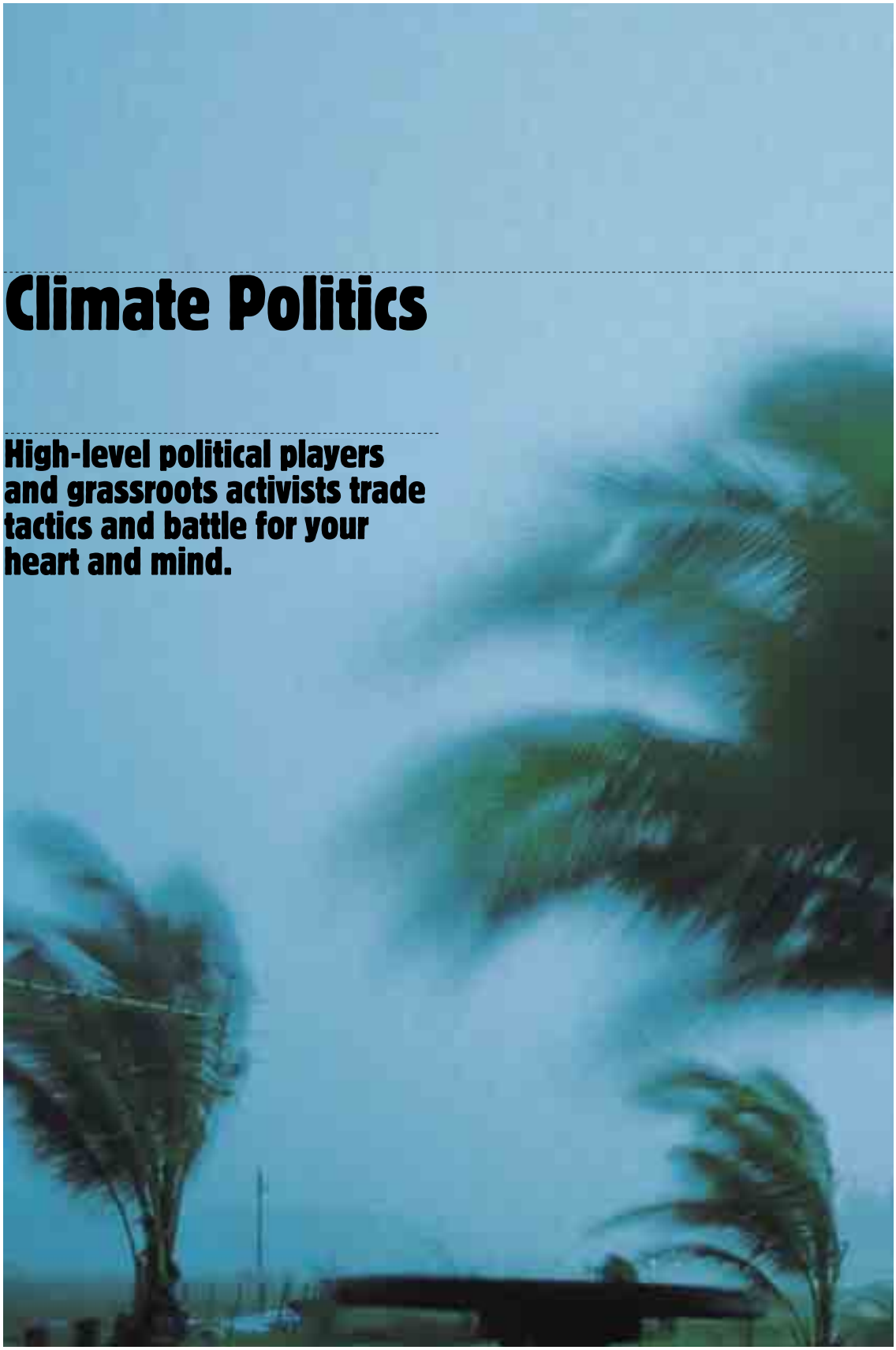
Climate Politics

High-level political players and grassroots activists trade tactics and battle for your heart and mind.



America faces reality on climate change (slowly)

Jim DiPeso

The Bush administration is in denial, but outside Washington cracks are showing in the wall of resistance to the truth of global warming, say the Republicans for Environmental Protection.

