

Extreme weather and extreme politics go hand in hand—Trump and Musk are pushing both

Jonathan Watts, *The Guardian*, 23 September 2025

Extreme weather and extreme politics are intertwined. First, because the latter feeds off the fear and uncertainty caused by the former. Second, because global climate action against big emitters has provoked resistance by billionaire individuals, companies and petrostates, who are pouring money into campaigns to deny, delay and distract. And third, because many of the ultra-rich are indeed apocalyptic in their visions of the future but they have given up on global solutions and would rather invest in their individual doomsday bunkers.

Viewed in this light, the rabble-rousing of far-right demagogues makes perfect—if grotesque—sense. Donald Trump publicly declares the climate crisis a “huge hoax”, which plays well with his oil company donors. Yet many of his actions as president are consistent with the most apocalyptic visions of a hothouse Earth. He has threatened to annex Canada and Greenland, two regions of the world likely to escape the worst effects of global heating. He has closed down or defunded many of the US government’s climate science programmes, which will keep the public in the dark about what is happening. And he has ramped up internal security forces, which are increasingly criminalising climate protests. In deed, if not in word, his climate denial appears either opportunistic or downright fake.

The great fear of Trump and his billionaire backers in the petrochemical and infotech industries appears to be that humanity could come together to find a solution to shared problems. For them, this would mean regulation, stagnation and higher taxes on the rich.

This helps to explain what is happening in the UK, where a foreign billionaire—Musk—risks stirring up hatred against foreign asylum seekers. Speaking by video link at the “unite the kingdom” rally earlier this month, the American told the London crowd: “Whether you choose violence or not, violence is coming to you. You either fight back or you die, that’s the truth, I think.”

It was also Musk who paid the legal fees of the far-right anti-immigrant campaigner Stephen Yaxley-Lennon—who goes by the name Tommy Robinson—and then used his X social media platform to raise the public profile of the founder of the race-baiting English Defence League. X is also among the social media that ramp up clips of inter-racial conflict before major elections. The constant repetition of images that we live in a climate of violence is enough to stir up fear, hostility and support for “strong leaders”. [...]

This is a shame as Musk was once a champion of climate action. But the intellectual ethos of Silicon Valley has shifted as tech billionaires feel increasingly under pressure for their eye-popping accumulation of wealth and carbon emissions. Some build space rockets, others invest in doomsday bunkers or mega yachts—all of which can double as escape pods if the climate gets too hot or the masses too rowdy. Increasingly, they are also funding social media sites, news companies, lobby groups and far-right politicians to resist any suggestion that the global economy may have stretched beyond the carrying capacity of the Earth. [...]

Optimists see the rants of Trump, Musk and [Peter] Thiel as the dying howls of a system that has outlived its usefulness. Outside the US and UK, there are signs of change and resistance, particularly in the global south. China’s huge investments in renewable power are expected to very soon start driving the world’s carbon emissions on a downward path, which will strand a great deal of oil industry assets¹. The Brazilian government and supreme court have defended its forests and democracy with rigour, punishing illegal land grabs, locking up its former leader Jair Bolsonaro for plotting a coup and successfully facing down Musk over compliance with local laws. Throughout the world, a huge majority of people want their governments to take stronger action on the climate crisis, as the 89% project shows. [...]

Rather than whipping up flames, responsible global citizens should be dousing down embers². If you want democracy, you have to defend it. If you want a healthy environment, you have to stand up for it. [...]

1 strand a great deal of oil industry assets: *détruire la valeur d’une grande quantité de capitaux investis dans l’industrie pétrolière*

2 whipping up flames / dousing down embers: *jeter de l’huile sur les flammes / éteindre les braises*