# A THEATRICAL INACTION: CLIMATE CHANGE RISK, BUREAUCRATIC INERTIA, AND ETHICAL ABDICATION IN STEVE WATERS'S THE CONTINGENCY PLAN

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**Nesrin YAVAŞ**



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**Keywords:**
Climate change theater,
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Climate ethics.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:**
İklim değişikliği tiyatrosu,
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Risk toplumu,
İklim etiği.

## ABSTRACT

This article examines Steve Waters's two-part play, The Contingency Plan (2009), as a theatrical critique of the structural and ethical failures underlying contemporary climate governance. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as risk society, the banality of bureaucratic evil, climate justice, and intergenerational ethics, the analysis reveals how the play dramatizes the disjunction between climate change knowledge and political action. When read together, these four frameworks disclose how climate irresponsibility is systematically produced not as a result of information deficit but through a coordinated regime of avoidance operating across the dimensions of risk, ethics, justice, and temporality. Waters depicts policymakers who acknowledge the severity of climate risk yet remain inert due to administrative inertia, short-term political calculations, and the prevalence of formal gestures that substitute for transformative intervention. The article demonstrates how The Contingency Plan critiques performative governance, the moral consequences of delayed responsibility, and the burden shifted onto future generations. Rather than presenting a narrative of denial, the play stages a more insidious form of inaction—one in which risk is recognized but decisive action is perpetually deferred. In this context, the play functions as both a fictional policy document and as an ethical case study that reflects real-world failures in climate governance. Ultimately, the article argues that theatre, as a form of climate storytelling, does not merely mirror institutional breakdowns but offers an emotionally resonant and ethically urgent mode of critique. The Contingency Plan thus stands as a compelling call to action, reminding us that a timely and transformative climate response is not a matter of political choice but a moral necessity.

## ÖZ

Bu makale, Steve Waters'ın iki bölümlük oyunu The Contingency Plan'i (2009), çağdaş iklim yönetiminin yapısal ve etik düzeydeki başarısızlıklarına yönelik tiyatral bir eleştiri olarak inceler. Risk toplumu, bürokratik kötülüğün sıradanlığı, iklim adaleti ve kuşaklar arası etik gibi kuramsal çerçevelere dayanan analiz, oyunun iklim değişikliği bilgisi ile siyasi eylem arasındaki kopukluğu nasıl sahnelediğini ortaya koyar. Bu dört kuramsal yaklaşım birlikte okunduğunda, iklim degisikligi sorumsuzluğunun bilgi eksikliği sonucu değil risk, etik, adalet ve zaman boyutlarında işleyen, eşgüdümlü bir kaçınma rejimi aracılığıyla sistematik olarak üretildiğini gösterir. Waters, iklim riskinin ciddiyetinin farkında olan ancak idari ataletten, kısa vadeli politik çıkar hesaplarından ve dönüştürücü müdahalenin yerini alan biçimsel tepkilerden dolayı hareketsiz kalan karar alıcıları betimler. Makale, The Contingency Plan'in göstermelik yönetişimi, ertelenmiş sorumluluğun ahlaki sonuçlarını ve gelecek kuşaklara yüklenen bedeli nasıl eleştirdiğini ortaya koyar. Oyun, inkâra dayalı bir anlatı sunmak yerine, daha sinsi bir eylemsizlik biçimini sahneye taşır: Riskin tanındığı, ancak eylemin sürekli ertelendiği bir durum. Bu bağlamda oyun, hem kurgusal bir politika belgesi hem de gerçek dünyadaki iklim yönetimi başarısızlıklarını yansıtan etik bir vaka çalışması işlevi görür. Sonuç olarak makale, tiyatronun bir iklim anlatısı biçimi olarak yalnızca kurumsal çöküşleri yansıtmakla kalmayıp, aynı zamanda duygusal olarak etkileyici ve etik açıdan aciliyet taşıyan bir eleştiri biçimi sunduğunu öne sürer. The Contingency Plan, zamanında ve dönüştürücü bir iklim tepkisinin politik bir tercihten ziyade ahlaki bir zorunluluk olduğunu hatırlatan güçlü bir eylem çağrısı olarak öne çıkıyor.

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## INTRODUCTION

Climate change has long been recognized as not just an environmental crisis but a crisis of governance – one stemming from political and bureaucratic failures to act decisively in the face of known risks. Scientific assessments, particularly the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), have for decades warned of escalating climate threats and the need for urgent action (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2007). However, governments worldwide often respond with delay, short-term measures, and performative policies rather than substantive interventions. In this context, Steve Waters's play *The Contingency Plan* (2009), comprising two interlinked plays, *On the Beach* and *Resilience*, serves as a timely fictional case study of contemporary climate governance. Steve Waters dramatizes the very debates, obstacles, and ethical failures that characterize real-world responses to climate change, effectively turning the stage into a mirror for policy shortcomings.

This article argues that *The Contingency Plan* functions as a fictitious summary for climate change policymakers, mirroring the structure and concerns of actual climate risk assessments while underscoring their fundamental weaknesses. In much the same way that official reports outline scientific findings, policy recommendations, and risk scenarios, Waters' play provides a narrative simulation of political decision-making under climate duress. Crucially, however, the play reveals an insidious form of climate inaction. Unlike scenarios of outright climate denial, *The Contingency Plan* portrays leaders who acknowledge the reality of climate risk yet fail to implement the necessary measures. This strategic inaction, recognizing the science but deferring meaningful response, is at the heart of the drama and reflects a pervasive challenge in climate governance today. The analysis also compares the fictional government's discussions to real-world UK climate policies, such as flood risk management plans, and to international climate commitments like the 2015 Paris Agreement and ongoing Conference of the Parties negotiations, demonstrating how art can reflect and critique reality. This analysis positions *The Contingency Plan* as a crucial intervention in the discourse surrounding climate change. It presents a narrative that highlights the political inertia, governance challenges, and ethical shortcomings that characterize our collective response to this pressing issue.

