

FOSSIL FUEL-FREE ACTIVISTS SHOULD FOCUS FIRST ON SELF-SACRIFICE

John F. Chant

UBC students, faculty and staff groups have passed resolutions calling for the university to divest itself of fossil fuel investments. This effort has not convinced the university's board of governors. At its most recent meeting, it voted against selling off its \$85 million stake in fossil-fuel businesses.

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The petitioners' efforts have been praised as being ethical and moral. Yet that praise may be excessive: the petitioners have only made a gesture of signing a petition. They have not had to bear any other costs.

The evidence about the impact of divestment is unclear. It may or

may not reduce the university's investment returns. If it does, the costs will not be borne by the petitioners but by future researchers and students. Future researchers will face less generous research support and future students will receive diminished financial aid.

However, the petitioners could demonstrate their support for their cause (of curtailing oil production) more fully in several ways. First, they could undertake to reduce their own carbon footprint by pledging not to use transportation based on carbon energy. Many of them already cycle to work. Second, they could also vow to avoid air travel for attending conferences, for their research purposes, and for their holidays. While carbon offsets may assuage their consciences, they, like medieval indulgences, cannot erase the act of greenhouse gas production.



Another significant step would be to commit to generally sourcing foods from beyond their immediate locale.

They could also pledge to switch away from eating carbon inefficient foods. A first step would be to forego the consumption of meat. The Suzuki Foundation argues that growing livestock for food is extremely inefficient and that the production of one kilogram of meat takes five to seven kilograms of grain. This grain in turn “takes considerable energy and water to produce, process and transport.”

Another significant step would be to commit to generally sourcing foods from beyond their immediate locale. They may have to sacrifice their enjoyment of fresher taste but this freshness comes at the cost of inefficient energy use and higher greenhouse gas production. A U.K.

government study, for example, has shown that locally grown tomatoes produced four times the carbon emissions of tomatoes grown in Spain and shipped to U.K.

Some sacrifice by the petitioners would make their commitment more credible. Actions speak louder than words. Think hunger strikes and Ghandi. Think bus boycotts and Montgomery, Alabama. Think helping the deprived and Jean Vanier.

These actions would demonstrate the petitioners’ belief in their cause far more effectively than any number of declarations, resolutions and petitions. [C](#)

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John F. Chant is Professor Emeritus of Economics at Simon Fraser University. He is also a Senior Fellow and on the Editorial Board at the Fraser Institute.