

Too hot to handle? The democratic challenge of climate change.

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Through her timely contribution to the climate change debate, Rebecca Willis, professor at Lancaster University, suggests a call for more democracy and citizen involvement in tackling climate change. Her text, part of the *Bristol Shorts Insights* series, manages to achieve much in just over 100 pages. Willis provides scientific context, a discussion of the current situation in relation to climate policy, and suggestions for combatting climate change through deeper engagement with democratic principles, in a similar vein to Daniel J. Fiorino's work (2018), which stresses that higher democracy yields better climate mitigation responses.

Willis structures her work in eight chapters. Throughout, there is an overt but measured acknowledgment of the climate crisis we face; her point is not to contest the veracity of the climate emergency but to consider how, through a democratic contract between politicians and citizens, we can (2020: 36), tackle the impending emergency. Following an introduction, she moves into a discussion in chapter 2 around how different nations have responded to the climate emergency. In chapter 3, she then considers why national strategies have generally fallen short. Chapter 4 discusses the dual reality in which we live in Britain: we simultaneously know that we are in a climate crisis, yet we continue as usual. In Chapter 5, Willis points to the 'feelgood fallacies' that offer solutions to climate change without tackling the underlying problem of a high dependence on fossil fuels. Chapter 6 offers a linking of democracy and climate change, before chapter 7 develops a democratic strategy for tackling climate change. In the final chapter, Willis offers suggestions for how readers can be good climate citizens in the face of crisis.

Running through the text is a call both for readers to acknowledge the serious challenge posed by climate change, and for a broader social and political engagement with the social and cultural changes that climate change will bring. Willis draws on primary research and a broad literature base as well as her professional background in climate policy and consultancy. Her central thesis is that we need to increase citizen participation in the climate change debate. While never shying away from the scientific facts of climate change, Willis underpins her work with a social understanding of climate change that will be of particular relevance and interest to those working in community development. She stresses the need to acknowledge "the energy elephant" in the room (2020: 52), referring to the ways in which fossil fuel use is woven into our society, and the power held by fossil fuel industries. In her suggested approach to bringing discussion of climate change to the fore, Willis also takes a distinctly social approach, suggesting that telling stories and providing realistic visions of an alternative future will be useful (2020: 98).

She reaches her conclusions through a detailed consideration of power, ranging from the power of fossil fuel companies to the powerful narratives of technology that are presented as the solutions to climate change. But she also critically considers the power of communities to make change, and questions whether a politician's role should be to lead or to follow (2020: 84). Her primary research demonstrates the need for politicians to engage with citizens openly and candidly, appealing to the heart and mind rather than using "stealth strategies" (2020: 70) that introduce climate mitigation strategies without explicitly referring to the climate benefits. For Willis, governments must engage with people as citizens living through a climate crisis rather than as consumers (2020: 77).

A key tenet of her writing is Willis' consideration of the problematic construction of 'feelgood fallacies' and related diversionary tactics. These feelgood fallacies are generally behavioural changes such as cutting down meat and dairy consumption or the purchase of electric vehicles.

For Willis, these tactics do little to avert the impending crisis when our political systems and societies are fossil fuel-dependent (2020: 69).

Willis makes clear that, while she draws on global policy initiatives, her focus for possible solutions is UK-centric and, arguably, this is a strength of the text: she considers how her solutions can work in a specific political system and geography. The UK focus does mean that there are questions that are left unanswered, however. While Willis acknowledges the complexities involved in applying her proposed solutions outwith the UK (2020: 115), and while achieving depth of analysis at a global scale would be challenging, there remain questions around how both countries with low emissions and those whose economies are structured around fossil fuel extraction could tackle climate change.

While Willis suggests community and citizen action, she also recognizes the role of the individual. In addition to practical tasks such as starting difficult discussions with peers, Willis acknowledges the psychological impact of climate change. Though she maintains that there is grief and uncertainty, there is an element of hope that permeates Willis' writing: "the future is yet to be shaped" (2020: 129). In this sense, she connects with Byron Williston's (2012) discussion of radical hope (Lear, 2006) in the context of impending climatic devastation.

Willis' book will be of interest to social policy, human geography, environmental science, sociology, and political science colleagues and practitioners. It will be invaluable to those working in the field of community development who seek to create community action initiatives to formulate a social contract between government and people (Willis, 2020: 36). The consideration in chapter 6 around citizen assemblies, deliberations, and co-creation of a radical transformation will be useful to community development activists looking to move beyond feelgood fallacies and towards a democratic solution to climate change. Further, the book's brevity combined with its accessible style makes this text a valuable addition to undergraduate reading lists. The final chapter's practical steps that individuals can take in being a good climate citizen offer an optimistic end to the text, reminding us again that "the future is yet to be shaped" (2020:129).

References

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