## METHODOLOGY

To illuminate the play's commentary on climate ethics and policy, this study incorporates several theoretical frameworks. Analyzing *The Contingency Plan* through a single theoretical lens risks flattening the profound structural, ethical, and temporal intricacies that define both the play and the phenomenon it interrogates: climate change. As a multidimensional crisis, climate change resists disciplinary containment, as it is at once a crisis of risk production (Beck), moral disengagement within institutional systems (Arendt), distributive injustice and global inequality (Shue), and temporal displacement and intergenerational harm (Gardiner). Each of these dimensions operates according to different ethical logics, political mechanisms, and cultural narratives. To apply one model in isolation, be it sociological, philosophical, or normative, would be to misrepresent the layered simultaneity of climate inaction that the play so precisely dramatizes. In particular, climate change's deferral of consequences to future generations, its uneven impact across socio-economic groups, and its entanglement with bureaucratic rituals of avoidance demand an analytical approach that can articulate these overlapping but distinct registers. The decision to adopt a plural theoretical framework in this study is therefore not merely methodological but epistemological: it acknowledges that no single theory can do justice to the complex, multi-scalar ethical failures embedded in contemporary climate governance. Waters's play, with its fusion of institutional critique, moral questioning, and emotional resonance, calls for an interpretive model equally attentive to system, subjectivity, and temporality. Only through an integrated critical matrix can one adequately assess how *The Contingency Plan* stages climate inaction not as a singular failure but as a convergence of failures: structural, moral, distributive, and generational.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Ulrich Beck and Risk Society

Ulrich Beck's concept of the "risk society" provides a sociological lens for understanding the world of *The Contingency Plan* as one preoccupied with managing human-made risks. Beck (1992) argues that modern society is defined by the production and distribution of risks, from nuclear fallout to environmental crises, that escape traditional boundaries and demand new forms of governance. In a risk society, hazards such as climate change become central organizing principles (Beck, 1992; Beck, 2009). Society must rely on science, policy, and institutions to anticipate and mitigate these dangers (Beck, 1992); however, those very institutions often struggle to cope with the complexity and uncertainty involved (Beck, 2009). Beck emphasizes that effective disaster risk management rests on strong institutions and policies, with successful implementation being key. Otherwise, societies remain "ill-equipped" for emerging threats (Beck, 2009, pp. 30–31). In *World at Risk* (2009), Beck contends that modern societies are increasingly shaped not by visible dangers or experienced catastrophes, but by the anticipation of catastrophe. He famously writes, "Risk is not synonymous with catastrophe. Risk means the anticipation of catastrophe" (Beck, 2009, p. 9). This shift creates a new historical condition in which latent catastrophes dominate political, emotional, and institutional life. Unlike classical hazards, risks in the world risk society are manufactured by modernization itself, and they possess a unique temporality: they are future-oriented yet present in consciousness.

A central pillar of this theory is "manufactured uncertainty," a term Beck uses to describe risks generated by the very systems meant to create safety, such as science, technology, and global capitalism (Beck, 2009, p. 50). These risks are deeply intertwined with knowledge systems, yet they remain resistant to control. Beck argues that societies at this stage are "confronted with the possibility of the self-destruction of all life on Earth due to human interventions," leading to a collapse of traditional notions of calculability and preparedness (Beck, 2009, p. 27). He distinguishes between the reality of catastrophe and the way risk is socially constructed, staged, and anticipated: "The moment risks become real, they become catastrophes. Risks are always future events that may occur, that threaten us" (Beck, 2009, p. 9). Governance in advanced modernity is characterized by a systemic dispersal of responsibility such that no single institution—science, law, or market—can be held accountable. "Responsibility becomes impunity," Beck writes, as a result of the contradictory nature of modern institutions that claim competence but deny liability (2009, p. 194). This contradiction leads to political inertia and institutional dysfunction, particularly visible in environmental policymaking, where urgent scientific warnings are frequently ignored or reframed to suit short-term interests.

Crucially, Beck introduces the concept of symbolic security and false preparedness, arguing that modern societies increasingly rely on technical "solutions," such as seawalls, modeling software, or contingency planning, to maintain the illusion of control. These technologies often function more as performances of security than as genuine protection. He refers to this reliance on numbers and plans as "the magical power of large numbers," which is used to "stage" safety and manage public perception (Beck, 2009, pp. 103–104). In many cases, such strategies fail to prevent disaster and can render society more vulnerable by masking the need for systemic change Beck also conceptualizes a "cosmopolitan moment" arising from shared global exposure to risk. As he explains, "We are all trapped in a shared global space of threats — without exit" (Beck, 2009, p. 56). This moment compels societies to move beyond national frameworks and recognize their mutual dependence. However, Beck (2009) is ambivalent: while risks can serve as catalysts for cooperation and new beginnings, they can just as easily foster denial, apathy, or authoritarian retrenchment. The political ambiguity of risk thus becomes central. Global risks may unite or divide societies, prompting transformation or paralysis. Beck's theory outlines how late modernity is haunted by invisible, uncertain, and irreversible risks that elude institutional containment and provoke emotional, political, and epistemological crises. Concepts such as "anticipatory consciousness," "organized irresponsibility," "manufactured uncertainty," and "the cosmopolitan

moment" (Beck, 2009) provide a comprehensive lexicon for analyzing cultural representations of climate and systemic risk. These ideas are especially pertinent for interpreting contemporary climate narratives such as *The Contingency Plan*, in which breakdowns of institutional foresight and the emotional impact of unmanageable risk constitute central dramatic concerns.

