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# Scott Campbell

## *Addicted To Oil*

Fifteen years ago, President George W. Bush in his State of the Union address declared that “America is addicted to oil.” He was understating the case.

In fact, all industrial civilization is addicted to oil, gas, and coal: fossil fuels that, when burned, release carbon dioxide locked up for millions of years, warm the world, and destabilize the only climate that humans have known since the dawn of civilization at least 10,000 years ago.

On Oct. 21, U.S. defense and intelligence agencies released reports outlining predictable repercussions of that instability. It’s not a pretty picture.

The changing climate is causing floods, droughts, and wildfires — as we have seen on TV. It is causing crop failures, food shortages, and lost income. It is causing social unrest, conflict, and migration.

The crisis at America’s southern border is but a taste of the migration pressures that rich industrialized countries will face in coming years. Millions of people living in marginal areas around the world — who, by the way, had little or nothing to do with causing climate change — will be knocking on the doors of those of us living in relative comfort and security, thanks to fossil carbon emissions. Will we let them in?

A New York Times article on the reports highlighted one of the documents, the National Intelligence Estimate, which for the first time focused exclusively on climate threats: “Global tensions will rise as countries argue about how to accelerate reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Climate change will exacerbate cross-border flash points and

amplify strategic competition in the Arctic. And the effects of climate change will be felt most acutely in developing countries that are least equipped to adapt.”

The N.I.E. goes on to predict that the world’s nations will fail to curb emissions enough to halt warming before it reaches unpredictable tipping points with unpredictable consequences.

Grim indeed. We may say, Vermont can’t stop climate change. And that’s true, but irrelevant. Climate change can stop us. The changing climate is also changing the economy, and if we don’t adapt, Vermont will be ever more a backwater unattractive to the next generation of working families.

Vermont is facing big, consequential issues: attracting and retaining those working families; funding public pensions; adopting fairer “pupil weights” for our schools; making childcare available and affordable; building out broadband — the list is long, much longer than just these. Facing the climate crisis and transforming our economy is a challenge that underlies everything.

Over Governor Scott’s veto, Vermont last year implemented a Global Warming Solutions Act, joining neighbors Massachusetts, Maine, and New York. The Act set up a Climate Council, which has been meeting since early 2021, and intensely since the summer, to draft a Climate Action Plan, due December 1, 2021. The Action Plan must address how Vermont will take responsibility for our contribution to the global problem by reducing our own emissions, and it also specifically requires assessing how we will prepare for the coming changes through adaptation and

improved resilience.

Some focus on the costs of adaptation, resilience and reduced emissions. There will be costs, to be sure. But ignoring the challenge poses costs as well. So far this year the U.S. has experienced 18 billion-dollar disasters. Vermont’s costs are rising too, as 50-year storms occur almost annually, to say nothing of climate zones and pests that drift farther north year by year.

There are costs, but opportunities as well. Economic transformations bring “creative destruction”: dislocations to existing businesses, but fertile ground for new businesses. There’s money to be made: weatherizing buildings; adding heat pumps; installing solar panels; rebuilding the electric grid; opening coffee shops with EV charging; and on and on. Kudos to publisher Todd Smith for seizing the opportunity to upgrade the Caledonian-Record building (see Oct. 21 article).

Fossil fuels have powered industrial civilization for two centuries and brought unprecedented standards of living to billions of people. But we have not reckoned with the costs. We have allowed our well being to become dangerously dependent on a single source of energy. We have, as President Bush said, become addicted to oil. Like most addictions, it helped cope with other problems, until it became the problem at the root of all others. And like most addictions, it is hard to break. But the first step is admitting we have a problem.

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