

Martin Wright, Editor of Green Futures talks to composer turned climate campaigner Aubrey Meyer, the man behind Contraction and Convergence.

Most mavericks who plan global salvation from the upstairs room of a small terraced house in Walthamstow can reliably be written off as two bricks short of a load.

Not so Aubrey Meyer. A classical musician with a head for maths, he might easily be dismissed as the last of the gentleman amateurs, if he hadn't gradually built up a vast swell of support for his disarmingly simple plan to tackle climate change. Its converts include such unlikely bedfellows as Jacques Chirac, the archbishop of Canterbury and the government of China, and it's increasingly being seen as the much-needed 'Plan B' to succeed (or even rescue) the struggling Kyoto protocol.

All this, despite just about the ugliest name in the environmental lexicon. In a field rich in silky smooth soundbites – think Climate Care, Future Forests, Clear Skies – Aubrey has come up with... Contraction and Convergence. Not so much a clarion call to save the planet, as a rather technical description of giving birth to twins...

*"Yes, and immediately I suggested it, everyone I knew said: 'Don't call it that, for god's sake! It'll just kill it stone dead!' But the great advantage is that it does **exactly** what it says on the tin...."*

Which is the singular virtue of 'C&C', as it's known to its burgeoning array of fans. What it lacks as a sound-bite, it more than makes up in beguiling simplicity. Like any great idea, it's tailor-made for an elevator pitch: you really can explain its essence in seconds.

So here goes: we need to cut carbon emissions to a level consistent with a liveable climate. That's the contraction bit. The fairest way to do this, and the one most likely to win the necessary support worldwide, is gradually to converge the amounts which people are allowed to emit, until every citizen of the world has an equal share.

In practice, that means we need to agree on a sustainable level of carbon in the atmosphere (around 450 parts per million by volume is the ceiling most commonly quoted), and a date by which we need to reach and hold that total (2050, maybe). Then we set national emissions ceilings according to population, so as to meet that goal on the basis of 'equal shares for all'.

It's as simple, and as challenging, as that. There are some devils in the detail (what do you do about Trinidad – tiny population, but thanks to its oil industry, absurdly huge per capita emissions?), but nothing which can't be satisfactorily fudged. (You allocate by region, not state – so Trinidad's discrepancy could, for example, be swallowed up by an Africa-Caribbean group.)



The subtle beauty of C&C is the way it neatly addresses some of the squelchiest sticking points in the whole Kyoto process. For starters, it actually sets a specific, global goal on the basis of climate science – rather than relying on national carbon reduction targets which owe as much to diplomatic expediency as hard logic.

By bringing all countries into the equation, it deals with America's concerns that booming developing nations such as India and China have no incentive under Kyoto to curb their own carbon. By supporting full international emissions trading, it allows countries to reach their goals flexibly and at least cost. It encourages them to keep making cuts way beyond any agreed targets, since that will give them more carbon permits to sell – or fewer to buy. Finally, by insisting on equity, it addresses the third world's objection to paying for the sins of the rich.

It's this one-plan-fits-all approach which has won C&C such eclectic support. The European Parliament has voiced its approval, so has the Red Cross, the Lib Dems, and the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution. Some in business, too, are friendly: Adair Turner, ex-head of the CBI, now with Merrill Lynch, is a fan. The insurance industry is interested, and even some of the oil companies, claims Meyer, have made privately appreciative noises.

The government remains wary, although Tony Blair has cautiously praised its *"intuitive appeal"*. Michael Meacher, by contrast, when still environment minister, was unequivocal: *"If ever there was an initiative that deserved support... it is this brilliant and relentless campaign waged by this fiercely independent, creative and apparently quite tireless individual."*

After over three hours in Aubrey's front room, I can vouch for the 'tireless'. The man's just back from the States, but any traces of jet lag are swept away in a rolling wave of loquacious, almost intimidatingly erudite passion. C&C might be a tightly focused scheme, but its author's conversation ranges wide and wild across philosophy, maths, politics, music.... A typical stream-of-consciousness might kick off with the nuances of climate politics, only to meander enthusiastically, if a little bafflingly, through yoga, Bach, Cantorian brackets and the musical stones of ancient China. He's not averse to picking up his viola, which looks suddenly tiny and fragile in his hefty paw, and plucking out fragments of a scale to illustrate a point.

In public, he's the director of the Global Commons Institute. But don't let that fool you into thinking he's serviced by an office full of support staff – or constrained by the spin-sensitive caution of most NGOs. Aubrey is a soloist, and that 'fierce independence' so admired by Meacher is borne out by some unlikely sympathy for Washington's stance on Kyoto. *"The deepest irony in the whole debate is that the US said from the word go that this had to be a worldwide agreement [and hence involve commitments from India and China]. But they were trashed by the NGOs just for saying that a global problem needs a global solution; that if we act unilaterally it won't solve the problem. And we said: 'You're absolutely right! Those are rhetorical, posturing protest arguments by people who want to be green, but don't think through the structural consequences of what they're saying.'"*

