

“You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today.”- Abraham Lincoln

Critically evaluate this statement by considering the notion of responsibility and the relative roles of business, governments and society in general in assuming responsibility for a more sustainable future.

Lincoln's call to action to take responsibility, made in the 19th century, is just as relevant today as ever as we find ourselves living within a climate and ecological crisis. This unprecedented time requires us all to take collective responsibility and actions to ensure a sustainable future for our planet and communities.

But what is meant by responsibility? And what does taking responsibility in the face of climate change mean?

The Cambridge Online Dictionary defines responsibility as “something that it is your job or duty to deal with.” (Cambridge Online Dictionary, 2021)

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines responsibility as “the state of being the person who caused something to happen”, “a duty or task that you are required or expected to do” and “something that you should do because it is morally right, legal required etc.” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2021)

It is evident that responsibility has many meanings, but these definitions do not capture the essence of what it means to feel responsible, or indeed explain how people come to feel responsibility for acting in a more sustainable way.

When discussing climate change and a sustainable future this notion of feeling and taking responsibility is an important one. Responsibility is taken by some, and not by others, and when responsibility is taken it is taken to varying and differing degrees of action. This is something that we can see happening across government, business and society.

For example, 192 Parties signed the UN Paris Climate Agreement (United Nations, 2021) to reduce global carbon emissions, however in 2017 the US, despite being the second biggest carbon emitter in the World, withdrew from Agreement which Donald Trump said was on the basis of fulfilling his solemn duty to protect America and its citizens. (BBC, 2017)

Or another example of this happening within society is the number of people taking responsibility for their carbon footprint and committing not to fly. (Vox, 2021), The disastrous impact of flying on the environment is one that is widely known, though the number of people flying is increasing year on year, i.e. reducing flying is a responsibility seen by some and not by others. (Statista, *Global Air Traffic – scheduled passengers 2004-2022*, 2021)

Understanding the notion of responsibility can help us to understand how people assume their roles in working towards a more sustainable future, but the notion is a complex one, and one that has been the subject of much philosophical contemplation.

Philosophers over the decades have discussed the notion of responsibility in four different areas. (Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, *Responsibility*, 2021)

Moral Agency

Immanuel Kant believed that humans by nature are rational beings that possess moral agency, that is the ability to make ethical decisions and act on them from an internal framework of what is morally right and morally wrong. Kant argued that one should act as if one's actions defined laws for humanity as a whole. (Philosophy Now, *What is Responsibility?*, 2006)

This is an interesting concept when looking at how people take responsibility on climate change as it is clear that not all individuals consider themselves to have the responsibility or a role to play in ensuring a sustainable future. A study undertaken by Deloitte last year looked at consumer behaviour and sustainable, out of those who said they had not made any changes to their behaviour based on environmental reasons 22% of them said it was because they were “not interested”. (Deloitte, 2021)

Retrospective responsibility

This is backward looking approach to exploring responsibility. Retrospective responsibility means that one is responsible for something that has happened. In this occurrence, people come to feel responsible because they see how their actions have had an impact, whether positive or negative, and feel they are to blame for the current situation or occurrence.

This is a relevant area of responsibility when discussing climate change. It is widely understood that global warming has been the cause of human activity, and that there has been a rapid rise in global temperatures since the industrial revolution. In this context it is important to recognise that humans, and this includes governments, business and individuals, have retrospective responsibility for climate change.

Prospective responsibility

This is a forward looking approach to understanding responsibility. Prospective responsibility arises where a person feels they have the responsibility to act to bring about something good or change something “even if one’s previous actions have nothing to do with the situation”. (Lahikainen, 2018)

Prospective responsibility is particularly relevant area when discussing roles and responsibilities for mitigating climate change. It is understandable that not everyone will feel retrospective responsibility for climate change, as the crisis has arisen over hundreds of years it is not the individual actions of current generations that caused the crisis, though it is critical that everyone takes action to overcome the impact of climate change to ensure the future of our communities and planet.

Responsibility as a Virtue

Responsibility as a virtue is close to how we consider responsibility in our everyday lives, that it is a characteristic held by an individual or organisation, that enables them to think responsible and take responsibility for things that need action.

