A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

FROM HIS LONDON LOUNGE ROOM, CLIMATE CAMPAIGNER AUBREY MEYER MAY JUST SAVE THE WORLD WITH HIS PLAN FOR PER CAPITA GLOBAL CARBON EMISSIONS TARGETS

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THE GLOBAL COMMONS INSTITUTE SOUNDS AS THOUGH IT should be a grand organisation with a fine headquarters. The institute is at the forefront of the fight against the growing threat of global warming and lobbies scientists, the media and politicians to listen to its ideas. It publishes glossy brochures, distributes them at all the key climate events, and its ideas are backed by an impressive roll call of supporters, including presidents and prime ministers.

In fact, the Global Commons Institute is a small association led by one man, working from a plain house in northeast London. That man is Aubrey Meyer, and from his home he has devised the answer to the world's biggest problem. Meyer is not a physicist, economist or green technology guru. He is a musician – a very good one – and his idea to address global warming, called 'Contraction and Convergence' (C&C) is striking a chord across the globe. Britain's *Guardian* newspaper recently named him one of the 50 heroes of the planet and *New Statesman* magazine placed him among the 10 people most likely to change the world.

As awareness of climate change has risen, so has interest in C&C. It sets out a framework to control each country's gas emissions based on the principle that, subject to the overall amount that stabilises the rising concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere (contraction), each person has the right to produce the same quantity each year, wherever they live (convergence).

And as nations struggle to agree a new global treaty to limit carbon emissions that fits all of their respective domestic agendas, Meyer's idea is increasingly being talked about as the way we should go. Last year, German chancellor Angela Merkel became the latest big-name politician to throw their weight behind a version of it. And the Archbishop of Canterbury said those who thought it Utopian simply hadn't looked honestly at the alternatives.

For the 60-year-old Meyer, such moves vindicate a determined campaign spanning nearly two decades. It's a crusade that began in earnest in 1990 when his then four-year-old daughter turned to him from her cot and asked: 'Daddy, is the planet really dying?' Meyer's response – 'no, don't you worry, we'll sort it out' – illustrates his no-nonsense attitude to the issue. Meyer cares not for political compromises: for him, the existing Kyoto Protocol is a largely ineffective, global deal to regulate carbon pollution, requiring that only rich countries make cuts.

Born in Britain but raised and schooled in apartheid-era South Africa, Meyer is acutely aware of the perils of inequality and of the need for a global agreement to be truly global. 'By definition you can't possibly resolve this situation on a separated basis,' he says. 'Separate development is not sustainable development. Global apartheid doesn't work.'

Instead, Meyer proposes a system of equal-per-capita emissions entitlements that places every citizen in a framework-based market under full-term global emissions control, and keeps below the greenhouse gas concentration target (see 'What is C&C?' on page 47).

Meyer's extraordinary calculating and communication skills have set a standard for the whole debate, although his dogged campaign >>

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WHAT IS C&C?

Contraction and Convergence (C&C) starts with the UN objective that global atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gas cannot be allowed to rise much above the present level. This means that the future total of greenhouse gas emissions to the atmosphere must now be significantly reduced at a rate determined by how quickly we need to stabilise greenhouse gas concentration and hence global temperatures. Working backwards like that gives us a shrinking amount of carbon we can emit overall between now and whenever we would exceed our limit, expressed as an annual, decreasing, carbon ration. This is contraction and it needs to be continually measured in light of the changing relationship between our sources and the declining natural sinks for the gases as revealed in the latest IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report.

Treating the atmosphere as a 'global common', C&C would then divide the remaining carbon output available under contraction among every person on the planet. Each would have an equal entitlement in the overall emissions output. Richer countries such as Britain and the US, with higher emissions per person and which emit more than their global share, would converge with poorer nations, such as China and India, who emit less. Subject to the contraction imperative, all nations would agree a future date for their entitlements to become the same per capita. This is the convergence.

GETTY IMAGES

Left: Meyer says everyone is integrally part of the environment. Above: C&C was on the agenda at the UN's climate conference in Bali late last year

During this process, as global entitlement decreases, poorer countries would be allowed to increase emissions, while richer nations would be required to reduce them.