**Hannah Arendt: The Banality of Evil in Climate Bureaucracy**

Hannah Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil," originally coined in her analysis of Adolf Eichmann in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, describes how grave injustices can be committed not by ideologically driven villains but by ordinary individuals who follow procedures without critical reflection (Arendt, 1963). Arendt (1963) emphasizes how Eichmann operated through administrative routines, exhibiting what she called "thoughtlessness," an uncritical adherence to orders and institutional logic. This concept is profoundly relevant to contemporary discussions of climate governance. The threat of climate change does not arise from dramatic or villainous acts but from a system of slow, procedural failure in which policy decisions are continually deferred, fragmented, or reduced to paperwork. This relevance is explored by Kerrie Foxwell-Norton (2017), who examines how Arendt's theory can be applied to the everyday operations of climate governance. Foxwell-Norton (2017) suggests that Arendt would view the proliferation of environmental damage, including plastic pollution and carbon emissions, as a consequence of systemic thoughtlessness, namely a failure of individuals and institutions to engage ethically with the consequences of their actions. For Foxwell-Norton (2017), climate change is enabled by a deeply embedded form of banal evil, in which metrics, reports, and targets become substitutes for real accountability or transformative action. This framework proves crucial for understanding the slow-moving, seemingly rational failures depicted in Waters's play. Arendt's theory provides a lens for examining how moral disengagement and institutional conformity can contribute to profound ecological harm. As Richard Bernstein (2008) argues, even well-meaning, respectable people can commit terrible acts, especially within modern bureaucratic and technological systems. Arendt (1963) argues that the absence of malicious intent does not erase responsibility; individuals remain accountable for their actions.

**Henry Shue: Climate Justice and International Responsibility**

Henry Shue's article "Global Environment and International Inequality" (1999) presents a foundational framework for evaluating fairness in global climate governance. His argument centers on three common-sense principles of equity, all of which bear directly on the ethical dimensions of climate policy. These principles—historical responsibility, greater ability to pay, and guaranteed minimum protection—lay out a moral rationale for how responsibility for climate action should be distributed across nations. First, Shue (1999) articulates a principle of historical responsibility, arguing that when a party has previously "taken an unfair advantage of others by imposing costs upon them without their consent," justice demands that it now "shoulder [unequal burdens] . . . to restore equality" (p. 534). Applied to climate change, this principle implies that nations that benefited economically from early industrialization have a duty to lead in addressing climate harms, particularly because their actions disproportionately contributed to atmospheric degradation. Second, Shue (1999) introduces the principle of greater ability to pay, asserting that "the parties who have the most resources normally should contribute the most to the endeavor" (p. 537). This forward-looking obligation holds even in the absence of historical guilt. In the context of climate governance, this principle justifies expecting wealthier, technologically advanced states to bear a larger share of the burden simply because they are better positioned to do so. Third, Shue (1999) emphasizes the need for guaranteed minimum protection of the most vulnerable. He contends that in a world of "radical inequality," it is "unfair not to guarantee everyone at least an adequate minimum" (1999, p. 541). This principle highlights the ethical imperative to shield those who have contributed least to climate change, often low-lying nations and economically disadvantaged communities, from the worst effects of climate disruption. Together, Shue's principles offer a framework for assessing global climate responsibilities based on equity, capacity, and need, all of

which underpin the ethical foundations of the analysis in this article.

### Stephen Gardiner: "The Perfect Moral Storm" and Intergenerational Ethics

Gardiner's work is central to understanding the ethical structure of climate change. He characterizes climate change as a "perfect moral storm," arising from the convergence of three mutually reinforcing challenges: the global storm, the intergenerational storm, and the theoretical storm (Gardiner, 2011, p. 7). These overlapping "storms" create conditions that obscure moral clarity and weaken the motivation to act ethically in the face of long-term global threats. Most relevant to this study is Gardiner's analysis of the intergenerational storm, where the current generation benefits from emitting greenhouse gases while future generations suffer the consequences. This leads to what Gardiner terms the "tyranny of the contemporary," a condition in which present decision-makers dominate the future, "foist[ing] large costs on a later generation" while avoiding their own accountability (2011, p. 152). Gardiner (2011) argues that this asymmetry of power threatens to erode our moral integrity and fosters a pattern of intergenerational buck-passing, in which each generation delays action, hoping the next will take responsibility. Closely linked to this is Gardiner's concept of moral corruption, defined as the tendency to embrace weak or self-serving arguments to justify inaction. When climate policy becomes more about managing appearances—producing reports, hosting summits, and citing uncertainty—than about implementing real change, moral corruption takes root. Gardiner (2011) writes that policymakers "welcome any rationale that appears to justify [their] behavior," allowing "distraction, complacency, selective attention, unreasonable doubt, delusion, pandering, [and] hypocrisy" to replace genuine ethical reasoning (p. 46). This diagnosis offers critical insight into how moral failure can be institutionalized and normalized, even in democratic societies Together, Gardiner's and Shue's ethical frameworks, combined with Arendt's insights into bureaucratic thoughtlessness, provide a robust foundation for analyzing the systemic, moral, and political failures dramatized in the play. These theories frame the article's subsequent discussion of climate inaction as not only a policy dilemma but also an ethical crisis shaped by structures of responsibility, avoidance, and delay.

## DISCUSSION

### World Risk Society on Stage

Steve Waters's *The Contingency Plan* (2009) can be read as a vivid dramatization of Ulrich Beck's concept of a world risk society, where human-produced dangers and institutional failures intersect. Beck (2009) defines the world risk society by "manufactured uncertainty," referring to risks generated by modernization itself, and an "anticipation of catastrophe" that dominates social consciousness (pp. 9, 50). In Beck's terms, "risk means the anticipation of the catastrophe" (2009, p. 9); society is forced to imagine worst-case futures in order to prevent them. Waters's play centers precisely on such an imagined catastrophe: a massive flood triggered by an Antarctic ice collapse and storm surge. The scientific protagonist, Will Paxton, brings an acute anticipatory consciousness to Whitehall, insisting that an unprecedented disaster is looming. He argues that the usual silos of expertise cannot grasp the threat, stating that "the boundaries between scientific disciplines are pretty meaningless on this [crisis]" (Waters, 2009, p. 131), thereby emphasizing that only a holistic, forward-looking vision can capture the impending danger. This echoes Beck's observation that global hazards defy traditional categories and demand new thinking across domains (Beck, 1992). In the play's scenario briefing, Will effectively stages a future catastrophe for the officials, describing a "worst-case 'perfect storm' event" that could overwhelm England's coast (Waters, 2009, p. 130). This staging of anticipation is akin to what Beck (2009) describes as society's need to proactively imagine global risks in order to mobilize action before calamity strikes. However, Waters (2009) shows that anticipatory knowledge alone is insufficient, as it collides with political denial and inertia. The officials acknowledge Will's catastrophic scenario in theory, yet remain paralyzed, illustrating the very gap between risk awareness and action that Beck's theory criticizes. The drama thus exposes how climate inaction persists even in the face of expert warnings, as political leaders cling to the hope that catastrophe will remain hypothetical.

