpinned by two recent statements by leading healthcare authorities:

- The [Lancet Commission on Pollution and Health](#) found that nine million deaths – 1 in 6 worldwide – in 2015 were attributable to pollution, mainly from fossil fuels and petrochemicals, with poor people being disproportionately affected.
- The [World Health Organisation](#) predicted that climate change alone will kill an additional 250,000 people every year from 2030-2050.

None of this information is secret. It exists in the plain sight of every person, corporation and government on the planet. The weight of scientific and medical evidence is overwhelming – it is more damning even than the evidence linking tobacco to lung cancer. Nor is it possible for the people who produce the poisons to claim they did not know.

From here on, it follows that any government that actively promotes fossil fuel use (e.g. those of US, Russia and Australia), or which knowingly retards the advance of clean energy, is culpable of homicide on a global scale. (For perspective, the 9 million victims reported by The Lancet Commission, outnumber the annual death toll of World War II by 2 million a year.) This raises the legal question of whether inflicting death on such a scale is not mere homicide, but a war crime or actual genocide. Putting a few fossil fuel company executives and their pet politicians in the dock at The Hague will be one way to find out.

However, executives and politicians aren't the only ones in the cross-hairs. Anyone who owns shares in coal, oil or gas is also, arguably, an accessory to murder. And not just murder in general, but including that of their own grandchildren. Their immediate punishment will be to see the value of their holdings and dividends vanish in a welter of legal fees, fines and corporate bankruptcies.

Worldwide this dawning awareness has ignited a stampede by [pension funds](#), [insurance companies](#) (like ING, AXA and Norway's sovereign wealth fund), [universities](#) (e.g. Cambridge, Edinburgh, California, Copenhagen) banks (including the World Bank), religious bodies (like the World Council of Churches) and other investors to divest money from fossil fuels amounting to hundreds of billions of dollars. This has taken place in barely five years, since climate campaigner Bill McKibben urged society to 'withdraw the social licence' of fossil fuels. So far, organisations with a [total investor value of US\\$6.1 trillion](#) have pledged to go fossil-free and [bank lending to fossil fuel companies](#) has nose-dived.

Social media is the central nervous system of the worldwide movement to end fossil fuel use. Stories about divestments, lawsuits, protests and the growth of renewables are

spawning at lightspeed round the planet through media like Twitter, Facebook and the activity of online groups like [AVAAZ](#), [GetUp!](#) and [350.org](#). In what may go down in history as the first great act of global democracy, citizens worldwide are rising against fossil fuels and their lethal legacy. They are taking the first great step towards '[thinking as a species](#)'. They are learning, sharing ideas and joining hands around a planet in a way that the creaking machinery of 20th century capitalism and governance can neither comprehend nor match. The movement to end fossil murder is becoming a greater force for change than any previous political or religious movement in world history. Significantly, it is receiving strong and spirited support from women and young people, who see no good reason their futures should be ruined by greedy old men.

A big question is: where does it go from here? To reduce fossil fuel dependence at the scale needed to solve the climate crisis will require a change in how we consume energy and the amount we consume. Even then, solving the climate crisis alone will not save humanity, as there are [nine other existential threats](#) that can take us down. How do we deal with them, and how do we unite, as a species, to save ourselves?

There are several proposals:

- Among the most forward-looking is the [Great Transition Initiative](#), proposed by Australian social innovator Andrew Gaines, which argues that a shared vision of 'a life-affirming global culture' is the basis for reinventing ourselves.
- Another, [www.HumansForSurvival.org](#), seeks to build the species-wide discourse about the risks we face and their crosscutting solutions.
- A third is [Vision.org](#), which also explores the risks and what can be done to overcome them.
- A fourth is [Future Earth](#), a worldwide alliance of scientists and scholars who believe that research, innovation, and collaboration can help transform the world toward sustainability
- A fifth is the [Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere](#), led by Paul Ehrlich, whose goal is to avert a shattering collapse in civilization through foresight intelligence. And there are many more.

Converting humanity from a death-affirming to a life-affirming culture may sound like a tall order, but the evidence is piling up that it is already happening. That faced with a choice, humans will collectively take the rational path to greater health and safety. Far from derailing this movement, pro-fossil-fuel regimes like those of Trump, Putin and Turnbull (in Australia) are only energising the trend. They are providing the [oxygen, the impetus and the moral outrage](#) to consign fossil fuels to the scrapyard of history – and maybe themselves to the dock in The Hague.

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