This is not a man desperate to ingratiate himself with what might be thought of as his natural allies. But Meyer is blessed with an outsider's take on it all. Born in Bradford in 1947, he was brought up in South Africa, remaining more or less untroubled by the injustices of apartheid until he went to study music at the University of Cape Town. *"I might have been ignorant of the situation before,"* he explains, in a soft, precise South African lilt mellowed by 20 years in London. *"But you couldn't exactly avoid it when the police turned up on campus with their truncheons and their guns, and started baton charging you. I wasn't deeply involved, but I had friends who were, and just by associating with them, I too became a threatened species."*

Increasingly uneasy at the situation, he used music as a means of escaping military service, playing viola in orchestras in Europe, before returning to Cape Town in the mid-70s. There he shaped a living out of composing, playing and conducting, before apartheid's realities came too close to home to ignore. Having befriended the (black) caretaker of his block of flats, he was horrified when the man was arrested on trumped-up charges of child abuse. He managed to have him freed, but *"I realised then I had to either become really committed in the struggle, or get out. I got out."*

So it was back to Europe, to a life of conducting, composing, "to being paid for doing something I completely loved!" – and suddenly his face lights up, animation courses through him, more than at any other time in the interview... *"I was writing ballets, I had royalty cheques landing on the doormat – it was like money for jam!"*

And then, one day in the late 80s, he was casting around for a subject for another ballet. He thought about Mandela, but by chance hit on Chico Mendes, the Brazilian rubber-tapper-turned-activist, murdered by ranchers intent on converting his rainforest home into pasture. Intrigued, Meyer started reading around issues that had scarcely touched him before – *"and within three to four weeks, I was completely overwhelmed."*

The era's wider surge of environmental concern trickled down to his four-year old daughter too. *"I was putting her to bed one night, and out of the blue she asked: 'Daddy, is the planet really dying?' So I said: 'I don't think so, darling, but Daddy'll find out, and if it is, I'll put it right.' And I thought, never in my youth, never in anybody's youth, has a kid ever had to ask a question like that."*

It was epiphany. *“The penny went through the slot very hard in one go. I thought: ‘You ran away from it last time – where do you run to now?’ And suddenly music seemed completely pointless. I sold my viola, I sold my scores; for a while I just stopped playing completely.”* He threw himself into the Green Party and Greenpeace, devoured *The Ecologist* and books like Jonathon Porritt’s *Seeing Green*, and started work on a scheme called ‘Equity and Survival’ – the precursor of ‘C&C’.

It’s tempting to cast this as a mid-life crisis: a comfortable man in his early 40s seeking to recapture the energy and edge of youth. Not a bit of it, says Meyer. *“I really wanted to write music; I got a real thrill from that. In one sense, I loathe doing this work....”*

Since that burst of self-denial, he has taken up the viola again. Now, you can imagine a musician passionate about the environment using his art to touch people’s hearts – yet Aubrey spends most of his waking hours wrestling with the complexities of carbon diplomacy and the intricate maths of C&C. Don’t the constraints, the discipline of all that, chafe against his creativity?

“Well music may be all beauty on the surface, but it’s all about discipline underneath.” He picks up the viola, plucks two notes, an octave apart. *“Music is very mathematical. An octave is a precise doubling – if it wasn’t, you’d hear it as out of tune... The discipline of C&C is right on the surface – the beauty, the ingenuity is all hidden. But it’s there.”*

Meyer’s not without his critics. Some warn that C&C could turn people off by equating strategies to tackle climate change with sacrifice and denial. Others are sceptical of the insistence on equal carbon quotas, arguing that this obsession with equity could in practice do little to improve the lot of the poorest, and instead detract from more creative, dynamic efforts to shift to a low carbon economy.

Well, life is all about living within limits, responds Meyer – and so, come to that, is music. *“There’s an almost childish fear of being constrained by supposed lost opportunities – that unless you allow unlimited growth, you’re somehow missing out. It’s nonsense.”*

He acknowledges that there’s an element of political persuasion for the South in the convergence element, but adds that this isn’t some kind of redistributive agenda: *“It’s only entitlements; we’ll go on having emission rates that are different – that’s what the trading is for....”* And convergence could win votes, too – especially if embodied in personal carbon budgets, as envisaged in the Domestic Tradeable Quotas bill [see GF49, p30]. *“You’ll get paid for going by bike instead of by car. You’ll get paid for doing nothing, or doing less, or doing it differently.”* Just as a small fraction of the populace owns most of the wealth, so the majority probably emit less than their ‘fair’ share of carbon. *“So you won’t hit them with a carbon tax, you’ll be giving them a climate dividend! And that has to be an election winner!”*

But there’s still a strong moral argument for the equitable element of C&C – and as global inequalities grow, argues Meyer, it’s increasingly in our own interest to respond to it. *“In economic terms, the last 50 years have actually been about ‘expansion and divergence’. Overall, we’re richer, but the majority have got poorer. We can’t keep doing that road. Even without climate change, that’s a social explosion waiting to happen – and one that will see a lot more mothers call their kids ‘Osama’...”*

“Angels are weeping; we’ve got to get in there, and do whatever it takes.”