This definition of responsibility embodies the three and when discussing responsibility in climate change, this is the definition that would be the ideal. Individuals, businesses and governments that embody responsibility as a virtue have an internal code of moral ethics that encourages them to do the right thing, they understand their role in causing climate change and most important understand their responsibility, and are empowered, to take action to improve the situation. (Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, *Responsibility*, 2021)

For the purpose of this essay and exploring the roles which government, business and society in general have in taking responsibility and action for a sustainable future we will be examining roles through the lens of prospective responsibility and responsibility as a virtue – that is the duties and power we have to bring about something good or change something. The reasons for this is that whilst it is well known that the actions of individuals and businesses have contributed to climate change, and it is important to know this, understanding our roles in bringing about change is more

important than examining the past (retrospective responsibility) to assign blame - and as quoted by Lincoln, it is about the “responsibility of tomorrow.”

Examining the responsibility and role of Government

The role and responsibility of government for acting for a more sustainable future is a significant one.

Governments work on behalf of the nations and communities that they represent, and studies have found that citizens expect their governments to be acting on climate change. A poll undertaken by GlobeScan in the summer of 2021, just ahead of the COP26 Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, found that 61% of people believed that governments hold a “great deal” of responsibility when it comes to addressing climate change and 56% of people from the 31 countries surveyed wanted their government to “play a leadership role in setting ambitious targets” to address climate change. (GlobeScan, 2021)

In 18 of those countries surveyed this expectation of responsibility had grown from 43% ahead of the Paris conference in 2015 to the recent summit in November 2021.

Governments are responsible for developing and passing legislation (laws) within their countries, which influence the ways in which public bodies, businesses and individuals work and live. Legislation is instrumental in ensuring that climate resilience, climate adaptation and sustainability is given the focus and priority needed from business, organisations and individuals by making it a legal duty to work and act sustainably.

An example of one of these laws being introduced by a government is the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. (Welsh Government, 2015) The Act was introduced by the Welsh Government in 2015 and gave a national translation of the United Nations Global Sustainable Development Goals. (UN, 2021) The law placed sustainable development at the heart of public bodies in Wales and made the improvement of the country’s social, economic, environment and cultural well-being a legally binding responsibility.

The Act requires Welsh public bodies to be working towards 7 goals;

- A Globally Responsible Wales
- A Prosperous Wales
- A Resilient Wales
- A Healthier Wales
- A More Equal Wales
- A Wales of Cohesive Communities
- A Wales of Vibrant Culture and Thriving Welsh Language

As well as legislating the well-being goals, the Welsh Government also provided a list of 40 clear indicators for public bodies to measure their success against, this helped to provide detail of how the overarching goals would be delivered in practice and made them tangible and relevant to their areas of work. The Act also requires public bodies to produce annual reports on their progress towards the national indicators which helped to embed the goals as a way of working and ensure organisations became accountable to the legislation and took the required responsibility for a sustainable future. (Welsh Government, 2015)

Legislation however is not always enough to enact the change required within organisations, businesses and societies to overcome climate change. Governments also have a responsibility to re-

develop and re-design key public services to align with policy and legislation and set statutory targets to ensure progress is being made.

An example of where a government has taken this responsibility to ensure public services are designed to promote and allow sustainable behaviour is the programme to increase household waste recycling within Wales.

Wales is rated the second best at household waste recycling in the World (Guardian, 2017), and in 2020-2021 achieved a impressive 65.4% recycling rate and a 2.6% fall in the overall waste produced. (LetsRecycle, 2021)

This hasn't always been the picture however, in 1998 – 99 Wales' recycling rate was just 5.2%. (Welsh Government, 2021)

This significant increase was achieved through a targeted campaign. The Welsh government imposed minimum targets on local authorities who provided household waste collections to ensure that the responsibility for reaching the target was shared by all parties. It also invested more than £1billion to develop new recycling infrastructure, improve waste management services and encouraged increased separation of waste streams. (Welsh Government, 2021)

The Welsh Government has now set an ambitious target to recycle 70% of household waste by 2025. (Welsh Government, *Beyond Recycling*, 2021)

However, whilst there have been some examples of where governments have taken responsibility on climate change by implementing legislation and targets and re-designing services, there is still much to be criticised in how governments have not played their role or taken the right level of responsibility when it comes to climate change. On occasions there appears to be a gap between delivering their responsibility as law makers, and acting on them.