Washington DC seems hostile towards even acknowledgement that civilisation has a devil of a climate problem on its hands.

Like a political Gresham's law that has driven out creative thinking, a sclerotic calculus that marginalises 'liberal environmental' concerns appears to dominate policymaking in the US capital.

But despair not. Look closer and cracks can be seen in the wall of resistance around the Beltway. Game-changing ideas stand a chance of seeping through, putting America back into play on climate change.

Senators John McCain (Republican, Arizona) and Joseph Lieberman (Democrat, Connecticut) have reintroduced the Climate Stewardship Act[1], which would establish a cap-and-trade policy to limit greenhouse gas emissions from US commercial and industrial sectors. A companion bill has been introduced in the House of Representatives.

No one expects near-term approval of either bill. But signs of a changing political dynamic could result in passage of 'McCain-Lieberman', or something like it, if not during the current presidential administration, then in the next.

That could initiate a global bargain where all nations accept steadily falling per-capita greenhouse gas limits, on an asymmetric schedule that puts the early onus for reductions on industrialised nations. This is envisioned by the 'contraction and convergence'[2] proposal mooted by the Global Commons Institute (GCI) in the United Kingdom.

But what's in contraction and convergence (C&C) for the US? First, US companies will be unleashed to find business opportunities in international cap-and-trade markets.

Second, by accepting emissions limits, the US would recover much international political goodwill, giving the country leverage in negotiations over climate issues. With all nations covered by greenhouse gas emissions limits, the US will have scored an important political point: solving a global problem requires global participation.

What's in contraction and convergence for developing nations? They would score their own political point as the downpayment on global emissions cuts should be charged to industrialised nations, which have enjoyed the fruits of a fossil fuel energy economy.

C&C would give developing nations a new product to sell the industrialised nations unneeded per-capita emissions allocations,

Links

[1] www.ucsusa.org/global_environment/global_warming/page.cfm?pageID=1237
[2] www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article.jsp?id=6&debateId=129&articleId=2462
[3] clinton4.nara.gov/PCSD/tforce/cctf
[4] www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/04_33/b3896001_mz001
[5] unfccc.int/essential_background/convention/items/2627.php
[6] www.grist.org/news/maindish/2005/03/01/hagel
[7] www.iags.org/saf

at least in the early years of the deal. Sale of those allocations could be dedicated to economic development, including deployment of technologies that will clean up air pollution and the associated health costs that developing nations can ill afford.

Yet even with a generous helping of political goodwill, negotiating the details of a global grand bargain would not be easy. The bargain would need many components – for example, technology agreements to accelerate deployment of non-carbon energy.

But there are four reasons to believe that American climate politics are starting to change in a way that hopes for such a deal may be more realistic today than they were a year or so ago.

A time to hope, and change

First, science. Many government and business leaders have accepted the increasingly compelling, peer-reviewed scientific findings that human emissions are at least partly responsible for global warming.

Most recently, the International Climate Change Task Force[3], co-chaired by Senator Olympia Snowe (Republican, Maine), published a report underscoring the urgency of acting now, before civilisation crosses climate thresholds that could result in security, health, and economic damage beyond our means to repair.

Climate sceptics, think-tank ideologues and the politicians who read their papers are starting to look silly and obtuse.

Second, business. Few business risks bother CEOs more than uncertainty. More corporate executives, even those running coal-burning US utilities, are coming around to a belief that carbon limits are inevitable and that it's time to get on with it. Given regulatory predictability, executives are confident business will adapt to new rules. 'Give us a date, tell us how much we need to cut, give us the flexibility to meet the goals, and we'll get it done', Xcel Energy CEO Wayne Brunetti told Business Week[4] in 2004.

A related uncertainty issue is 'regulatory Balkanisation'. Tired of waiting for Washington DC, US states are adopting their own climate policies. A California law, for example, imposes carbon emissions limits on new cars sold in America's most populous state, beginning in 2009. A handful of northeastern states, including New York, have adopted the California rules. The Pacific states of Washington and Oregon may be next. Businesses fearing a 50-state regulatory patchwork may press Washington DC to adopt a national climate policy.

