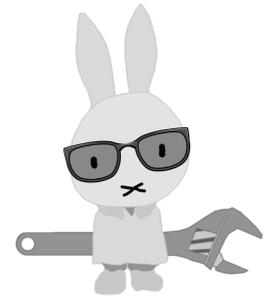


Retail & services are collapsing; well, it would have happened soon anyway

People are mourning the loss of their 'normal' life – the truth is that 'consumerism' is no longer a viable lifestyle, and never really was

Paul Mobbs, *The 'Meta-Blog'*, issue no.10, 3rd December 2020



In response to the current news, I feel I must lay an 'uncomfortable' truth upon you all: People are blaming the Covid-restrictions, but the fact is the 'consumer lifestyle' has been slipping away from an increasing number of the British public for the last forty years. More importantly, to solve both the world's economic and ecological woes, the wind-down of [retail and services](#) would have happened soon anyway – either planned by necessity, or catastrophically due to global ecological collapse.

[Debenhams has collapsed](#). Locally I don't think many people really understand what that might mean for our local council. The local elected members have got some difficult questions to answer – and they need to do that soon.

The pride of my local council is a huge [White Elephant](#), currently under construction in the town centre. What's worse, they borrowed the money to do it; a decision that – much criticised at the time – is looking extremely dodgy now, and which may have [serious implications](#) for the [viability of](#) local services if it all [goes bad](#).

The Conservative majority on [Cherwell District Council](#) have for years projected their total commitment to neoliberal values, and the culture of affluence they believed this inevitably would bring. The town has floundered under their ideological convictions, starved of funds for 'social needs'; and under this regime Banbury has become one of the [most deprived](#) places in [the county](#).

After many years of indifference towards Banbury town, and the progressive slashing of budgets over the past ten years, what a surprise it was when the Council decided to blow [£60 to £100 million](#) (the exact details of the deal are confidential) [to buy](#) the shopping centre and extend it. They were forced to do this, apparently, because its corporate owner re-



fused to undertake the work – as they saw no business case for it.

As with the bailout of banks and big business at the national level, at the local level my council and many others are propping up an affluent lifestyle with public cash because it is no longer profitable; and the reason it is not profitable is that the underlying 'ecological' conditions can no longer support it.

A particularly sad item on [Channel 4 News](#) outlined people's wrecked affluent lifestyles as a result of the pandemic. Though sad at the individual level, this has been happening across Britain for decades now – though less remarked upon because it largely happened in ['The Desolate North'](#).

Today's problems in Banbury were initiated by the 1980s recession, and the closure of engineering and manufacturing in the town. Banbury has always had high levels of shift work, though today that work is increasingly subject to insecure 'minimum wage' conditions too – in part because the M40 has brought more precarious jobs in warehousing, transportation, and distribution, since it opened.



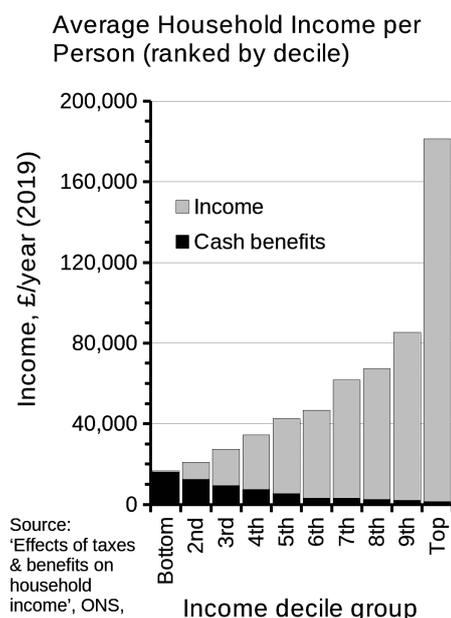
At the bottom quarter of the earnings scale, [over half of](#) annual income is made-up from state benefits which top-up low pay rates. The squeeze on benefits for the last decade has [stalled incomes](#) in areas like Banbury, with a knock-on effect for services and retail – albeit it's been a boost for trade at the growing number of [local foodbanks](#).