In June 2021, the UK Climate Change Committee, an independent body established under the Climate Change Act 2008 to advise the UK and devolved governments on preparing for and mitigating climate change, (Climate Change Committee, 2021) produced a report that assessed the UK's current climate risks which included impact on soil health, hazards to habitats and risks to the economy. The report also reviewed the actions being taken by the government to overcome these. The results of the assessment were alarming and showed how we are falling far behind on adapting to climate change. The report said; "The UK has the capacity and the resources to respond effectively to these risks, yet it has not done so. Acting now will be cheaper than waiting to deal with the consequences. Government must lead that action." (Climate Change Committee, *Independent Assessment of UK Climate Risk*, 2021)

Another example of where governments have appeared to take responsibility but not acted on it, is with the introduction of the Net Zero UK by 2050 target but failing to stop the development of a new oil field. The Net Zero strategy legislates the UK's ambition to become carbon neutral in less than 30 years, which includes the decarbonisation of our power stations. (HM Government, 2021) Therefore the entertainment of an application to open a new oil field which will produce emissions equivalent to running 18 coal fired power stations for a year, (Greenpeace, 2021) is completely contradictory to its own policies and ambitions. It should be noted that this project is now on pause, but not due to government aligning its actions to its own legislation but because Shell, one of the companies behind the project, has pulled out for "economic reasons."

The role of governments in ensuring a sustainable future is a significant one as their sphere of influence through policies, legislation and national targets has the capacity to bring about huge positive change for the sustainability of our planet.

Though some responsibility is being taken to legislate carbon reduction as examined before, further work to embed responsibility as a virtue and recognise the responsibility as a role model and to align all areas of government actions to the sustainability agenda to ensure we are seeing the changes needed.

Examining the responsibility and role of Businesses

Business operations have a great impact on the environment in the UK through emission of greenhouse gases and consumption of natural resources. This means they have a key role to play in ensuring the sustainability of our planet and society but also a key opportunity to adapt and become leaders in innovation to overcome the climate crisis.

In the UK, business sectors are responsible for producing more than 43% of greenhouse gas emissions (the emissions for energy supply and agriculture have been included in this figure as these are in most, if not all, cases commercial entities where a responsibility for sustainable practices, carbon reduction and improved land management should be felt and therefore should not be emitted in this statistic – the breakdown for each sector is as follows; Business – 18.2%, Energy Supply – 15.4%, Agriculture – 10%) (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2021)

It is therefore encouraging to see that many businesses within the UK have recognised their responsibility to reduce their impact on the environment by committing to more sustainable business practices.

Businesses are changing to reduce their impact on the environment in a number of different ways, such as increasing their use of renewable energy, Amazon for example has committed to powering 100% of its operations through renewable energy. (Amazon, 2021) Others have committed to reducing the use of water in their operations or reducing their use of single use virgin plastics.

Other businesses have taken steps to reduce their impact through vehicle use by moving to electric vehicles. Last year British Gas placed the UK's biggest electrical vehicle order on its journey to decarbonising its fleet of commercial vehicles. Further more the company has committed to transition to a fully electrified fleet by 2030. (Centrica, 2020)

There has also been a rise in the number of businesses starting to move away from a linear business process towards a more circular economy model. The circular economy is an economic model which seeks to eliminate waste by either re-circulating products and materials in to new products, making products more durable and making more reusable products. This ensured that our natural resources are kept in circulation for as long as possible. (Chatham House, 2021)

One example of a business moving towards a circular economy model of production is Fairphone. Fairphone is a producer of sustainable mobile phones. The company has adopted fair sourcing principles for the precious metals and minerals required for its products, and going against the current trend of mobiles the phone has been designed to last as long as possible as Fairphone provide modules to upgrade or fix phones, meaning less phones end up being waste. (Fairphone, 2021)

One of the roles businesses have in ensuring a sustainable future is to find innovative new solutions to replace current methods of producing energy or manufacturing to ensure we can move towards a

new and greener society. ITM Power are a company leading the way in designing and manufacturing electrolyser systems to generate green hydrogen which will play a key role in the future of the UK's energy supply and transport sector. (ITM Power, 2021)

Many businesses are taking responsibility for ensuring a sustainable future by working towards an externally verified certifications that measure social and environmental impact such as B Corp.

B Corp requires businesses to make a legal commitment to reducing their impact on the environment and society by changing their Articles of Association and undertaking a rigorous assessment of their business practices such as their environmental management system, code of ethics and supply chain management. Companies aiming for the accreditation must also commit to a programme of improvement with support from B Corp.

