

Corporate Power and “Toxic Allegiances” behind Destruction of Biodiversity, Poisonous Agrochemicals and Contaminated Food

Dr. Rosemary Mason's Open Letter To The Oxford Martin Commission (OMC)

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The [Oxford Martin School](#) is based at Oxford University in the UK. In what seems to be a laudable aim, the school has set up the ‘[Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations](#)’ (OMC), which has brought together 19 international leaders from government, business and civil society to address the growing short-term preoccupations of modern politics and business and identify ways of overcoming today’s gridlock in key international negotiations.

These prominent figures include Lord Chris Patten, Arianna Huffington and Lionel Barber from the British media. The OMC’s website says that a diverse group of highly respected global leaders has called for a radical shake-up in politics and business to deliver progress on climate change, reduce economic inequality, improve corporate practices and address the chronic burden of disease. There is also talk of working for a sustainable future and promoting inclusiveness.

Toxic agrochemicals, disease and the environment

Rosemary Mason is a prominent figure who campaigns against the use of toxic agrochemicals and has just written an 18-page, 9,200-word open letter to Achim Steiner, Director Oxford Martin School. Steiner is the former United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Director General. Much of what follows is a summary of some the letter’s key points. Readers can consult the original document for all of Mason’s supporting evidence, including links to papers, documents and reports: [open-letter-to-the-director-of-the-oxford-martin-school](#).

Achim Steiner
Director
Oxford Martin School
Oxford OX1 3D

Dear Achim Steiner

In your position as former UNEP Director-General I copied you into a document that I sent to the US EPA: **Grave Inaccuracies and Omissions in US EPA Glyphosate Issue Paper: Evaluation of Carcinogenic Potential**. However, I understand that you have just moved from UNEP, to be Director of the Oxford Martin School. In fact, I believe it is particularly apposite for you to share this document with all your colleagues in the Oxford Martin Commission and School.

May I remind you of the introduction to the UNEP Report on Global Bee Colony Disorders and Other Threats to Insect Pollinators¹ that you launched in March 2011: *“Current evidence demonstrates that a sixth major extinction of biodiversity event is underway. The earth is*

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If there is one area of business and politics that requires a “radical shake up,” it is food, agriculture and the agrochemicals sector. Mason opines that humans and the environment are silently being poisoned by thousands of untested and unmonitored chemicals, which are highly profitable for big corporations that have a vested interest in keeping their toxic products on the commercial market.

With the OMC’s desire to ensure a healthy and sustainable future in mind, Mason expresses concern about the agrochemicals industry’s impacts on pollinators (bees), biodiversity and human health and reminds Steiner about the introduction to the UNEP report on ‘Global Bee Colony Disorders and Other Threats to Insect Pollinators’, which he launched in March 2011.

It says: “Current evidence demonstrates that a sixth major extinction of biodiversity event is underway. The earth is losing between 1 and 10% of its biodiversity per decade, mostly due to habitat loss, pest invasion, pollution, over-harvesting and disease. Certain natural ecosystem services are vital for human society.”

The report mentions both chemical spray drift from agricultural spraying and systemic neonicotinoid insecticides, and Mason is particularly concerned about neonicotinoids, which several papers show act on mammalian nicotinic acetylcholine receptors. Given the quantity neonicotinoids that are being applied to seeds or sprayed on crops, Mason is left in no doubt that humans are being adversely affected.

In 2011, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) held a conference on pollinators. Three crucial admissions were made that had not been made before, either by industry or by the EPA: neonicotinoid pesticides are harmful to bees; tests and protocols that had allowed registration of these pesticides were not adapted to assess potential hazard and risk from this type of pesticide; and despite knowing all this, the protection agencies have allowed the pesticides industry to keep the neonicotinoids on the market.

Systemic neonicotinoid insecticides are still on the market, apart from those on flowering crops attractive to bees that were banned by EFSA in 2013. And new ones are being

authorised by the European Commission. Mason notes that the quantities used after the ban stayed at the same level and the quantities exported by German companies even increased significantly.