Beck's notion of "organized irresponsibility"—a systemic failure of institutions to take responsibility for risks they have helped create (Beck, 2009, pp. 24, 194)—pervades *The Contingency Plan*. In the play, government officials and scientific authorities engage in bureaucratic maneuvers that perform preparedness without producing substantive change. The Minister for Resilience, Tessa Fortnum, and her colleagues speak in the technocratic language of risk management, yet their responses amount to what Beck describes as responsibility as impunity (Beck, 2009, p. 194). They hold meetings and produce contingency paperwork while sidestepping accountability for preventing disaster. Tessa wryly admits that "resilience is pretty procedural stuff" (Waters, 2009, p. 94), a telling line that exposes the mindset of performative governance. The government's "resilience" agenda, as portrayed, is more about protocols and symbolic displays of control than about tackling the root causes of the flood threat. This is a dramatic illustration of what Beck (2009) describes as symbolic security: using technical solutions and bureaucratic routines to maintain an illusion of safety. Throughout the play, officials cling to the Thames Barrier and a dusty contingency plan as talismans of security, yet these prove wholly inadequate. In a dire monologue, Will Paxton warns that the onrushing storm surge will render the vaunted Thames Barrier "as much a folly as the Maginot Line[2]" (Waters, 2009, p. 130), exemplifying Beck's warning that modern safety infrastructures can become dangerously obsolete (Beck, 2009). The barrier, like the Maginot Line, offered symbolic reassurance that lulled policymakers into complacency. When nature's "manufactured" fury arrives, this false security is brutally unmasked, and the authorities are revealed as ill-prepared. In Beck's terms, a latent risk materializes into catastrophe, exposing how prior assurances were little more than stage props. The play's climactic flood thus holds the powerful to account, dramatizing the collapse of institutional pretenses. No single official deliberately causes the disaster; yet, collectively, they enable it through the hallmarks of organized responsibility: denial, delay, and fragmented responsibility. A striking example is the Chief Scientific Advisor, Colin Jenks, who dismisses Will's warning by noting that Will is "no oceanologist" but "a glaciologist" (Waters, 2009, p. 131). This trivial turf conflict exemplifies how experts and agencies deflect responsibility in a risk society. Jenks's quibble, rooted in compartmentalized authority, betrays a culture in which each actor narrows their scope of concern to avoid taking action. By dramatizing such moments, Waters critiques the folly of institutional tunnel vision and the ease with which bureaucracy turns responsibility into impunity. The characters' adherence to procedure over precaution illustrates the "organized irresponsibility" that Beck argues plagues late-modern governance (Beck, 2009, pp. 59, 91).

*The Contingency Plan* exposes how performative risk management—all protocol, no urgency—becomes a form of collective negligence. Its portrayal of political denial, the marginalization of scientists, and the comfort of routine in the face of crisis constitutes a theatrical indictment of structures of false security. Waters's drama ultimately invites the audience to viscerally confront a cosmopolitan awareness of global risk. By dramatizing the collapse of symbolic security and the consequences of organized irresponsibility, the play spurs an anticipatory consciousness in viewers. In this way, Waters's art aligns with Beck's sociology: both call for a reflexive response to global risk that transcends complacency before it is too late.



**Bureaucratic Inertia and the "Banality of Evil": The Comfort of Procedure Over Action**

Hannah Arendt's (1963) perspective helps explain how well-intentioned individuals (e.g. ministers or civil servants in the play) become complicit in harmful inaction simply by adhering to procedural normalcy and political self-preservation. In Waters's portrayal, banal bureaucratic behavior includes endless meetings, risk assessments, and contingency plans that give an illusion of action while substantive change is postponed. The play's civil servants and ministers exemplify this pattern: they engage in protracted debate and paperwork even as a climate disaster looms, illustrating how routine can overtake urgency. Tessa

2 The Maginot Line was a line of defensive fortifications built by France along its border with Germany in the 1930s. Intended to prevent invasion, it was famously bypassed by German forces in 1940. The term now serves as a metaphor for false or misplaced security.
Imperial War Museums. (n.d.). What was the Maginot Line? Retrieved March 26, 2025, from https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/what-was-the-maginot-line

Fortnum, the Minister for Resilience, relies on established bureaucratic tools (reports, protocols, committees) and thus contributes to a failure of preventive action—what Arendt would recognize as the ordinary, bureaucratic face of evil.

One telling moment comes when the newly appointed Climate Change Minister, Christopher Casson, pointedly resists any sense of urgency. Upon taking office, Casson prides himself on caution: "Well, I said I didn't want to rush in. I don't do that. I talk to the team. I take soundings. Right?" (Waters, 2009, p. 105). His civil servant adviser, Sarika, immediately affirms this approach: "I think that makes a lot of sense" (Waters, 2009, p. 105). Here, not rushing is framed as a virtue. Casson's instinct is to consult and defer—to gather more opinions and "take soundings" (Waters, 2009, p. 105)—rather than act decisively. While deliberation can be prudent, it becomes a convenient rationale to stall. This exchange sets a tone of hesitation at the very start of the crisis, reflecting how bureaucratic culture often valorizes process over decisiveness. It shows an official adhering to procedural normalcy even when abnormal threats are emerging. Casson's reluctance to "rush in" encapsulates the default mindset of inaction: caution eclipses mounting urgency.

