

# Jonathon Porritt

environmentalist & writer



[Home](#)

[The World We Made](#)

[Biographies](#)

[Forum for the Future](#)

[Campaigns](#)

[Affiliations](#)

[The Blog](#)

[View all](#)

[Aviation \(21\)](#)

[Built Environment \(7\)](#)

[China \(5\)](#)

[Climate change \(56\)](#)

[Consumption \(6\)](#)

[Crime \(1\)](#)

[Economics \(7\)](#)

[Energy \(87\)](#)

[Farming \(2\)](#)

[Genetic modification \(2\)](#)

[Government \(47\)](#)

[Health \(7\)](#)

[Housing \(7\)](#)

[Innovation \(12\)](#)

[News \(12\)](#)

[Politics \(52\)](#)

[Population \(18\)](#)

[Retail \(4\)](#)

[SD History \(5\)](#)

[Society \(15\)](#)

[Sustainable Food \(19\)](#)

[Transport \(4\)](#)

[USA \(5\)](#)

[Waste \(6\)](#)

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06. 10. 2009

## George Monbiot, The Guardian & population

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Under attack, yet again, from [George Monbiot in The Guardian](#) (September 28th) for continuing to campaign on population issues. Yes, well .....

On 27th January 1979, George Monbiot was celebrating his 16th birthday. I'm sure he was having lots of fun, in a precociously environment-friendly way.

On 27th January 1979, I was happily engaged in drafting the Ecology Party's Manifesto in preparation for the General Election in May 1979. As it happens, that Manifesto was particularly strong on equity issues, with an uncompromising call for the burden of taxation to target the very rich, and for economic policy explicitly to combat conspicuous consumption. As a member of the Green Party for the next 30 years, I've continued to advocate policy positions of that kind at every single point in my career.

I only mention all that just in case there's anyone else out there (apart from George Monbiot) who believes that just because I'm concerned about the issue of population that I must, by definition, be unconcerned about poverty, unconcerned about the super-rich, and only happy when schmoozing with billionaires on their luxury yachts.

It seems extraordinary that I should have to account for myself in that way. But the characterisation of people concerned about population as elitist, uncaring monomaniacs demeans those who use such rhetorical devices to exercise their own dim prejudices about population – such as George Monbiot.

For this particular attack, George prays-in-aid a new report from the eminent academic David Satterthwaite, just published in the journal *Environment and Urbanisation*. David has looked at the correlation between population growth and growth in greenhouse gas emissions in different parts of the world between 1980 – 2005. He comes to the not terribly surprising conclusion that in somewhere like sub-Saharan Africa, population has grown very fast (18.5%) and emissions hardly at all (2.4%), whereas it's the other way round in countries like the US. He goes on from there to suggest that the West simply shouldn't bother about spending billions of aid money providing contraception in the developing world, because poor people have such low per capita emissions anyway.

All very logical at first glance. But all very baffling when you dig a bit deeper. David's article also refers to China – where emissions have risen by 44.5% since 1980 (as per capita incomes rose fast), even as the population grew by very little because of their 'one child family' policy.

So just try out this retrospective hypothesis for the fun of it. Imagine, back in 1978, that the Chinese Government had petitioned rich countries to fund its family planning programme. Imagine, we'd said 'no', not on ethical grounds (for the purpose of this retrospective hypothesis), but because we didn't think it would represent 'good value for money' in terms of helping China keep future emissions of greenhouse gases under control.

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30 years later, as we now know, had there been no 'one child family' policy in place, there would have been 400 million additional Chinese citizens, each one of them now emitting on average 4.5 tonnes per annum – precisely because they've been getting richer faster. So do you think we might feel then just a touch regretful?

Fast forward to today. Imagine India came to us now asking for help with a new family planning programme. Simply not worth it, says David, because India's emissions are currently very low – less than 2 tonnes per person. So no family planning programme takes place – despite the fact that India's population is currently growing by around 15 million a year.

