

# POLICING POLLUTION

**Aubrey Meyer** examines the current political thinking on the major environmental question

TONY BLAIR addressed issues of potentially devastating significance in his recent major environment speeches. For the first time anywhere in the industrial world, our prime minister gave voice to the dreadful dilemma we now face.

"Climate change is the greatest threat to our environment today...if there is one issue that threatens global disaster it is the changes in our atmosphere...we have to face a stark fact, neither we here in Britain, nor our partners abroad, have succeeded in reversing the overall destructive trend. The challenge continues to grow and become more urgent."

In the more recent speech he said, "the process is accelerating. For some parts of the world, particularly the poorer parts, the effects will be catastrophic."

Drawing on the latest data now available from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) science group (reflected in the graphics alongside), he acknowledged that the trends of global climate changes - due to the human pollution behind global temperature rise - are now worsening towards potentially catastrophic outcomes.

Inexorably, and from now on, the supreme test of any government's policy and performance is whether they are acting effectively to reverse these trends. The test is both national and international. Failing in either dimension means our other efforts will be progressively overwhelmed by the consequences of this failure. The 0.02 per cent of UK GDP - essentially new money Tony Blair proffered to "kick-start self-sustaining markets" in renewable energy developments to deal with this coming catastrophe - was risible. It implied a degree of somehow getting lucky with the globalization of climate disruption that is obviously just not on the cards. Getting hurt or getting seriously organized to prevent this hurt, is all that counts now.

World business leaders meeting a year ago at the World Economic Forum in Davos described the trends as already "devastating", asking, "Why had more not been done to avert them?"

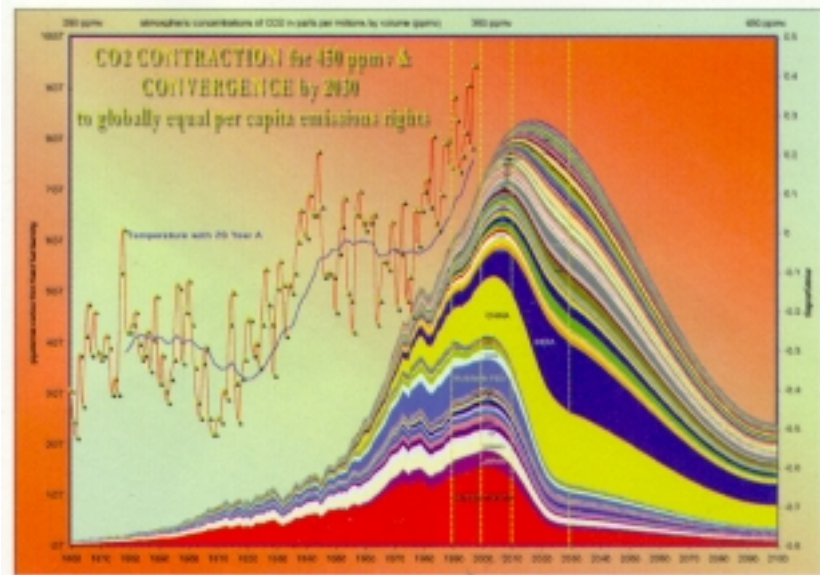
Sadly, based on the latest summary of the IPCC policy group, the impression given is that there is no certainty that averting them is possible at all. This reflects the views of a largely outdated and myopic group of economists that absurdly prioritizes the pursuit of economic growth ahead of the global environmental security on which this so obviously depends. It also reflects, however, the alarming properties of the devastating trends themselves. It can be said that these are possible to miss precisely because their enormous implications are so hard to absorb, let alone rationalize in policy terms.

While discreet events of local devastation - such as violent storms and flooding - are costs rather than benefits, in conditions of overall global climate and temperature stability, we understand and cope with these as parts of the swings and roundabouts of global "weather" patterns. When, as now however, they become inexorably fiercer and more frequent with the passing of time - because of increased heat being trapped in the atmosphere by accumulating pollution - this growing instability constitutes a trend into a global climate equilibrium shift, potentially a runaway greenhouse effect.

Averting this is not an everyday policy challenge. And, if difficult to accept, it is perhaps easy to understand why the political response to climate change to date has been so far short of what is really needed. For example the sub-global proposals passionately championed by John Prescott in the Kyoto Protocol - to semi-randomly pursue policies and measures to limit, reduce and also trade pollution entitlements amongst the industrial countries only - are correctly understood as inadequate and merely a first-step.

However hope for even this inadequate first-step to be taken appears now to have been crushed by the refusal of the new US President, George Bush, to submit any version of this Protocol to the US Senate for ratification. The world's largest polluter reminded us all that in June 1 997 the Senate had voted unanimously for the so-called Byrd-Hagel Resolution that insists on emissions reduction, or at least limitation commitments, being undertaken by all countries - not just the industrial countries. Intriguingly no clues were given as to how these would actually be quantified.

While Bush's move may really betray his overriding loyalty to the fossil fuel industry whatever the environmental cost, a reason cited for his refusal was that it would have exempted developing countries from such emissions control. At the same time, in response to this refusal, a recent CNN poll in the US showed that two thirds of its citizens



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believed that Bush should come up with a plan to save the climate. Once again no clues were given as to what this might be.