To date more than 4000 businesses have undertaken a B Corp certification. (B Corp, 2021)

However recently, some actions undertaken by businesses to act on climate change has come under fire and has been labelled as greenwashing.

Greenwashing is not a very new term, Jay Westerveld first used the word in 1986 in an essay criticising hotels for the "save the towel" campaigns, which after witnessing the amount of waste occurring in other areas of hotels, he said was not in the interest of the environment but instead one of cost cutting. (Earth.org, 2021) And in a time where people are making more consumer choices based on environmental ethics, for example a study undertaken by Deloitte on consumer behaviour and sustainable lifestyles found that 28% of those surveyed had stopped buying some products due to environmental and ethical concerns, the term greenwashing is particularly relevant! (Deolitte, 2021)

Greta Thunberg famously left a meeting on carbon offsetting at the recent COP26 conference, saying that companies were greenwashing. (Guardian, 2021) Voluntary carbon offsetting allows companies to purchase carbon credits, usually created through tree planting or carbon sequestration, to offset or cancel out the carbon emissions they are producing. It is heavily criticised as a way of avoiding action on real carbon reduction which is necessary to ensure the sustainability and future of our planet. (World Economic Forum, 2021)

Shell for example has committed to becoming net zero carbon by 2050 (Shell, 2021) by investing in cleaner fuel sources such as hydrogen and looking for ways to offset its emissions. The business however continues to extract oil and gas as its main business operations which produces significant amounts of greenhouse gas emissions and has many new major projects in development. (Shell, 2021)

Businesses have the opportunity to lead the way in finding new solutions to ensure a sustainable future, but responsibility to change and innovate must be felt across all sectors and all sizes of businesses.

Examining the responsibility and role of Businesses

The average annual carbon footprint of individuals living in the UK is 12.7tonnes of CO₂e (Pawprint, 2021). If everyone on Earth consumed natural resources in the same way that British people did, it would require the resources of three planets to support all lifestyles. (University of York, 2021)

All individuals have a responsibility and a role to reduce their impact on the environment, and it is encouraging to see that environmental awareness is growing yearly and a survey undertaken by Pew Research Centre in Spring 2021 found that 84% of people in the UK were willing to make changes to

their lifestyles to reduce the impact of climate change. (Pew Research Centre, 2021) This is evidence that people are starting to recognise how their actions impact the environment and want to take responsibility for that.

Some of the roles individuals can take in ensuring a sustainable future are using renewable energy in homes, reducing the amount of meat and dairy we consume or significantly reducing the amount of single use plastics we consume.

Arguable of the most important things we can do as individuals in the fight to overcome climate change is to use our collective voice to influence businesses and governments by speaking up for the type of future we want for our planet. This includes becoming an ethical consumer and demanding more sustainable products and practices from businesses or not buying at all. Or urging our governments to take real and practical action on climate change, as was seen recently with the marches in Glasgow for COP26 Climate Change conference. (BBC News, 2021)

Placing the responsibility for taking action on climate change with society in general, or on individuals, is a controversial one however and has come under much debate over recent years. Whilst individual actions do have an impact on the environment it can be said that it only goes a small way to mitigating the impacts of the significant greenhouse gas emissions of large corporates – just 100 companies are responsible for 71% of all global emissions since 1988. (CDP, 2017)

Appealing to people's virtues can be seen as a way for governments and businesses to pass the responsibility for taking action on climate change. The notion of individual carbon footprinting became popularised from a PR campaign run by British Petroleum – one of the largest emitters of greenhouse gases. (The Guardian, 2021)

Whilst it is not difficult to see how positive individual actions are shadowed by the negative actions of governments or businesses, it is important to recognise that collective actions from individuals have a significant impact on a sustainable future.

Conclusion

It is clear that governments, businesses and individuals all have a responsibility for climate change and a sustainable future. Our roles in bringing about change are all different but are all important and essential.

The crisis that we find ourselves in requires us all to take responsibility, and these responsibilities are very much interlinked. Governments must take a strategic approach by providing the legal guidelines and legislation to improve behaviours and practices, businesses must drive forward innovation and seek to find new ways to reduce and reuse our natural resources and individuals must make lifestyle changes that in turn influence new policy and business innovations.

The responsibility for solving climate change cannot fall to individuals, nor can it fall solely to business, or solely to governments. The solution to solving the climate crisis lies in world wide collective responsibility and action, a global effort to overcome a global crisis.

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