Third, diplomacy. Senator Chuck Hagel doesn't like the Kyoto Protocol[5], but he also doesn't like the US being diplomatically isolated. A possible presidential candidate in 2008, Hagel has introduced bills providing incentives for deploying technologies that reduce carbon emissions, both in the US and in developing nations. Hagel's legislation[6] points the way for climate sceptics to engage with the issue constructively.

Fourth, security. One of the oddest political coalitions in years has emerged in Washington DC to demand a serious national policy to reduce oil dependence and its associated strategic liabilities. 'Set America Free'[7], a group of evangelicals, neo-conservative defense hawks, and greens are pressing for incentives to improve fuel efficiency and expand use of non-petroleum fuels, such as ethanol. While the driver for the plan is national security, an effort to reduce oil dependence would have climate benefits.

The political outlook for Set America Free is uncertain, but the unusual politics of the coalition may put the Bush administration in an awkward spot. The administration cannot ignore the voices of core constituencies as easily as it dismisses environmentalists.

The American federal government will not change overnight, but early signs of a political climate change are worth cautious optimism. While it's naive to ignore the artfulness with which politicians avoid facing facts, endless pressure could bear fruit. It had better, because the uncontrolled science experiment we are performing on the only atmosphere we have is becoming increasingly dangerous.

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www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-6-129-2468.jsp

The United States has it right on climate change - in theory

Aubrey Meyer

The Kyoto Protocol is not a global framework and the United States shouldn't be regarded as an obstacle.

Links
[1] unfccc.int/2860.php
[2] www.nationalcenter.org/KyotoSenate
[3] www.schumacher.org.uk/schumacher_b5_climate_change
[4] www.cbc.ca/news/background/kyoto/

The objective of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change[1] (UNFCCC) agreed in 1992 to stabilise the rising concentration of greenhouse gases in the global atmosphere at a level that prevents dangerous rates of climate change. George Bush senior signed the convention for the US, and the US government's stated position has never contradicted this objective.

The US, including George W Bush, has affirmed the unavoidable truth that no one can be exempted from limits on emissions if uncontrollable rates of global warming are to be avoided.

In 1990, a rational formulation for emissions control was suggested at the climate conference: all countries would agree to reduce their emissions by 1-2% per year. Thus began an argument that by June 1992 had led to the clause in the UNFCCC calling for 'common but differentiated responsibilities'. The clause meant all countries would control their emissions but at different rates and starting at different points in time, and not at a globally uniform rate in a globally uniform timeframe.

The Byrd-Hagel Resolution[2] points the way forward. It accepts the need for 'differentiated responsibilities' for all countries in the UNFCCC.

With permit 'tradeability', there would be negative growth in the entitlements of developed countries alongside the controlled positive growth in the entitlements of developing countries. The structural result: the rich would be financing the clean development of the poor to save the planet.

Global Commons Institute (GCI) clearly pointed out that this, by definition, was 'contraction and convergence[3]' (C&C); there was no other conceivable way to organise this global-scale solution. Led by the Africa group of nations at Kyoto in December 1997 and supported by India and China, this trade-equity swap in C&C was accepted by the US. In the heat of the negotiations for a global solution, the US accepted that the equitable pre-distribution of emissions permits created by C&C framework was the necessary reward demanded by the developing countries for global emissions trading.

The Kyoto Protocol, by contrast, is widely – and rightly – regarded as inadequate. It omits the US and rewards the problem[4] (by delaying contraction) more than it rewards the solution (which is to accelerate convergence).

For full text, see:
www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-6-129-2462.jsp

Setting limits on industrial emissions is an essential component of a climate change policy.

The Kyoto Protocol: time for action, not hot air

Michael Grubb

Kyoto is the only foundation for global action on climate change, but governments must now start using the tools it provides.

Links

[1] www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article.jsp?id=6&debateId=129&articleId=2462
[2] www.opic.gov/GeneralOPIC/senateresolution98
[3] www.climnet.org/EUenergy/ET
[4] www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page6333.asp

The debate on Kyoto has suffered from an almost obsessive focus on first-round targets that set emission limits for industrialised countries over 2008-12, and on the US position. This has obscured its real importance, namely its fundamental 'structure' and the obligations on governments it embodies: to negotiate specific, binding limits on their emissions; to implement these (including efficient market mechanisms); and to update these in sequential rounds of negotiations, as knowledge accumulates, until the problem is solved. Nearly all the world has now signed up to that structure.

