

Europe still needs a Green New Deal

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The Economist's [Charlemagne newsletter this weekend](#) carried an intriguing message. Faced with soaring temperatures across western Europe, it suggested that people should stop feeling guilty about turning on their air conditioning. The argument was that as Europe shifts towards cleaner energy, attitudes towards cooling homes and workplaces need to change.

There is, of course, some necessary truth in this. Extreme heat kills. It particularly threatens older people, young children and those with existing health conditions. Adapting to a hotter climate is not optional. If air conditioning is needed to keep people safe, then it has to be used.

But I could not help feeling that the article was both an admission of failure and a failure to recognise a greater truth.

For decades, we have known that climate change was coming. We have known that Europe's housing stock was poorly adapted to extreme temperatures. We have known that our cities trap heat. We have known that reducing emissions should have been a priority.

And yet here we are. The response being offered is not to prevent the problem, but to consume more energy to cope with its consequences. As an exercise in ignoring the relationship between cause and effect, this takes some beating.

I stress, I am not suggesting that air conditioning is inherently bad. What I am suggesting is that we should not confuse adaptation with a solution. The real challenge is not whether people should feel guilty about cooling their homes. It is how we redesign housing, workplaces, cities and energy systems so that people can live comfortably in a warming world without ever-growing demands for energy and resources.

That means better building standards. It means adopting passive cooling. It means necessary urban greening. It means planning for resilience rather than merely reacting

to a crisis. Air conditioning may still be a part of the answer, but the need for ever more of it is also evidence of how badly we have failed to address the underlying problem.

The Economist may be right that Europe needs to rethink its attitudes towards air conditioning, but what Europe really needs to rethink is why it allowed itself to reach this point in the first place.

Europe still needs a [Green New Deal](#). I have been saying so for 18 years now.