Subject to the C&C framework, a market for emissions trading from poorer countries that do not use their full allowance could help richer nations meet their targets, providing revenue for the former. Meyer says: 'It's poetic justice. It corrects fatal poverty and fatal climate change in the same framework.'

has managed to annoy all sides of the green movement in the past. To politicians and economists of the UK and US, the idea had echoes of communism, while hardened eco-warriors disliked the carbon trading aspects of the scheme and thought it too complicated, prescriptive and thus politically unsellable.

Meyer says: 'As soon as you push a per capita argument, people call it communism and as soon as you allow trading, people call you a capitalist. These critics wanted a row and their attitude to me was "who let you in here? Go and get a hair cut." But their dichotomy was a false and discriminatory stitch-up with no understanding of the need for integration and accuracy.'

We talk sitting on the floor of the Global Commons Institute's living room, surrounded by papers that he shuffles through from time to time to illustrate a point, and interrupted by phone calls from his daughter (now 21 and a university student) as she plots her trip home for Christmas.

Has he kept his promise to her to sort out the world? 'We're as close as we ever have been to getting C&C adopted,' he says. 'In that sense, we're probably closer to finding a solution, but in another sense we're in so much deeper trouble now, and a lot of us are beginning to doubt that this problem is really going to be fixed.'

Climate change may have finally hit the mainstream recently, but the science has moved on as well. All the signs suggest we face a greater challenge to limit temperature rise to 2° Celsius than we realised, and that we have less time to slash carbon pollution than we thought. Meanwhile, the international political response drags along at a glacial pace, or perhaps a melting glacial pace.

At United Nations climate talks at the end of last year in Bali, countries pledged to find a way to replace the Kyoto Protocol by 2009. Many people predict that the change in government when George W Bush leaves the White House will smooth the path to such an agreement. But for Meyer, President Bush and the US are not the climate criminals they are often painted. 'Bush acknowledged the problem is real and serious and there are many serious people beyond him.

'The global apartheid argument is made by the US, who have constantly said that unless China and India are part of the deal then it won't work. However much people want to >>

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vilify the US for being a big, bad bully, in one critical respect [the US has] been right from the word go. The US saw C&C and the US Senate Byrd Hagel Resolution as the same thing and said so in Kyoto.'

And what about the European approach: that developed countries should make unilateral cuts, as specified under Kyoto? 'Kyoto was an attempt to get a process going, but it's essentially picking numbers out of a hat and saying because we're guilty Europeans, we'll reduce our emissions alone. The Americans say we don't care whether we're guilty or not, we want everybody in.'

This is where C&C appeals. 'If you want everybody in, then you must integrate and have a way of organising it. It has to be global and rights-based. You need to specifically and formally agree to stabilise the atmosphere and agree to move towards equal emissions per capita by a given date.' That gives us a path shared globally where countries either limit or reduce their emissions according to whether their average per capita emissions are below or above the global average.

After studying music at university in South Africa, Meyer returned to Britain, played with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and became a successful composer. In 1988 he turned to environmental politics in a search for answers to questions raised while researching a musical about Chico Mendes, the assassinated Brazilian rainforest campaigner. A friend, fed up with his newfound curiosity on the environment, suggested he join the Green Party. Two years later, following the question from his daughter that was to change his life, the Global Commons Institute was born.

'From that moment on I thought: this is the end of music,' Meyer says. 'I sold my scores, I sold my viola and used the money to buy a computer to start figuring out how to deal with this issue.'

Has a musical background allowed him to see the problem in a different way? 'The key thing, especially with music and string playing, is that real feeling comes from integration and accuracy. It's a war on error. You have to be sure when you're playing that it is the audience that's crying. If you're crying and your tears are all over the fingerboard then you're skidding around and you can't play a damn note. You've got to be ice cold and yet red hot to get it over.'

He adds: 'That's partly the false dichotomy that haunts this debate. There are people who speak this red-hot rhetoric about the defilement of the environment, and others who have this measured commerce approach. Without a really shared discourse, there's error and no possibility of a proportionate response.'