Aubrey Meyer[1] is wrong to argue, in his contribution to this debate, that the 1997 Byrd-Hagel[2] resolution offers a radical alternative that is a more realistic way forward. The essence of that vote was that the US would not take on binding limits unless developing countries did so simultaneously. But developing countries are adamant that the rich world must first demonstrate leadership and willingness to tackle the problem.

At the moment, the central focus should be on whether the countries that have accepted targets have the means and the will to implement them.

Europe's promise

The centrepiece of international implementation is now the European Union's Emissions Trading System[3] (EU ETS), launched in January 2005. This sets limits on emissions from European heavy industry and power generation while enabling them to trade their allocations. It covers energy and industrial sector emissions in twenty-five of the thirty-four industrialised countries that are party to Kyoto; it is, in short, the 'big beast' of implementation policies.

The EU ETS is structurally sound but has got off to a weak start, with many EU governments handing out overly generous emission allocations that do not correspond with their Kyoto targets. Barely a week after Tony Blair, the UK Prime Minister, reiterated warnings[4] about the risks to the planet, his government announced a big increase in emission allowances to industry. Setting targets (whether in real-world negotiations, or in imagined global solutions) is the easy part: the key now is to deliver.

For full text, see:
www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-6-129-2517.jsp

A new strategy for climate change

Tim Harford

A market-based approach to pollution control pioneered in the United States suggests a way to overcome inadequacies in the European approach to climate change, and a model the whole world can join to the benefit of its poorest people.

Links
[1] www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article.jsp?id=6&debateId=129&articleId=2462
[2] www.cramton.umd.edu/papers2000-2004/02ep-tradeable-carbon-permit-auctions.pdf

In 1993, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the United States faced a dilemma: sulphur emissions from coal-fired power stations were causing acid rain, but the cost of cleaning emissions was high.

The EPA gave polluters a choice: either remove sulphur from emissions, or buy one of a limited number of 'permits' to continue polluting.

Permit prices had to fall to $70 per ton before many polluters would consider actually polluting over cleaning up their act. Emissions fell dramatically, the government made money, and any power plant facing difficulty meeting the emissions target had an escape, for a price.

Now tradable permits are being used to reduce carbon dioxide emissions through 'cap and trade' schemes, such as the European Union's Emissions Trading System (ETS). The ETS does not use an auction but hands out free quotas and allows countries to trade them. The trouble with this system is deciding on the quota for each country.

Many Europeans blame George Bush for the absence of the United States, but the problem is deeper. The Senate's refusal[1] was because developing countries refused to restrict their emissions and because US obligations were challenging. Developing countries had an infinite quota, while America's quota was too small to be politically acceptable.

Some economists (including Peter Cramton and Suzi Kerr: 'How and why to auction, not grandfather'[2]) have suggested adopting the same strategy as the EPA did. That is, emulate the sulphur dioxide auctions by scrapping national quotas and fixing a global supply of emissions permits to be sold to the highest bidders. The overall emissions would be the same as with a quota system, but instead of giving the emissions permits away as quotas, every ton of carbon dioxide would have to be paid for.

This system would meet concerns that developing countries like China have some incentive to reduce emissions. At the same time, the Chinese would want to be included, because the money they received from the permit auction would be substantially more than what they would have to spend on permits. Even a country like Ethiopia would gain from joining the agreement, and Ethiopians would have an incentive to adopt energy-efficient technologies.

For full text, see:
www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-climate_change_debate/pollutionpermit_2536.jsp

Floodwaters surrounding houses in Dhaka. The rainy season in Bangladesh may be more unpredictable as a result of climate change.

