

The Pivotal Generation:  
Unprecedented Responsibilities in an Unprecedented Historical Period  
[Geneva Environment Network, 7 December 2020]

Henry Shue, University of Oxford

1. The current generation is the pivotal generation in human history. Why is it pivotal?

A. We are the first generation to have the spectacular opportunity to establish a limit on the extent of climate change. The extent of climate change is currently unlimited - it is now worsening without any boundary or floor under how much worse it becomes. The climate change cannot be limited until carbon emissions reach net zero because otherwise the atmospheric accumulation of CO<sub>2</sub> continues to increase. And as long as the accumulation continues to increase, climate change worsens. Our generation is the first to understand the dynamics of the climate well enough to have a chance to control when net zero is reached. We may be able to set a floor under the worst that can happen to future generations. This would be an invaluable moral achievement that would reverberate across millennia.

B. We may be the last generation capable of limiting the extent of climate change. The dynamics of the climate system are not linear. Instead they contain numerous tipping points, at which change can abruptly speed up or become more severe. In some cases this non-linear change constitutes a positive feedback in which one form of worsening feeds other forms of worsening. And some of these positive feedbacks are irreversible, for example, the melting of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet. The longer we delay the arrival at net zero carbon emissions, the more we risk allowing a cascade of positive feedbacks to become entrenched, perhaps accelerating in ways humans can no longer control.

2. But is not the responsibility of entrenching an Energy Revolution – an irreversible transition away from the current fossil fuel regime - too much to ask of one generation?

A. Each generation faces the contingencies it faces. As the maps say, “you are here”. Perhaps some other centuries were pleasanter - this is the one we live in. We must play the hand we have been dealt. A generation chooses its response, but it cannot choose its challenges. We can be the ones who rose to the occasion, or the ones who were too self-absorbed to respond. Our choice will determine how future generations live (and how they remember us).

B. If we fail to meet the challenge, future generations will face tasks that are both (a) harder than ours and (b) harder than they would have been if we had acted. We would in effect have shifted burdens we could have carried forward in time to fall upon their shoulders. Easing our burdens by making theirs heavier is unfair, especially since future generations are entirely at our mercy. (They might be wealthier than we, but only if climate change does not meanwhile undermine the sustainability of the economy. And wealth might or might not be able to deal adequately with a still worsening climate.)