Meyer uses musical metaphors a lot. He compares the difficulty of cutting carbon pollution to learning to play the Sibelius violin concerto – 'It's a tough piece but you learn it; it doesn't learn you.' C&C, like all music, has the disciplined demand of structure: coordination and accuracy in harmony, rhythm and form. He sometimes appears frustrated that words fail to communicate his thoughts and feelings as elegantly as a musical score can.

'Nobody has a choice but to be an environmentalist,' he says. 'We're integrally part of it. It's just that your relationship is determined by how much you surrender to how beautiful [the world around you] is.'

Perhaps drawn by its logic, or driven by the failure of other approaches, Meyer's idea is steadily emerging as a serious political option. In Britain, the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution and most political parties support Contraction and Convergence. It is the stated basis of policy in India, China and most African countries.

With political recognition has come a raised profile and awards for Meyer, including a City of London lifetime achievement award in 2005, and a UNEP (UN Environment Programme) financial leadership prize last year. Meyer says: 'I've received many awards now. Ten or 15 years ago I would have been proud as hell and worn them on my blazer, but what's most pleasing today is that for all the people in the corridors who have been saying for years that I'm an idiot and rude and have got this really stupid idea, there are now people saying hang on, this is quite a useful argument.' He pauses for a moment. 'But rude? I'll give them that.' □

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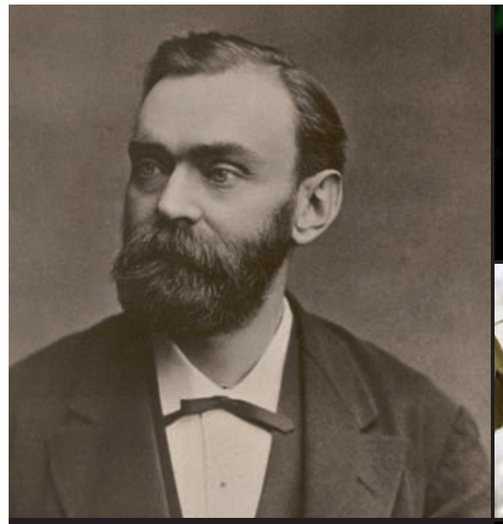

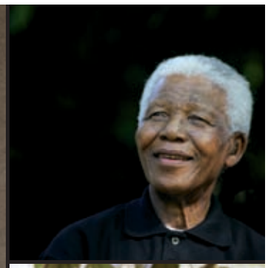

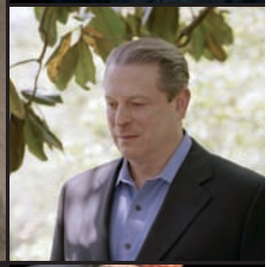

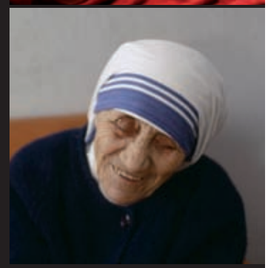

THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

After last year's Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Al Gore and the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change for underlining the climate problem, many have said that Aubrey Meyer should be a future recipient of the award for having pioneered and established the solution to it.

But how is the winner decided? Uniquely among the Sweden-based Nobel awards, the Peace Prize is agreed by a Norwegian committee and awarded in Oslo. Alfred Nobel never explained why he wanted this unusual arrangement. The Norwegian parliament appoints a Nobel committee, which invites nominations each year from the great and good around the world, including members of national governments, international courts, university chancellors, leaders of peace institutes and foreign affairs institutes, former winners and committee members, and professors of social science, history, philosophy, law and theology.

More than a hundred nominations can be received each year. These are supposed to be kept confidential. The committee asks for help from qualified experts in drawing up profiles of the nominees and then decides who, in Nobel's words, has 'done the most or the best work for fraternity between the nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and the holding and promotion of peace congresses.'

Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk received it for ending South African apartheid through justice without vengeance. With Contraction and Convergence, Meyer could receive it for establishing the template of reconciliation that avoids dangerous rates of climate change by ending 'global apartheid'.

Clockwise: (from above left) Alfred Nobel, who bequeathed funds to establish the eponymous awards; Nobel Peace Prize recipients Nelson Mandela, Al Gore, The Dalai Lama and Mother Theresa