While some parties say a ban would harm agriculture, Mason notes that Italy's partial ban on systemic neonicotinoid insecticides in 2008 has been successful. After seven years, crop yield is within the expected range. It is also worth noting the results of the two-year Pan-European epidemiological study on honeybee colony losses. This was a landmark study that revealed the UK was suffering one of the worst rates of honeybee colony deaths in Europe. In the winter of 2012-13, 29% of honeybee colonies in the UK died, with only Belgium suffering a higher rate of losses (34%) of the 17 countries surveyed. By contrast, only 5% of colonies in Italy were lost.

Mason indicates that Bayer and Syngenta have concealed unpublished field trials with the US EPA. She also notes that field trials on neonicotinoid insecticides showed Syngenta's thiamethoxam and Bayer's clothianidin caused serious harm to honeybees at high levels. Yet in August 2016, Syngenta had told Greenpeace that: "none of the studies Syngenta has undertaken or commissioned for use by regulatory agencies have shown damages to the health of bee colonies."

In response, Prof Dave Goulson, a UK bumblebee researcher at the University of Sussex, said: "That clearly contradicts their own study". Goulson & Nicholls have just published a paper: 'The canary in the coalmine; bee declines as an indicator of environmental health'. Goulson states, "We argue that bee declines are indicators of pervasive and ongoing environmental damage that is likely to impact broadly on biodiversity and the ecosystem services it provides."

According to Mason, Industry pays about 60% of UK Chemicals Regulation Directorate budget. She argues that the loyalty of the staff must lie with the industry that pays them and asks is the directorate a safety agency or a corporate service agency? She implies it is the latter.

What is also of great concern is that the UK Food and Environment Research Agency (FERA) survey of pesticides 1988 to 2014 confirms that pesticide residues on British food are increasing annually. Moreover, there is strong evidence of increased bee population extinction rates in response to neonicotinoid seed treatment use on oilseed rape and that, overall, biodiversity has crashed.

In what is a long and well-researched letter, Mason goes on to make many more points. For those who have read any of Mason's [previous papers and correspondence with officials](#), they will be familiar her overall theme of powerful corporations using their financial clout and political leverage to co-opt officials, undermine regulatory integrity and distort science to serve their interests at the expense of public health and the environment.

Why is Mason writing to the OMC and Steiner?

The OMC says it wants to facilitate a radical shake-up in politics and business to deliver progress on various pressing issues affecting humanity. To ensure maximum impact, it could start by focusing on the links between politics and business and the capture of international bodies, national governments and regulatory agencies by big business, which Mason has outlined (see previous link) as have various others (for example see [this](#), which

contains relevant links to illustrate the point). These corporations are driven by one thing alone: the compulsion to make profits and the obligation to deliver on shareholder dividends. The public interest is not their concern – that is left to public institutions – which big business has compromised. And Mason implies that the OMC may be no different in terms of certain commissioners’ conflicts of interest and their ideological commitment to corporate power.

Any institution committed to radically shaking up politics and business should be both willing and able to call to account powerful private interests and not be compromised by ideology or conflicts of interest. However, Rosemary Mason argues that both ideology and conflicts of interest severely undermine the OMC and its stated aims. For example, in the 2013 report of the OMC ‘Now for the Long Term’, compiled by Pascal Lamy, former Director General of the World Trade Organisation, 63% chronic diseases were mostly attributed to lifestyle choices and there was no mention of pesticides.

Mason argues it is highly convenient to associate chronic disease with ‘lifestyle choices’. This neatly draws attention away from structural determinants of poor health that are embedded in society as a result of the political power and everyday products and practices of powerful industries, not least the agrochemicals sector.

In a previous document, Mason [has indicated how](#) ‘lifestyle choice’ and alcohol consumption have become convenient scapegoats; she provides evidence to indicate that agrochemicals, not alcohol, are largely responsible for various cancers. In effect, the pesticides industry is being let off the hook by the lifestyle choice/alcohol narrative which emphasises individual responsibility not corporate culpability.

In her open letter to Achim Steiner, Mason pulls no punches when going through a list of OMC commissioners to illustrate individual commissioner’s conflicts of interest and allegiances.

Commissioners with allegiances to global corporations and corporate power

The Chairman of the Oxford Martin Commission is Pascal Lamy, Former Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO). In a case brought by the US, Canada, and Argentina in 2006, the WTO ruled that the European moratorium on genetically modified (GM) crops was illegal. The relevance of GM crops to this discussion should be made clear: the GM issue is closely aligned with Mason’s concerns about the indiscriminate use of toxic agrochemicals (not least glyphosate – Monsanto’s Roundup and its Roundup Ready GM seeds). Moreover, the GM model of agriculture is [fraudulent](#) (having been corrupted by corporate interests) and is being driven by governments that collude with powerful corporations, which in turn have a stake in denigrating and displacing more sustainable, appropriate and effective models of farming.

