

# Town Hall

*Lucy van de Wiel, November '17*

Sometimes meetings give you a tremble, a shiver, a light sweat. When each minute feels more charged because you can sense that there is so much at stake in what is said, and what is heard. When the words speak to the lives of so many and a range of possible futures are folded in the present moment.

Tonight felt that way.

There were perhaps 40 or 50 of us. The chair addressed us as a voice—a collective voice for the university that is beholden to the futures we wish to see. We spoke about carbon, flowers, corporations, chemistry, funding, rats, human rights, death and, beyond death, extinction.

We spoke about bluebell fields missing the spring sun as the trees overhead grew their leaves too quickly, too soon. We spoke about the empty nests of starving birds whose migration patterns no longer matched their food supplies. We spoke about the first mammal species that vanished after rising sea levels drowned its habitat.

We spoke when a man with a kind face took the stage and voiced the existential risk that climate change posed as a cause of human extinction. He was apologetic as he listed the familiar likelihoods of global disruptions and unequal catastrophes. He drew attention to the unlikely, but not unrealistic, possibility of runaway climate change.

Investment in fossil fuels, he said, not only ran counter to the university's mission to be a positive force for change in the world, but challenged the idea that the university would continue to exist in perpetuity. Its investments posed an existential risk to the land, the people and ecosystems upon which the university's own imagined permanency depends.

We spoke when a young woman with bright eyes told in the voice of a thousand students of the duty to protect future generations from the effects of climate change. She painted a picture of the moon and the sea and scaled the small individual efforts of recycling and lighting against divestment as the most important, structural way to make a difference.

We spoke when a slender man with a wavy beard stated this was a matter of social justice for the climate victims in the Global South and beyond. When he was told to stop after his allotted 4 minutes, and listed all the groups that have spoken out for divestment in Cambridge.

And we did when a student, her arms dangling loosely from her shoulders, asked why Cambridge would want to be associated with companies known for their human rights violations. She reminded us that only 0.4% of research funding comes from fossil fuel companies, and an audience member remarked that it would certainly be unethical, if not extortion, to make research funding contingent on investments.

Did we speak with those who spoke out against divestment? A man in suit explained that divestment did not have the desired effects from a financial point of view. A man with white hair pleaded for engagement, not divorce. It was more important that we reduce the CO<sub>2</sub> footprint of the atmosphere rather than that of the endowment. It is obvious we will shoot over 2°C, he said, so we will need to work with companies to create negative emissions.

Some started with a prelude about their concern about climate change. Some praised their use of a hybrid car or flaunted a bike helmet. Others emphasised the good intentions of those working in the fossil fuel companies. Noone denied the seriousness of the effects of fossil fuel extraction, although some effects were deemed more dismissable than others.

The teachers unions, the student unions, the zoologists and the biologists and the sociologists, the philosophers, the chaplains, the activists, the project managers, the psychologists, the chemists, the material scientists, the young, the old, the students, the professors, the men, the women.

Who is the we of our collective voice? How does the university speak? What futures does its speech create?

I spoke and heard my voice amplified. I spoke about the visibility of inaction. The question is not about whether we should divest, but about the continued act of investment. As shown in the recent [Paradise Papers](#), it is investment, not divestment, that makes Cambridge and its colleges stand out as supporters of the fossil fuel industry.

One man gesticulated passionately as he spoke about the need to work with the fossil fuel companies to solve the carbon problems. His voice trembled. The rest of the meeting he stared at the table, holding his head in his hands.

A man in a brightly-coloured jumper argued with fire in his voice that climate change was rooted in a broader crisis of democratic society. The university should be a role model, not an enabler. In a toxic relationship, divorce, rather than engagement, is necessary as a public statement of symbolic importance.

An English faculty member remarked on the gender, age and life/social sciences divide between the different sides of the argument.

Two young female scientists spoke up in response. One suggested we could divest and invest at different points in time. It need not be a binary. Another argued that fossil fuel companies were increasingly becoming energy companies who develop renewables.

A young man proposed that, in that case, it would make more sense to simply invest in renewable energy companies. And would it not indeed be naïve, argued someone else, to expect fossil fuel companies not to produce fossil fuels—in the same way it would be absurd to invest in arms companies and seek to persuade them not to sell arms?

A rational man in suit spoke in a loud rational voice. I could not hear him.

Another man proposed that investing in fossil fuels only makes sense if you don't expect the Paris agreement will hold. This is not a message the university would want to send out.

A woman spoke with passion for divestment on behalf of the teacher's union.

A man pleaded against divestment and for engagement with the industry.

Someone called for the middle ground.

I was given the last word. I said that it was precisely the role of the university to be able to engage, to reach out irrespective of financial interest. The University of Cambridge ought not to rely on investments to be heard.

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Afterwards, I went up to the working group who organised the meeting. I thanked a student whose eyes were gentle. I pressed the weight of responsibility on her shoulders.

I spoke in hyperboles about the fundamentals of our existence to a beautiful and well-behaved man.

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What does the university reproduce? Sarah Franklin regularly reminds us of this question. Tonight it was a sense of futurity, an urgency of the time to come to which we are beholden.

Whose lives are imagined in this future? Who will safeguard the conditions of their birth and the liveability of their existence?

We will hear one answer in May 2018, when the working group will voice its response.

Until then, I will remind myself to honour the privilege of an amplified voice and to tremble at the unspeakable:

### **Midnight Oil**

--by Sheryl St. Germain

how to speak of it  
this thing that doesn't rhyme  
or pulse in iambs or move in predictable ways  
like lines  
or sentences

how to find the syntax  
of this thing  
that rides the tides  
and moves with the tides and under the tides  
and through the tides  
and has an underbelly so deep and wide  
even our most powerful lights  
cannot illuminate its full body

this is our soul shadow,  
that darkness we cannot own  
the form we cannot name

and I can only write about it at night  
when my own shadow wakes me, when I can feel  
night covering every pore and hair follicle, entering eyes  
and ears, entering me like Zeus, a night I don't want  
on me or in me, and I dream of giving birth  
to a rusty blob of a child who slithers out of me,  
out and out and won't stop slithering, growing and darkening,  
spreading and pulsing between my legs  
darkening into the world

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what it might feel like to be a turtle, say,  
swimming in the only waters you have ever known  
swimming because it is the only way you move through the world  
to come upon this black bile

a kind of cloying lover

a thing that looks to you

like a jellyfish, so you dive into it and try to eat it

but it covers your fins so they can't move as before

and there is a heaviness on your carapace and head

that wasn't there before, and you are blind

in the waters of your birth