Throughout the drama's high-level meetings, officials cling to procedure and deflect bold action. In an emergency Cabinet-room discussion about an approaching flood, Colin Jenks, the Chief Scientific Advisor, explicitly warns against any drastic moves: "Above all else what we mustn't do now is panic. We need to stay cool, maintain our judgement" (Waters, 2009, p. 132). He accuses Will of "offering panic not judgement" by urging stronger warnings (Waters, 2009, p. 132). Jenks's mantra—essentially, do nothing hasty—exemplifies a bureaucratic instinct: to prioritize stability and minimize alarm. Decades in government have taught him to distrust "urgent" voices as alarmist. Tessa immediately backs this cautious stance. She steers the meeting back to a pre-written report, suggesting they "confirm Sarika's paper, which is well argued, and . . . get a large injection of cash into Civil Contingency, sign off on this and go to the House and the press" (Waters, 2009, p. 132). In other words, stick to the existing plan, allocate some funds, make a statement to Parliament and the media — performative steps that create an appearance of action without requiring any politically risky commitment. Tessa avoids endorsing Will's call for immediate, sweeping measures. Instead, she suggests folding his data into a future "brainstorming group" or the next report—"Indeed, incorporate his research, why not? So. . . . " (Waters, 2009, p. 133)—before proceeding to formal approval of Sarika's report. A meeting convened to address an urgent threat thus becomes an exercise in procedural containment: new warnings are acknowledged, then shunted into bureaucratic channels (committees, revised documents) that delay any concrete response. The officials choose a polished, moderate course they can all agree on over any drastic precaution. Waters uses these interactions to show how adherence to protocol and consensus can override urgent decision-making. The civil servants and ministers are not ignorant of the danger; rather, they feel more comfortable addressing it through familiar bureaucratic rituals—press briefings, funding allocations, further study—instead of decisive preventive action.

As the crisis intensifies, bureaucratic habits emerge not merely as administrative routines but as mechanisms of political self-preservation. Waters (2009) stages this dynamic in a tense exchange in which Tessa refuses to authorize the evacuation of a city until the appropriate procedural requirements are satisfied. Even as floodwaters rise, she pauses to require Will to sign a waiver clarifying the basis of his advice—thereby shifting accountability onto him. "Sign it before they call back," she insists, pressing a form into his hands at the height of the crisis (Waters, 2009, p. 148). Confused, Will reads the document and realizes it "simply states that at the time of the decision to evacuate [he] offered the best scientific advice available . . . and that in the event of any subsequent inquiry [he] will account for that advice" (Waters, 2009, p. 148). "So it's letting you off the hook?" Will asks pointedly, to which Tessa coolly replies, "Making the hook fit for purpose" (Waters, 2009, p. 148). Only after Will reluctantly signs—literally, paperwork amidst a looming catastrophe—does Tessa give the go-ahead for life-saving measures. Will's bitter retort, "Is that what it takes to save a life round here?" is met with Tessa's terse answer: "That's what it takes" (Waters, 2009, p. 149). This extraordinary exchange

lays bare the bureaucratic mentality at its extreme: even in an emergency, the priority is to follow protocol and cover oneself before acting. Tessa's demand for a written record at a life-and-death moment shows how deeply ingrained liability concerns and chain-of-command formalities are. It is a moment of near-parody that feels chillingly true to bureaucratic logic. The audience sees that Tessa is so constrained by institutional norms and fear of repercussions that she momentarily privileges paperwork over people's lives. The result is a delay in action—however brief—at a critical juncture. Waters underlines how political risk-aversion (the need not to be "on the hook" for a possible mistake) can fatally slow responses to fast-moving crises. It becomes a stark dramatization of how administrative passivity and rule-following, as Arendt observed in a different context, enable catastrophic outcomes.

Even when decisive action is finally taken, it comes with an acute awareness of political risk. After ordering a limited evacuation, Tessa cynically remarks on the government's calculus of caution: "Shutting this city down . . . if you make the wrong call you won't be thanked, will you?" she muses, noting that a false alarm would destroy careers (Waters, 2009, p. 149). This single line encapsulates why officials hesitate to take bold preventive action: fear of political backlash should the worst-case scenario fail to materialize. In Tessa's view, avoiding blame is paramount—a mindset that naturally leads to inertia, as doing less often feels "safer" for one's career than taking on more and being wrong. The play suggests that only an unquestionable catastrophe would justify such a risky decision. Indeed, Tessa privately admits that genuinely transformative climate action may require an overwhelming disaster. Later, she tells Will to "think of tonight as a gift . . . The way forward is to pray for the worst" (Waters, 2009, p. 151). This startling remark reveals a minister resigned to reactive rather than proactive governance. Under normal circumstances, she explains, "What you and I want is simply not conceivable in modern Britain," because any ambitious climate initiative is swiftly "scuppered" by political opposition and public resistance (Waters, 2009, p. 151). As she puts it, "[It] only takes a few loudmouths in a parish council meeting, a few mobilised truckers, an unusually dedicated journalist . . . and the boldest of plans get scuppered" by a political system overly responsive to the "greediest and most vocal" (Waters, 2009, p. 151). In this damning reflection, Waters links bureaucratic inertia to the broader democratic environment, suggesting that elected officials frequently retreat from unpopular but necessary measures, choosing the path of least resistance. Absent a clear mandate—typically secured only after catastrophe—leaders gravitate toward half-measures, the "half-done thing" that "replaces actual action," as Tessa admits (Waters, 2009, p. 152). This moment of candor exposes systemic failure: incrementalism and political caution prevail until crisis escalates to the point of inevitability. Such dialogue underscores that inertia is not merely personal timidity but a structural feature of climate governance, wherein decisive preventive action is politically disincentivized. In Arendtian terms, the ordinary mechanisms of democratic politics—consensus-building, appeasing constituents, avoiding controversy—enable the continuation of profound harm by delaying necessary intervention. Tessa's stark hope that "the worst" will arrive thus stands as a critique of a system that learns only through irreversible damage.