That's been made worse in areas like Cherwell where, over the last 20 years, the cost of a house [has increased](#) from 4 to 11 times the lower quarter's annual income. In Banbury, that means increasingly the costs of housing is being paid for by the state rather than from employment. Cherwell's annual budget for [the whole](#) council is around £25 million a year; and yet they have been ['passporting'](#) (passing on) up to £35 million a year from the government to local landlords for tenants receiving housing benefit.

If the retail core of Banbury is collapsing, that's not just the effects of [opening](#) out-of-town centres, serving primarily car-based shoppers. Cuts to state benefits reduce the amount of cash in circulation,

while passing public money to out-of-town landlords – or rather, to the banks they borrowed it from.

That last point – the [debt-based system](#) – is another 'ecological' issue. Let's forget the basis for Government debt for a



moment. From buying expensive houses to the latest consumer goods, personal debt in Britain has been [growing constantly](#) for a couple of decades – now valued in excess of £1,685 billion; and that's forecast to rise to £2,425 billion by 2024. Covid-19 has been positive in that people have [repaid a record amount](#) over 2020, precisely because they've been unable to spend it.

Thing is, everything I've just said about the economy of Banbury applies to the economy of Britain, and the world. Banbury's economy is failing because it regularises the poverty of some to support affluence elsewhere; primarily by providing cheap labour to support the lifestyles of the truly affluent.

First-world consumers (i.e. 'us'), make-up around ten percent of the world's population, but consume [more than half](#) of what is produced. Most of that stuff is imported; and with those goods [we drive](#) the carbon emissions required to make them.

Right now the Government [is talking about](#) reducing our carbon emissions to meet climate change obligations. That's only our direct emissions though, mainly from the use of fossil fuels and farming. What they do not include are the 'embedded' emissions from all those imported goods.

According to the Government's [own research](#), commissioned a few years ago by the Department of the Environment, those embedded emissions could bring our annual total to almost three times what we tell the world we're emitting today.

Likewise, the Government's ideas to solve this problem include plans which have an extremely [doubtful efficacy](#) to stop climate change: From [biofuels](#) – which [we know](#) damage the planet; to renewable energy technologies that rely upon large quantities of [mined metals](#) that are in short supply – and the production of which also causes [wide-spread damage](#) to the global environment.

Right about now people usually say to me, "*but what can we do if we can't have renewable energy*". We do the one thing that few green groups, let alone any politician, will discuss – [we have less](#).

That's been the sticking point of the lockdown: Unlike the growing ['precarariat'](#) – who have been in a bad economic place since the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s – the Covid recession is hitting affluent consumers, and they don't like it one bit.

The reality is though – the one that most green groups will certainly not talk about – this was going

to happen over the next decade or two, no matter what. This is because we would either:

Have to reduce mass consumption to meet climate and ecological goals, because there is no viable mechanism to replicate the 'service' provided by fossil fuels, equitably for everyone in the world, within the limits enforced by the Earth system; or

In the absence of any global agreement on cutting emissions and consumption, then the combination of resource depletion, climate breakdown, and other ecological limits, would together derail the globalised mass consumption system around 2030.

Recently, [yet another paper](#) was published which laid bare this reality. It forecasts a global reduction of consumption of 60%. In order to do that equitably those who consume more must cut more – meaning the wealthiest nations must cut by 95%. That sounds drastic, but that level of cuts would give a standard of living similar to Britain in the late 1950s or early 1960s – before 'consumerism' took off.

I find that result, and the way it was put together, quite pleasing. That's was roughly the conclusion of the book I wrote, *'Energy Beyond Oil'*, in 2005. The Earth has a [fixed level](#) of resources; and the Laws of Thermodynamics set fixed limits [for their use](#). 'Do the math', and the results are always going to come out in a similar location.

Most mainstream economists, the politicians who hang on their quasi-religious prognostications, and



even many green groups, don't believe in such ['limits to growth'](#). Contrary to the founders of the discipline of economics two centuries ago, they believe the human economy can [keep expanding](#) forever.

People who think the economy can grow forever need to come and see Banbury. Not simply because of its present problems, made worse by the local council's delusional shopping scheme. They need to see the failure of their policies here, and the slow degradation of lifestyle that will hit everyone if they don't change their outlook; and take heed that mound of research which shows their growth-based dreams to be an economic fantasy. In the meantime, Banbury's problems will likely be ignored, whilst such fantasies continue to exist.