



Harvard Faculty for Divestment

For a fossil-free endowment

harvardfacultydivest.com

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To our colleagues at the University of Oxford,

Oxford students calling on St. John's College to divest from fossil fuels recently met with a dispiriting response: their bursar, Andrew Parker, refused their demands but offered to turn off the central gas heating instead. The *Wall Street Journal* picked up this story with glee, framing the students as hypocrites who received a cool dose of "[common sense](#)."

Here at Harvard, we have spent the past several months debating the merits of divestment with our colleagues. (We review many of these arguments in our [white paper](#) and transcripts of the debates are [online](#).) Parker's argument, borrowed [directly](#) from the misinformation [campaigns](#) trying to undermine the credibility of climate science, is wrong. The Oxford community, and Oxford faculty in particular, should work to ensure that their debate on the merits of divestment cedes no ground to those who would mire us in endless rhetorical distraction. Faculty members can do so in part by adding their legitimacy to the voices of students.

No defensible moral principle will tell us that we cannot work to rectify some wrong if we are in any way implicated, even involuntarily, in the perpetuation of that wrong. Widespread wrongs often involve entrenched institutions, from which there is no instantaneous escape; that fact does not shield such institutions from ethical pressure. We do not accuse 19th-century abolitionists of *hypocrisy* because the only clothing available to them was made of cotton, harvested by slave labor. Similarly, our unpreventable dependence on fossil fuels does not undermine our *standing* to join in a concerted effort to rein in their combustion. Rather, the opposite is true: the more deeply our lives are entangled with fossil fuels, the greater our responsibility to support collective decarbonization in every way possible. What makes no "common sense" is to continue using fossil fuels longer than necessary.

Our debates at Harvard have just concluded with a vote overwhelmingly in favor of a motion calling on our Corporation to divest from the worst offenders in the fossil fuel industry: those who seek to increase our dependence on carbon by investing in the discovery and exploitation of new fossil fuel reserves. The debates were serious, both intellectually and morally; they explored the issues from a number of different viewpoints; they involved deep but unfailingly respectful disagreement. And not once – not even by the most diehard opponents of divestment – was the charge of hypocrisy wheeled out. We focused on substance, not "zombie arguments" from fossil fuel misinformation campaigns, that rear their heads after every clear refutation in order to confuse the issues and paralyze serious discussion of the climate crisis and the measures we must all take to address it.

No one should underestimate the scope and systematicity of these campaigns. They are well-financed, well thought out, skillfully executed, and profoundly [insidious](#) and [destructive](#). They succeed by sowing doubt and confusion, not just about the science behind the climate crisis but – just as importantly – about the moral contours of humanity's response to that crisis. Humanity is in trouble. We all need to act – quickly, collectively – to decarbonize our economies, our energy sectors, our ways of life. That is the work of years, during which we cannot help but continue to rely on the very fuels that are slowly killing our planet. It is a horrible predicament to have to face. But the right way to face it is not to shout

“hypocrisy!” while burying our heads in the sand; it is to own up to our own unavoidable complicity, and to act as one in drawing it to a close as quickly as we can.

Given the nature and history of this predicament, it is especially heinous for outlets like the Wall Street Journal to grouse at young people calling for divestment that they should be quiet unless they are willing to make extraordinary sacrifices. Many students *already* sacrifice a great deal of time and effort to push for a post-carbon transition. More importantly, our generation's failure to act has essentially sacrificed their future prosperity without them having any say. With such a great failure comes a great responsibility that we faculty members must take up, by joining our knowledge, connections, and credibility to the energy and purpose of our students.

It is a shame that the *Wall Street Journal* exhibits such short-term thinking. One would hope for better from a paper devoted to business. Still, the more important thing is for those of us engaged in serious debate to ignore those outlets that still promote these debunked arguments and proceed with the important changes that need to happen. Divestment is only a first step. But it is a serious and sensible one.

Sincerely,
Harvard Faculty for Divestment

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