Ultimately, the play's climactic decision lays bare the triumph of bureaucratic inertia. As the storm's outcome becomes uncertain, the ministers opt not to evacuate London—essentially choosing inaction in the face of potential catastrophe. "Do you know what? I have a plan!" Chris Casson declares, bitterly embracing paralysis. "We do nothing" (Waters, 2009, p. 161). Moments later, he doubles down: "Nothing is what we are going to do. Blitz fucking spirit. 'Above all else do no harm'" (Waters, 2009, pp. 161–162). Here, Waters delivers the ultimate indictment of political inaction. Casson invokes the wartime "Blitz spirit" of stoic endurance and even the Hippocratic oath ("do no harm") to justify doing nothing. It is a perverse twist: doing nothing is portrayed as the responsible choice, since any intervention might be seen as an overreaction—"the cure is worse than the sickness," as Chris argues (Waters, 2009, p. 161). This finale crystallizes bureaucratic inertia as a form of collective shirking. Faced with ambiguous evidence and fearing the political cost of a false move, the officials essentially freeze. Disaster is narrowly averted by luck, and they take that as a

vindication of their passivity. However, the audience, and, by extension, society is left uneasy: we have witnessed how close misjudgment was, and delay ultimately led to tragedy. Chris's proud proclamation of "doing nothing" starkly illustrates the systemic failure at the heart of climate governance. It is the banality of evil in action: no villain, no grand refusal to act, just a committee of politicians and experts persuading themselves that inaction is prudent. In the end, their self-justifying routines and fear of risk lead to what Arendt would recognize as "the ordinary, bureaucratic face of evil," a deadly status quo maintained under the guise of due process and prudence.

Through these pivotal scenes, Waters underscores how political inaction on climate change is often a rationalized choice rather than overt denial. Leaders hide behind protocols, demand endless evidence, deflect responsibility, and normalize indecision and risk aversion even amid dire threats. This inertia is portrayed not as indifference but as a carefully rationalized caution, precisely the kind of banal evil Arendt warns about, in which maintaining routine overrides moral responsibility. In sum, the play demonstrates that the failure to address climate change often stems not from ignorance or ill intent but from excessive procedural caution—a bureaucracy that, even as floodwaters rise, cannot overcome its own inertia. This stark portrayal aligns with Arendt's cautionary message that significant crises can unfold simply because no one is willing to disturb the status quo or accept responsibility, a chilling insight that the play drives home within the realm of climate policy. Real-world parallels to this bureaucratic inertia are abundant. We see it when governments respond to climate warnings by creating new committees or launching lengthy reviews rather than enacting bold policies. For example, following major floods in 2007, the UK government commissioned the Pitt Review, which made dozens of recommendations. Many were adopted on paper, but on-the-ground improvements—like better drainage or stricter limits on building in floodplains—lagged amid bureaucratic delays. *The Contingency Plan* distills this issue to its essence: faced with a pending catastrophe, officials find comfort in plans—the titular contingency plans—instead of taking decisive action. In the play, Tessa's and Casson's preference for discussing contingency options in an "unminuted meeting" (Waters, 2009, p. 148) rather than engaging in transparent public action highlights a lack of political accountability. They seem more afraid of the political fallout of overreacting than of the physical devastation of underreacting. Here, Waters holds up a mirror to climate governance at large: often, complex bureaucratic systems respond to explicit threats with insufficient urgency, opting for routines (making plans, deferring to existing infrastructure, issuing careful statements) while failing to avert the coming disaster. The play's critique is sharp: bureaucracy, if left to its own devices, can become a form of denial.

**Climate Justice and Responsibility**

Henry Shue's (1999) work on climate justice provides a moral framework for distributing burdens and responsibilities in responding to climate change. Shue (1999) posits that affluent, high-emitting entities bear a primary responsibility to respond proactively and comprehensively to climate threats, grounded in the three principles discussed earlier (historical responsibility, capacity to pay, and protection of the vulnerable). In the context of *The Contingency Plan*, Shue's principles shed light on the ethical dimensions of the government's actions, or lack thereof. The play's fictional UK government functions as an analogue for wealthy, capable actors in the real world. By investing faith in stopgap measures like the Thames Barrier while neglecting more transformative action, the officials arguably fail Shue's test of responsibility: they neither adequately account for their nation's contribution to the climate crisis nor safeguard the most vulnerable, including future generations and coastal communities. Shue's framework informs our analysis of the fairness and adequacy of the government's contingency strategy, suggesting that simply defending one's own assets (London's infrastructure, in this case) without a broader justice-oriented response is ethically insufficient.

One of the stark messages from *The Contingency Plan* is that not everyone is equally protected or valued in the face of climate risk. In the second play, *Resilience*, characters discuss a flood that hit a western city, strongly implied to be Bristol. Their dismissive tone toward the affected neighborhoods reveals a class bias: those areas

were "largely social housing . . . notorious for crime," essentially considered "dodgy" places that "get flooded" anyway (Waters, 2009, p. 121). This exchange exposes how marginalized communities can be tacitly written off as acceptable casualties. It is a small-scale reflection of climate injustice: the poor and marginalized are more vulnerable to climate impacts because they often live in riskier areas (floodplains, substandard housing), have fewer resources to cope or relocate, and historically have had less political voice to demand protection.

According to Shue (1999, p. 541), basic human welfare must be safeguarded in the face of climate risk. In other words, there should be a baseline of protection for those most vulnerable so that no one is left without the essentials needed to endure climate impacts. The first part of the play, *On the Beach*, which focuses on the personal story of Will Paxton's parents (Robin and Jenny) on the Norfolk coast, humanizes this inequality. Robin, a retired glaciologist, and Jenny live directly in the flood's path, far from the halls of power. As the storm surge approaches, they wonder whether anyone from the government will come to their aid or if they must fend for themselves. This disparity highlights a real policy issue: major cities often receive the lion's share of protection resources, while rural or poorer areas rely on inadequate defenses. Robin and Jenny's vulnerability reflects Shue's claim that justice demands prioritizing protection for those most at risk (Shue, 1999, p. 541). In Shue's framework, fairness requires guaranteeing everyone an "adequate minimum" of safety and security before asking anyone to bear additional burdens (Shue, 1999, p. 541). However, *The Contingency Plan* shows the opposite happening: the government's inaction leaves Robin and Jenny dangerously exposed. In the climactic moments, they are nearly overwhelmed by onrushing waves—a fate that could have been avoided had authorities evacuated coastal residents earlier. The failure to safeguard this elderly couple (and others like them) dramatizes Shue's concern that the worst-off are too often neglected in climate adaptation efforts. By depicting how social inequalities exacerbate disaster impacts, Waters's play illustrates the ethical urgency behind Shue's arguments in concrete human terms. The government officials in the drama remain preoccupied with politics even as the seas breach defenses, whereas justice, as Shue insists, would mean focusing first on protecting those most vulnerable to the flood. In sum, the play's portrayal of unequal suffering in the context of a climate crisis vividly supports Shue's plea for a more responsible and equitable response to our environmental emergency.