Sir John Beddington is Professor of Natural Resources Management for the OMC. He was made Chief Scientific Adviser to the British Government in 2007. In 2012, he declared his faith in GM technology. “And among those scientific wonders, the use of genetically modified crops has a particularly rich potential”. Beddington added. “Just look at the problems that the world faces: water shortages and salination of existing water supplies, for example. GM crops should be able to deal with that.”

Beddington would do well to [look elsewhere for solutions](#) to water shortages and

salinization. More sustainable solutions already exist. Indeed, GM belongs to a corporate-driven 'Green Revolution' model of agriculture that has seriously adversely impacted food security as well as the environment, farmers' livelihoods, and traditional farming practices that were [highly productive and ecologically friendly](#).

Lionel Barber is editor of The Financial Times, a very business-orientated UK paper. According to Colin Macilwain, "the British press - led by the BBC, which treats the Confederation of British Industry with the deference the Vatican gets in Rome - is overwhelmingly conservative and pro-business in its outlook. It is quite unperturbed by the fact that the UK Science Media Centre's sponsors include AstraZeneca, BP, Coca-Cola, L'Oreal, Monsanto, Syngenta (as well as Nature Publishing Group) but not a single environmental non-governmental organization (NGO) or trade union."

Another member of the OMC is Julia Marton-Lefèvre. She has just left her post as Director-General of IUCN. She serves as environmental advisor for Dow Chemical Company and The Coca-Cola Company, two companies with dubious track records.

Then there is Lord Chris Patten, Chancellor, University of Oxford and former Chairman of the BBC Trust. Mason notes that the BBC is a strong supporter of the agrochemical industry and GM crops. Many people have complained that BBC coverage is completely unbalanced but each time the BBC Complaints Unit dismisses their claims.

A BBC Panorama programme on GM Crops was also [widely condemned](#). Mason notes that 'GM Food - Cultivating Fear' was selective and prejudicial and resembled little more than the most clichéd corporate press release.

While the OMC states that GM is [not a magic bullet](#) (p. 27) and should be discussed along with other options, Mason is correct to flag up what seem to be some clear allegiances in favour of this technology.

OMC: the solution or the problem?

In its document '[Now for the Long Term](#)', the OMC talks a lot about 'growth' and sustainable development. However, the question is: how can figures with deep connections to corporations, which have a vested interest in maintaining a financially lucrative status quo, bring about the much-needed radical changes that are required to deal with, for instance, climate change, rising inequality or an [unsustainable and damaging model](#) of chemical-intensive agriculture?

They cannot. In fact, Mason argues that the OMC resembles 'an all the year round' Bilderberg Group from the higher echelons of big business. Ultimately, corporate imperialism is the problem and not the solution. The institutions of international capitalism - from the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO to the compliant bureaucracies of national states or supranational unions - facilitate private capital's ability to appropriate wealth and institute everyday forms of structural violence (unemployment, bad housing, poverty, disease, toxic chemicals, environmental destruction, etc) that have become 'accepted' as necessary and taken for granted within mainstream media and political narratives.

Therefore, if we are to have genuinely effective solutions for the world's most pressing problems, there must be a deep commitment to reigning in corporate power; not extending it by handing over policy-making to 'free' market ideologues or corporate missionaries.

Solutions involve challenging a dominant narrative that is not prepared to question or is incapable of questioning a corrupt neoliberal capitalism and which privileges private interests and the private ownership of key industries and resources ahead of public need.

As for addressing the agrochemicals issue that Mason discusses, if we are to have a radical shake-up, this should be based on the recommendations of [numerous high-profile reports](#). It should entail making a fundamental shift towards a more democratic, less chemical-intensive model of food production. This [would be rooted in](#) investing in ecologically sustainable practices, supporting the bedrock of global food production – small farms (and thus rural communities and jobs) – and encouraging climate-resilient and climate-friendly practices: in other words an agriculture rooted in [human need and not corporate greed](#).

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