By 2035, that means that India's population will have risen by roughly one third of a billion additional citizens. Average per capita emissions will then have risen to (say) 4.5 tonnes per person – where China's emissions are today. (I can assure you that India would be very disappointed at such a slow rate of growth, by the way). That means another 1.4 billion tonnes of CO2 a year, that could have been abated, right now, at a remarkably low price. Nice one, David.

The point is a simple one. Hopefully (because poverty in these countries is wretched), poor people today (even in Africa) won't stay poor. And certainly I hope there's no one out there who believes that they will have to stay poor to help us with the problem of climate change. As incomes rise, so too will emissions. And if population is rising too, the end result is a substantial net increase in emissions – which could so easily be averted.

Take Uganda. 50% of Uganda's population of 33 million is aged below 15. Population is growing at 3.2%. Average fertility is around 6.5 children per woman. On a business-as-usual projection, Uganda's population will be around 100 million by 2050. (These figures are from the Population Reference Bureau.)

Worst case for Uganda? The country implodes, primarily because of completely unsustainable population growth. That means emissions stay low, but that's hardly a good economic outcome either for Uganda or for the world.

Slightly better case? Uganda's rich thrive, their incomes rise fast, and average emissions soar, even as the poor stay poor and their emissions don't rise.

Best case? Uganda introduces the best ever family planning programme in Africa, with unstinting support from the rich world. Incomes rise by more than in any other scenario, emissions rise too, but with a population of around 40 million (instead of 100 million) that's not really so much of a problem.

Unfortunately, Uganda's President Museveni is an out-and-out pro-natalist. He can't wait for Uganda to have a population in excess of 100 million. Neither, apparently, can George Monbiot.

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## Comments

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06. 10. 2009  
Julia Brown

Relentless logic, Jonathon, given that someone has to crack open the debate. Attaboy! Is it just me, or do others think that it would be good to see more women wading in to the population/consumption debate?

[reply](#)

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07. 10. 2009  
Anna Gallés

In my country, Spain the population debate does not exist, on the contrary, the policy is to increase birth rates to maintain a young workforce of nationals.

I am convinced that we cannot be blind to the population issue, and that we should handle it responsibly. Unfortunately, it is a very taboo matter.

I read an interesting report on Africa's fertility

<http://discuss.prb.org/content/interview/detail/3027/>

where a demography expert reminds that in developing countries there is a significant

percentage of women that cannot decide by themselves the number of children they wish to have, or have no access to contraception methods.

[reply](#)

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07. 10. 2009  
Tanya Dimitrova

Mr. Porritt,  
I have always sided with the idea of promotion of contraception and improved family care planning in third world countries. At the same time, I did find George Monbiot's perspective interesting, even though I also had a quite few arguments against it. The point is, though, that you are both very important and inspiring figures in the environmental movement. I understand that you differ greatly on certain issues, but such public disagreements (especially nagging at a more personal level) do not help the cause at all. I do believe that you can both work for the issues that each of you sees as most pressing independently from one another. :)  
Please take my words as face value, I am not trying to be confrontational.  
Greetings,  
Tanya

[reply](#)

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12. 10. 2009  
Jon Reeds

Jonathon,  
A key issue neither you nor Mr M have mentioned is not just how many of us there are or how we live, but where we live.  
For the first time in human history, more than half of us humans are now living in towns. That's a trend that once upset the environmental movement and I guess a fair proportion of the Ecology Party in 1979 would have had us living in tepees in south-west Wales. But in this sense, small isn't beautiful, because the per capita carbon emissions of city dwellers are far lower than those who live in rural areas, or the sprawling suburbs which became the default mode of affluent societies in the 20th century.  
Dispersed development of all kinds everywhere tends to be car dependent and high carbon. Even if we humans weren't increasing our population, we'd need to start living closer together - a necessity recognised by the smart growth movement in North America and sustainable urbanists in Europe.  
Anyway, a question for those who think population concern is a self-indulgence of rich nations - if world population isn't a problem now, when will it be? Seven billion? Eight billion? Ten billion? Twenty? When?  
What was it they used to say?  
"Overpopulation is everybody's baby."