In one scene set in Whitehall, the ministers Tessa and Casson grapple with an imminent flood threat. Their ministry's very existence—a department for resilience—suggests an acknowledgement of responsibility to protect the public. Nevertheless, Waters portrays a government initially more concerned with political optics and "stability" than with bold preventive action. Early in *Resilience*, when Will Paxton presents his alarming findings, Casson greets him with sarcasm: "So, Einstein. Waves but no floods? . . . No floods as yet?" (Waters, 2009, p. 161). This dismissal, referring to Will as "Einstein," suggests that the minister downplays scientific warnings because a disaster has not yet occurred. Such complacency illustrates a failure to act on knowledge of risk. Shue (1999, p. 531) argues that waiting until harm is undeniable is unjust, since by the time affluent actors feel the consequences, the vulnerable may already be suffering. In the play, Britain's leaders delay robust action until a major flood forces their hand, rather than exercising the precautionary leadership that Shue's principle of historical responsibility would demand.

When a catastrophic flood strikes a "venerable city" in Britain, the government's preparedness or lack thereof comes under scrutiny (Waters, 2009, p. 124). The play's climax involves a storm surge flooding Bristol, causing thirty-five fatalities (including a rescue pilot), a scenario reminiscent of the real 1953 North Sea Flood, which exposed severe weaknesses in Britain's coastal defenses and resulted in over 300 deaths in the UK (Hall, 2013).[3] This historical parallel underscores how extreme weather events test the adequacy of state planning and infrastructure. In the play, the disaster reveals how well or poorly the government had prepared. During an emergency meeting, officials acknowledge that the hardest-hit neighbourhoods were "largely social housing . . . on land rated Flood Risk Three," a known high-risk floodplain (Waters, 2009, p. 121). This admission exposes the extent to which vulnerable communities had been left in danger zones. Colin Jenks cynically remarks, "I mean, these areas get flooded, sea-level rise or no. Dodgy developers" (Waters, 2009, p. 121), thereby implying regulatory failure and negligent oversight. Lax planning permitted poorly designed housing on cheap, flood-prone



3 The North Sea Flood of 1953 was a major storm surge event that struck the eastern coasts of the United Kingdom and the Netherlands on 31 January–1 February 1953. In the UK alone, over 300 people were killed, thousands were displaced, and extensive coastal damage occurred. The disaster exposed significant weaknesses in flood defense systems and directly contributed to the later construction and reinforcement of large-scale protective infrastructure, including the Thames Barrier.

land, placing disadvantaged citizens directly in harm's way. Such negligence contravenes Shue's principle of historical responsibility: Britain, having benefited from early industrialization and its associated carbon emissions, bears a duty to invest proactively in robust defenses and to restrict development in high-risk zones to "restore equality" (Shue, 1999, p. 534). The government's failure to do so leaves vulnerable communities exposed, and the flood's toll becomes a stark manifestation of this moral lapse.

**Political Accountability and Intergenerational Ethics: The "Perfect Moral Storm"**

Stephen M. Gardiner (2011, p. 23) conceptualizes climate change as a "perfect moral storm," highlighting a confluence of ethical dilemmas that complicate effective responses. More recently, Gardiner (2024, para. 12) describes the crisis as characterized by "distortions in how our problems are discussed, especially through warped framings, misleading arguments, and shadow solutions that reflect the narrow priorities of the few while leaving deeper issues unresolved." A particularly salient issue Gardiner (2011) raises is intergenerational injustice: the current generation reaps the benefits of fossil fuel consumption while relegating the associated burdens to future generations. This dynamic is compounded by phenomena such as political buck-passing, where individuals and institutions defer responsibility, preferring that others undertake the necessary and costly actions. Additionally, Gardiner (2011) addresses moral corruption, wherein the complexities and uncertainties surrounding climate change are exploited as rationalizations for inaction.

*The Contingency Plan* examines political accountability in the face of enduring threats. A notable critique in the play is the reluctance of leaders to accept responsibility for critical decisions when the worst outcomes extend beyond their immediate political horizon. In *Resilience*, as the flood crisis escalates, Climate Change Minister Casson epitomizes this dilemma in a poignant exchange about intergenerational ethics. Facing pressure to implement drastic measures such as large-scale evacuations or issuing a public alarm that could save lives, Casson hesitates to take politically costly steps. He says defiantly, "I'm not prepared to be the minister who consigned Nelson's Column to the North Sea" (Waters, 2009, p. 133). This statement encapsulates a fundamental ethical failure: the tendency of current officials to defer difficult choices to their successors. Casson's stance reflects a short-termism pervasive in political discourse, raising questions about the impulse to avoid immediate political repercussions, such as public alarm, financial expense, and economic disruption, particularly when the benefits of action will materialize long after one's term or career ends. Waters uses Casson to personify this temptation, showing how he prioritizes immediate political safety—avoiding blame or panic—over the long-term safety of the populace. Gardiner's "perfect moral storm" is vividly illustrated here: Casson exemplifies the temporal dimension of that storm, wherein current decision-makers wield full authority in the present but offload the burden of response onto a future in which those who will bear the consequences have no voice. This is intergenerational injustice in action. In the play, Robin and Jenny, who are Will's parents in *On the Beach*, symbolize an older generation that inadequately addressed climate issues, while Will and his peers represent the younger generation left to face an intensified threat. There is a poignant connection between the two plays: *Resilience* shows politicians temporizing in London, while *On the Beach* depicts a coastal family confronting the flood with little help from the authorities. The implicit question is, "Who bears the cost of today's political inaction?" The answer is the younger and future generations—whether it is Will, the scientist frustrated by inaction, or the communities about to be flooded.

