

“I only found out by chance...”

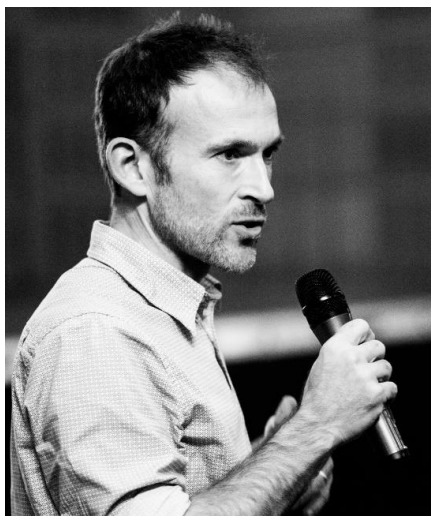
The Right to Know, Cut11% and the Climate Academy. Matthew Pye devotes his life to help give the global population what it deserves; climate justice.

The article:

While attending a talk on sustainability in 2011, Matthew Pye was struck by a realisation. A moment of understanding that would turn out to be a fork in the road for his life. The talk vividly demonstrated the extraordinary scale and threat of the ecological debt that was building up in the background to all the usual headlines that occupy us. At the time, thinking he was well educated, as head of Philosophy in a European School, he was baffled. “It was not just the fact that all the graphs and data pointed towards a catastrophic conclusion for humanity within the lifetimes of my own children. It was something else.” He tells me. “I only found out by chance.”



He stumbled across it. He was curious about the topic, and the speaker was the Oscar winning movie director, Michael Wadleigh. But like everyone else in that room, he did not have to go to that talk. “This is my story,” he continues. “I had always wanted to be a teacher and I will always love the classroom. But in 2011, the game changed. There was a challenge to bridge the gap between the science and the social reality for my students, and do it in a way that was more empowering than disempowering.” While being a Philosophy teacher at the European School of Brussels, [Matthew Pye](#)



works to cultivate a global understanding of the climate crisis. As founder of the [Climate Academy](#), public speaker and author, he believes that deep rooted systemic changes are needed to combat the approaching catastrophe. Throughout the interview he insists that at the heart of all these changes is an urgent need to square up to the remaining carbon budget. Working in collaboration with leading scientists, he has planted [Cut11%](#) at the centre of his Academy, his books (like “Plato Tackles Climate Change”) and his events. “We have dashboards and indexes for everything, from Covid-19 to currencies. But we do not have any clear index about how close we are to the 1.5°C and 2°C thresholds of the Paris Agreement. That is both absurd and amazing”.

Why has the world only seen such timid responses to the climate crisis?

Pye: “Well it is deeply uncomfortable. I would say that education is no different to all the other areas of society. Schools do incredible things for young people, but we are failing them in sustainability. Real courage is needed. The bald truth is that we simply don't teach climate change as if it is an existential crisis... and the success would be finding ways to teach it that empowers and enables, it is easy to get it wrong and either crush students, or just allow them to casually ignore it”.



Pye thinks that most sustainable education never gets much beyond primary school level, “A student of 18 who is about to enter university will have an advanced, complex and interconnected understanding of Biology, History or Psychology, and yet their understanding of the climate crisis might not extend much further than a concern for polar bears, more stormy weather and a fairly remote awareness of rising sea levels.”

With all the odds stacked against us, what can give young people hope of surmounting this crisis?

“It is always a heavy burden to introduce young people to this debt. But a key feature of Cut11% is that it points to the law”. He explains, “It is inspiring to see all the individual sacrifices that people are willing to make for the future, but this focus on the individual can become a major burden for young people. This is due to the fact that although their efforts are what is needed, those efforts are made inside a system that is geared in the wrong direction. The major, infrastructure, finance and policy changes that are required will only happen through the systemic power of the law – and happily, fighting for this kind of change is not wrapped up in narratives that are negative or have a vibe of guilt.”



Pye then burst into an inspiring little speech about Martin Luther King, who led millions by being deeply honest about what going on, whilst talking about virtues, compassion and courage. All the time, MLK had his “eye on the prize” – a single minded focus on legislative, system change.

Recent court victories in Germany, my country the Netherlands, and Denmark, show that this route to climate justice is starting to really make progress. Indeed, by going to the courts directly, it avoids the achingly slow route of parliamentary progress. At the end of the day, this is an issue of human rights. I think these examples are a good indicator of how change needs to happen.



What would be your message to young people directly?

“Get informed,” Pye says immediately. “Educate yourself. Given the acute nature of the crisis in sustainability, there is simply no time for the slow processes of syllabus reforms. Get yourself a clear understanding of the crisis, the science behind it, and steel yourself to fight for systemic action”.

Do you not sometimes wish you had never gone to that talk in 2011?

“No. Not at all. It was tough to see the truth like that, but climate change is a wrecking ball that we can still dodge. We are capable of such reckless stupidity, but there is still a short slice of time left to act. This is the crazy game of being a human being. We are capable of such incredible scientific insight and progress – and, tragically, we can be so numb and dumb too”.

I want to extend a word of thank to Matthew Pye, who was kind enough to sit down with me, to the World Teenage Reporting Project for this opportunity, and to you, the reader, for your time.



Thomas Karmarker (Aged 16)