

Perspective

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SUMMER SPECIAL

Reasons to be cheerful

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+ Gavin Esler interviews Patrick Radden Keefe



Wade Graham's Walden

Backstroking over the waterfall



The Hoover Dam in the Black Canyon of the Colorado River



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Global temperature rises have become unavoidable, even for climate-change deniers. We've seen record-smashing 40-degree heat domes pressing down on swathes of Europe, Asia and North America; rivers and reservoirs are drying out and wildfires chewing through France, Spain, Portugal and even England.

This has all been long predicted, it's just arriving earlier than forecast. Yet we continue to do very little to avoid catastrophe.

The question isn't "is the climate changing?" nor "what can we do about it?" (the solutions have long been clear) but "why do we still ignore the warnings?"

The easy answer is: "We" don't. The powers that be do.

That's true as far as it goes, except that "we" gave "them" permission. We the body politic set them up to it, by designing our institutions to fail. Charged with protecting the public, government agencies all too often protect private interests instead. That includes often-marginal businesses with potential to damage and endanger the environment.

That collusion at worst can feel like a

mafia group co-opting the government, the big difference being that mafia groups and their collaborators are well aware of their illegality. What political scientists call "agency capture" is more furtive, starting with the appearance of good intentions, but with lines becoming blurred once profits are up for grabs. The financial imperatives corrode the agency's sense of public responsibility; private interests take precedence. But that blurring makes reform close to impossible; bad actions by government stewards aren't easily called out as illegal.

A case in point is the Colorado River, in the American Southwest, which I've watched closely for three decades.

The Colorado covers 1,100 miles from its headwaters in the Rocky Mountains to the Gulf of California in Mexico, flowing through seven US states and two Mexican ones. Compared to the mighty Mississippi or Columbia, it's a decidedly modest stream, its run-off inconsistent, alternating from a wild torrent during spring snowmelt to a tepid trickle in the fall. And its water isn't easy to divert, given most of it runs through precipitous desert gorges, including the almost mile-deep Grand

Once-full giant reservoirs are receding, revealing fossilised speedboats and even unidentified human remains at the bottom of Lake Mead

Canyon. But the temptation to harness it for development proved irresistible – and, unsurprisingly, corrupting.

Since its earliest exploration in the 1860s, clear-eyed observers have repeatedly warned that the Colorado couldn't possibly support the demands that would be placed on it. But the potential profits for anyone able to bring water to millions of acres of dirt-cheap arid land guaranteed demand. The only problem, from a free-market economic perspective, was that the massive dams, canals, and pumping stations required to tame the river were too expensive for private-sector entrepreneurs. Normally at odds with any state competition to their business models, this time the capitalists convinced Big Government to foot the bill.

The immediate benefits were undeniable: Hoover Dam, completed in 1936, helped win World War II by sending cheap hydroelectricity to the aircraft factories of Los Angeles, and sprawling cities blossomed under the desert sun. But such development eventually transformed the river and its tributaries into the most heavily-engineered watershed on earth. Today there are more than a hundred dams, the two largest reservoirs in the nation and thousands of miles of aqueducts and tunnels. Pumping stations driven by colossal coal and nuclear power move water under and over mountain ranges to irrigate 5.5 million acres of farmland, quench the thirst of 40 million people, and underpin one of the most world's dynamic regional economies. For decades, the entire river has been siphoned off before it reaches the sea. All of it at taxpayers' expense.

However, the promised return on investment has been uneven, to put it mildly. Agriculture, which uses 80% of the water, gives back just a single digit of economic output. In California, the nation's largest farm economy, agriculture's contribution is a paltry 2%. Half of Colorado river water diverted to farms grows cattle feed – the lowest-value crops. Much of that feed is shipped to China, to fatten its burgeoning herds of cows. And, because of a water-rights regime that prioritises landowners claims over efficiency, it is virtually impossible to reallocate water from farms to cities, or even leave it in the river for environmental benefits. It is a system designed to serve a nineteenth century economy, and incapable of meeting the challenges of the twenty-first.

It turns out the experts were right: the river is severely overstretched, with demand for new dams and pipelines rising just as water levels are falling due to climate change. As the Southwest endures its worst

drought in 1,500 years, once-full giant reservoirs are receding, revealing fossilised speedboats sticking out of mudflats, and even, with a cinematic touch, unidentified human remains at the bottom of Lake Mead, outside Las Vegas. Emergency restrictions have resulted in fallowed farm fields and dying trees across the region.

We can't say we didn't see it coming. The Colorado is the most carefully-studied river on Earth: scientists have for decades issued detailed and dire warnings of peril ahead if water use isn't reduced, especially for egregiously wasteful desert farming. But the government agencies in charge have for decades denied, delayed, and fended off any changes to the big water users' prerogatives.

Now the gig is up. Reservoirs are dropping towards "dead pool", the levels where power production must stop and water deliveries all but cease. The long-running political crisis is now playing in fast-forward, as various actors point fingers at one another and try to dodge meaningful change. The US federal government, scrambling to keep its system from collapsing, is suddenly demanding cuts to water use of one third – a step once politically and economically unimaginable, but now unavoidable.

The broader lesson from this tragedy is that our governance arrangements are failing the public trust not by accident but by design, because since the nineteenth century we have allowed them to construe private profit not just *with* the public interest but *as* the public interest.

The case *du jour* of how this mistake poisons the well is that of West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin, who is blocking national climate change legislation because it would cut into the payoffs of the coal industry, which bankrolls his election campaigns. His (false) claim that aggregate jobs would be lost in the short term sells out his state, the nation, and the world. But to him, he is just doing his job.

We need a radical rewriting of our governing institutions so that politicians see their jobs as guardians of public, not private, good. The clearest way I can see to achieve this is to add a fourth branch of government, less susceptible to chicanery and politics than the other three (executive, legislature, courts): an independent scientific process, given legal standing in decision-making so that science cannot be ignored.

This would be a transparent and collective approach, open-source and public, with legal triggers for ensuring meaningful action from public servants. Insisting science is included in deliberations is perhaps the strongest step "we" the people can take to reclaim our government, our environment, and our future. There is no time left.