Real-world climate policy provides many analogues. International climate negotiations repeatedly see countries set ambitious long-term goals such as net-zero by 2050 or keeping warming below 1.5°C by the end of the century, while postponing concrete action to later years or decades. The Paris Agreement (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC], 2015) is a case in point: it relies on national pledges that escalate over time, essentially trusting that future administrations will significantly cut emissions, a strategy often described as "kicking the can down the road." Meanwhile, current emissions reductions remain modest relative to what science indicates is necessary. In national politics, too,

officials often opt for policies whose toughest costs will not manifest until they are out of office. Casson's fictional remarks mirror this behavior. For instance, a government might approve a new coastal defense project due for completion in 20 years or set a climate target for 2040 while doing little in the present, leaving the burden of delivery to successors. The moral hazard Gardiner (2011) highlights—that current actors have a strong incentive to push off burdens—is starkly represented in the play when Casson, faced with a decision that could save lives now at some political cost, chooses to leave the dilemma to future administrations. The play forces us to confront the ethical bankruptcy of such an approach. By the time a future administration takes over in the story, as in reality, the window to prevent catastrophe may have closed. Waters's drama thus serves as a call for accountability: those in power now must not abandon their duty simply because the gravest dangers will fully materialize on someone else's watch. Failing to take ownership and be accountable to the future is portrayed as a central tragedy in the play. It is a caution particularly apt for climate change, where the benefits of courageous action today—averting disaster decades hence—are invisible to the current public, while the economic, political, and social costs are immediate and tangible. Through Casson's character and decisions, Waters challenges the audience and, by extension, today's policymakers to consider what it truly means to lead responsibly in the face of a slow-building crisis.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

*The Contingency Plan* does not conclude with reassurance but with the ominous sound of an enormous storm; the final thunderclap refuses closure, leaving London suspended in uncertainty and underscoring that acknowledging a risk is not the same as averting it. Through its portrayal of earnest scientists, cautious bureaucrats, and self-interested politicians, the play delivers a nuanced critique of how contemporary society manages and mismanages climate risk. What emerges is not simply a dramatization of environmental crisis, but an interrogation of the ethical and political failures that allow such crises to unfold.

At its most immediate level, the play exposes the peril of inaction despite knowledge. Waters makes clear that ignorance is rarely the central problem in climate governance; rather, the crisis lies in the failure to act upon what is already known. In *The Contingency Plan*, every major decision-maker recognizes the possibility of devastating floods. Yet awareness does not translate into prevention. The gap between knowledge and action becomes the site of tragedy. The disaster is not merely a natural occurrence but the cumulative result of decisions—to delay, to deflect responsibility, and to maintain "business as usual" within bureaucratic structures when exceptional measures were required. The implication for real-world policymakers is unmistakable: decisive action must precede catastrophe. Contemporary climate governance continues to struggle with this temporal logic; long-term commitments proliferate, including those associated with international frameworks such as the Paris Agreement, while immediate and proportionate measures remain insufficient relative to scientific warnings. Waters's drama resonates as a pointed critique of precisely this pattern of deferral.

Equally significant is the play's meditation on ethical leadership under conditions of systemic risk. Casson and Tessa embody a politics shaped by institutional caution and career calculation, whereas Will Paxton represents a competing moral orientation grounded in scientific integrity and intergenerational responsibility. His marginalization within governmental deliberations mirrors real-world patterns in which expert knowledge is acknowledged yet procedurally neutralized. The play's closing atmosphere—where flooding can no longer be treated as hypothetical—implicitly vindicates Will's stance. In this respect, Waters's vision aligns with Stephen Gardiner's conception of climate change as an "intergenerational storm," demanding present actors exercise virtue and restraint on behalf of those not yet able to speak for themselves. Meaningful climate leadership, the play suggests, requires accepting political risk to avert moral failure.

From a broader theoretical standpoint, the analysis demonstrates that no single framework fully captures the entangled dynamics of climate inaction. Risk theory, bureaucratic moral disengagement, distributive justice, and intergenerational ethics converge to reveal that climate paralysis is not an aberration but a patterned mode

of governance. Within this logic, precaution becomes performative, urgency is absorbed into procedure, and responsibility is displaced across time and institutions. *The Contingency Plan* thus offers not merely a narrative of institutional breakdown but a structural anatomy of how climate irresponsibility is rationalized and normalized within contemporary policy cultures.

Beyond the fictional stage, the play's relevance becomes even more pronounced. Waters is prescient in capturing debates that continue to this day: How much should societies rely on adaptation infrastructure versus mitigation? How can scientific urgency be effectively communicated in political forums? Who is accountable when climate policies fail, and who ultimately bears the cost? When the on-stage debates are read alongside real-world policies, such as reliance on the Thames Barrier in relation to the Thames Estuary 2100 plan (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs & Environment Agency, 2023) and recurring delays in international climate negotiations, the play appears less an exaggeration than a condensation of existing governance patterns. In essence, *The Contingency Plan* is a call-to-action masquerading as a work of drama. Its contribution to climate ethics and policy discussions lies in its ability to cut through abstract rhetoric and present the human and institutional factors that determine our fate. The audience leaves the theatre, or the reader closes the script, with a visceral understanding of how easily caution can turn into culpability when it comes to climate change.

*The Contingency Plan* is far more than a climate disaster story – it is a thoughtful exploration of climate governance at its breaking point. Waters's play challenges us to recognize the follies in our current approach to climate risk: the endless meetings with no outcome, the misplaced confidence in partial solutions, the tendency to shift burdens onward, and the moral failing of ignoring the vulnerable. These are not just theatrical dramatizations; they are ethical and practical challenges that confront us in the real world. The play's fictional ministers learned too late that having a contingency plan on paper is not enough when the sea is at the door. Our real-world society, armed with science and plentiful plans, must heed that lesson. If we do not, Waters implies, we too will be left "on the beach," facing the consequences of having treated a planetary emergency as just another file in the cabinet. *The Contingency Plan* thus stands as a compelling artistic contribution to climate discourse, one that underscores the imperative for timely, just, and courageous action in the face of a crisis that is all too contingent on what we choose to do next. If Arendt were watching/reading the play, she might point out that while the characters are worried about avoiding panic, following orders, or saving face, they are failing the most basic test of judgment – to care for and protect our common home. The banality of their evil lies precisely in that gap between their ordinary demeanor and the enormity of the consequence.

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