

Opinion Climate change

Cultural carbon capture is on display at Science Museum

Sponsorship of the new climate gallery gives the illusion of serious engagement without the inconvenience of action

The shades of green offered by upmarket paint purveyor Farrow and Ball run from a pale Vert de Terre to a sumptuous Duck Green. It is tempting to suggest their Green Smoke number for the new climate change gallery announced on Tuesday by the Science Museum in London.

That sums up the feat of greenwashing that the gallery's sponsor, Indian conglomerate Adani Group, has managed to pull off in the run-up to the COP26 climate conference. The headline sponsor for the planned Energy Revolution gallery might be Adani Green Energy, the group's ambitious wind and solar arm, but meanwhile its parent company is opening a new coal mine in Australia.

There is no mention of the contested Carmichael mine in the explanatory blog published by Ian Blatchford, director and chief executive of the Science Museum Group. "[Our] trustees . . . are not convinced by the argument from some who say we should sever all ties with organisations that are 'tainted' by association, direct or indirect, with fossil fuels. We believe the right approach is to engage, debate and challenge companies, governments and individuals to do more to make the global economy less carbon intensive." Editorial control rests with curators, he added, before denouncing the "deceitful innuendo from activists" who suggest otherwise.

There is a world of difference between severing all ties and taking funding for a climate change exhibition from an organisation that is firing up, not shutting down, coal mining. It is easier for fossil fuel companies to "engage and debate" than to desist and decarbonise. As for curatorial independence, it is naive to rule out self-censorship. Yes, money for museums is tight, but what a powerful gesture it would have been for this temple of knowledge to demur. Multiple insurance companies, including Axa, have said they will not renew policies for the Carmichael mine.

The tie-up was announced as the Science Museum hosted a green investment conference attended by prime minister Boris Johnson. Chris Rapley, a former director, resigned from the museum's advisory board earlier this month over ongoing oil and gas sponsorship, despite facing a similar furore as director more than a decade ago. For him, the urgency of the climate crisis paired with industry's lukewarm response no longer justifies the soft diplomacy route.

The relationship between the oil and gas industry and climate outreach is particularly sensitive. As Met Office scientist Peter Stott details in *Hot Air*, the history of the climate crisis is really a saga of how science has been doubted, discounted, distorted, disputed and denied over the past 30 years. With every IPCC report, the tactics subtly change: disinformation is now giving way to misdirection. Sponsoring galleries at prestigious institutions gives the illusion of serious engagement and social respectability without the inconvenience of action. It feels like cultural carbon capture.

It also shifts the gaze away from industry and governments and on to individuals. By such sleight of hand, the sweating planet becomes slightly more our responsibility and slightly less theirs. Racked by green guilt, we dutifully recycle and eat less meat, but by the time these decisions fall into our laps, the carbon is often already out of the ground. We can and should exercise personal responsibility — while also remembering that, according to one report, around 70 per cent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions since 1988 are linked to a mere 100 companies.

As debate drags on, our warming world slips closer to tipping points, pushing humanity towards a potentially irreversible future marked by flood, fire and forced migration. The energy industry already knows it needs a radical rebuild, not a paint job.