This would however appear to be asking for a plan that shows how developing countries can integrate their contribution into the global effort to control emissions needed to prevent a runaway greenhouse effect. And to avert this does require committing globally to a rate of implementing the solution that is faster than the rate at which we are collectively creating the problem. Our own Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (RCEP), joined recently by the liberal Democrats, has forcefully advocated to government how this should be done through the formal procedures of "Contraction and Convergence" explained in their exemplary report from the June last year, *Energy - the Changing Climate*.

If we are to stabilize rising global temperature, we are going to have to rapidly stabilize the upward acceleration of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere. According to the RCEP, and many others, this in turn means that we must effect a global contraction of emissions of greenhouse gases by 60 to 80 per cent from human sources. This must be achieved internationally through a global transition - or convergence - to develop goals based upon per capita calculations.

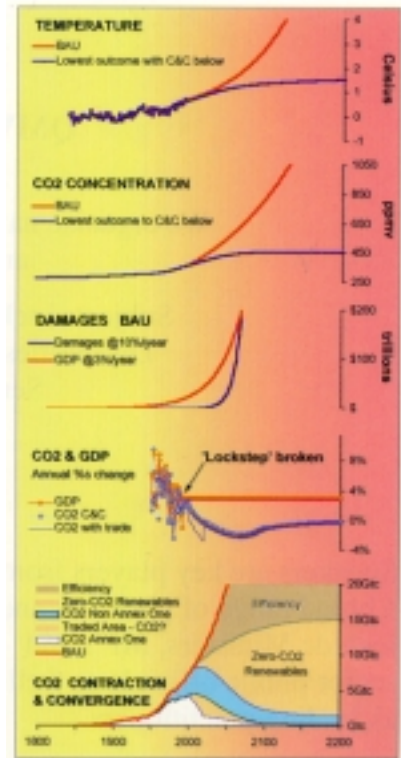
The problem is cumulative. This means, simply but devastatingly, that the atmosphere retains at least half of any year's emissions semi-permanently. Consequently, contracting emissions only slows the upward rise of their concentrations in the atmosphere. Thus it can be argued that unless we become organized soon in a global programme that is committed to this end, we might as well not bother to try and solve the problem at all as we may just remain caught in the randomness of partial, and effectively, symbolic emissions control while the problem continues to accelerate to the point of becoming insoluble altogether.

As the developing countries accurately say that they did not precipitate and will not prosper in this growing climate crisis, the diplomacy required to sell such a global programme will be a challenge made easier if the global emissions gas emissions from the

global entitlements created by C&C are assumed to be readable. And whatever way we do it, the problem is by definition based on the *a priori* need for a "pre"-distribution of entitlements, (as you can not trade what you do not own) and tradability makes possible an "accelerated" rate of convergence with potentially much more generous entitlements, and therefore revenues, accruing to those countries than would otherwise be the case. Moreover much of the long-standing global economic dysfunction such as the debt crisis could be addressed this way. This is a more honest approach than indulging the view that a long game works in their favour.

The graphics alongside give an overview of this new battleground of the rates of change. It was in this context that the insurance industry made media headlines at the UN climate negotiations last November with their stark projection of damages. Fossil fuel consumption had averaged two per cent growth a year since the end-of the war. During this period, while the GDP dependent on this energy expenditure had averaged three per cent growth a year, the damages from the climate change related disasters caused had been rising at 10 per cent a year. Unless, they said, the dependency of this economic growth on fossil fuel burning was now fundamentally broken, the damages (or wealth destruction measured as uninsured losses) will overtake gross wealth-creation in real terms within the next 65 years. This, the insurance industry pointed out, is obviously unsustainable and joined the RCEP in the advocacy of the global "Contraction and Convergence" procedures - an example of which is portrayed in the bottom graphic. While Mr. Blair has yet to respond to this advice from the RCEP, Michael Meacher did recently instruct his negotiators in the IPCC policy forum to promote C&C in the summary output from the group. Ludicrously, considering their recent contribution, the Americans blocked this at the key meeting.

In the big picture we all have real cause for concern as there is little mainstream 'discourse at this time upholding the notion that we will have curbed and stabilized the upward rise of global temperature within less than 100 years from now. To do this would require nearly complete removal of



greenhouse gas emissions from the global economy within the next 50 years. Noting the exceptional contributions of Amory Lovins, of the Rocky Mountain Institute and Greenpeace, few have argued for this and been seriously listened to so far. Yet not to argue for this suggests that we will all lose in the battle of rates of change.

It is these comparisons that are at the heart of the "devastating trends" of climate change. To do enough to avert the trends requires now a globally coordinated rate of the organized transformation of human behaviour and development techniques on a scale for which there is no precedent - except perhaps nationally in wartime.

Averting devastating global climate change is going to be like fighting a hundred years' war. Unless the total notion and process of governance is reconfigured to the over-riding purpose of winning this war, Mr. Blair's strong words will gradually become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

*Aubrey Meyer is the Director of the Global Commons Institute and author of Contraction and Convergence - the Global Solution to Climate Change. Graphics are reproduced with the kind Permission of Green Books.*