[reply](#)

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15. 11. 2009  
**Andrew Sterling**

Seems to me we live in a largely misery or world of terrible discontent. Either you are miserably poor or you are miserably rich. Few are truly, stably, content.  
The poor seem to breed as a hoped-for way out and the rich consume for the same reason. But no-one actually physically, or psychologically, needs more than what is basically necessary.  
The solution then is for us to focus on the real means of fulfilment, give up exploiting the poor and create meaningful, locally-based economies - which are then intrinsically low in emissions and (presumably) low in population growth.  
Trouble is that corporates and government are intertwined and have no interest in this, and few amongst us rich folk are content enough to see it either.  
If I am right, this is the message I would want both Messrs Porritt and Monbiot to bang on about instead of fighting.

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05. 01. 2010  
rob elliott

Lets face it, big business wants a forever increasing population of consumers & politicians want an increasing electorate to hold sway over. One thing for sure, nothing will be done by either group until desperate measures are needed, since they have short term agenda`s either for profit or power. Change will have to come from the general population to curb itself. A better life & raised standards is possible for all provided the "ALL" is small enough.

reply

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10. 01. 2011

Pete

'Make Greed History' is an interesting idea.  
Seems to be the general sentiment right now.  
Used to ponder the ultimate result of 'Make Poverty History'.  
Ended up with 'Make Greed The Future'.  
Bottom line is that there are too many people, consuming consuming too much stuff.  
The earth has limits.  
So should we.

This is a great film - <http://www.collapsemovie.com>

reply

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16. 02. 2010

Miriam Yagud

Dear Jonathan

I was disappointed to read your response to George Monbiots article The Population Myth in the Guardian. There was more than a hint of testosterone fuelled hubris in your attack on him.

I share his analysis and just today had a look at the IEA document made available in time for the Copenhagen conference. You can find it at <http://www.iea.org/co2highlights>

You say you have been considering equality since at least 1979, yet you seem happy to imply that CO2 emissions are emitted equally by a population when we all know - don't we? - that rich people with plenty of money to spend have a greater carbon footprint than poor people with less money.

The richer the country the greater the CO2 emissions. While the UK and DRC have a similar global share of the population, CO2 emissions in the DRC are 0.04 compared to 8.6 in the UK. The more purchasing power a population has, the more they spend on manufactured goods the greater their CO2 emissions and the fewer children they have.

I'm surprised that women's and children's human rights are so overlooked in your vehement protestations on population control. In discussions with people who link climate change to population growth I find plenty of focus on how mothers die in childbirth, how children are born or aborted and teenage pregnancies, but little or no mention of the conditions in which children are conceived. Poor women and girls give birth to more children than women, like me, who live in a rich country with a fairer share of social and economic power in society. Population growth has everything to do with how much control we have over our bodies and our reproduction. Its not contraceptives that will cut CO2 emissions, but redistribution of wealth and a fairer share of power in society. We need to have the social and economic power to say no to men and parents and for that to be respected and promoted at government level. Its not poverty we have to focus on, but greed and unequal power. Let's start a campaign called "Make Greed History".

reply

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26. 10. 2011

neil jones

Can't you see that all people, including poor women are greedy. Once people escape poverty they set about increasing their consumption.

reply

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19. 04. 2014  
dan mayo

It is surprisingly and unfortunately common how many greenies don't get the overpopulation problem.

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15. 01. 2019  
Francesca Morton

The reason those countries weren't increasing emissions despite the population but now they are is because they didn't have the same lifestyles. It is important to keep population growth down but it's even more important to keep animal agriculture down and stop the developing world from desiring the lifestyles of the developed countries. That's the most important issue to focus on, not simply population control.

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