The G8, the Kyoto Protocol and the world

Benito Müller

UK, European and Japanese leaders must reaffirm their commitment to the Kyoto Protocol at July's G8 summit. by encouraging participation from developing countries and sub-national parties in the United States, they can advance the global climate change agenda

Links

[1] www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article.jsp?id=6&debateId=129&articleId=2517
[2] www.guardian.co.uk/climatechange/story/0,12374,1501646,00
[3] www.foxreno.com/news/4547719/detail
[4] www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article.jsp?id=6&debateId=129&articleId=2570
[5] www.arcatacityhall.org
[6] www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article.jsp?id=6&debateId=129&articleId=2468
[7] www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article.jsp?id=6&debateId=130&articleId=2513

The European Trading Scheme and the international emission 'cap and trade' regime of the Kyoto Protocol[1] are the most important weapons in the fight against climate change. Such permit-trading schemes offer economic incentives to reduce emissions.

Since George W Bush repudiated the Kyoto Protocol in 2001, his administration has been opposed to the idea of carbon-emission caps, opting instead for a voluntary regime with 'intensity targets' and technology (export) initiatives. But at the sub-national (state[2], city[3], corporate[4] and community[5]) level, several measures are underway which could be integrated with Kyoto Protocol-type flexibility mechanisms.

UK and European policy must remain focused on genuine leadership to continue the Kyoto-track negotiations, but with modifications allowing changes to rules (such as the introduction of price 'safety valves') and participation by sub-national entities of 'non-Parties' (Australia and the US) in the flexibility mechanisms. This would lend support to efforts at the sub-national level in the US, and might help put pressure[6] on federal authorities. The only way forward is to engage with the US administration to forge some joint technology initiatives. But this must be a complement to the Kyoto-track, not a substitute.

Most developing countries are less concerned about what kind of arrangements are made for after the 2008-12 Kyoto commitment period than they are about how already rich, industrialised countries will 'participate meaningfully' in dealing with the impacts of climate. For developing countries, climate change is not only a matter of mitigation or adaptation; it is a crosscutting issue of disaster management, desertification, biodiversity, trade, and, above all, development[7].

The key points in promoting an international climate regime beyond 2012 are:

- keep the Kyoto-track (i.e. differentiated mandatory emission caps & flexibilities) negotiations for industrialised countries
- make provisions for 'as-if-Parties' who are willing (and able) to play by the rules of the treaty but have not managed to (or cannot) get formal ratification by their governments
- engage developing countries by addressing their emissions without imposing additional economic burdens.

For full text, see:
www.opendemocracy.net/globalizationclimate_change_debate/2586.jsp

What to do about climate change? British activists debate

George Marshall, Sophie Hug, Sophie Harding and Phil Thornhill

Climate change will dominate the lives of billions in the 21st century, yet it scarcely features on the political agenda. In a two-part debate, four leading activists discuss why, and what can be done.

George Marshall
Social change on climate change will come from a movement of people leading by example, who, having faced up to their own denial and complicity, have taken real steps to reduce their own emissions. We should do this not from guilt, but from a confidence that authority on this issue starts from changes we make within.

Phil Thornhill
But it's not difficult to understand why our campaigning efforts seem to have made so little difference. Above all it is simply the unprecedented nature of the threat: humankind has had a serious impact on odd corners of the global ecosystem before but never the whole thing at once, as now. No wonder we do not have the mechanisms to deal with it.

Sophie Harding
We need to demonstrate how the nebulous global threats of climate change translate tangibly to individual lives. We have all contributed to the problem, and we all have a vital role to play in becoming a part of the solution. The poor have not contributed to climate change, yet it is they who will suffer most from its adverse effects.

Sophie Hug
But the fact is that unlike many other noble causes, climate change is not even on most people's radar. The global justice movement could have an important role in spreading that message.

We need to move from publicising the problem, which hasn't got us anywhere, to using the language of empowerment. Providing people with clear action seems simple but I don't think it has been done yet in a clear and consistent way.

For full text see:
www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-6-129-2472.jsp

China, India, and Brazil: activists debate climate change

Angel Green (China), Clifford Polycarp (India), Rubens Born (Brazil) and Mark Lutes (Brazil)

How do people in the global South view climate change? Here, voices from civil society in three emerging industrial giants present their views.

Industrialised and developing nations need to work together to find solutions to our emissions problems.

Links

[1] unfccc.int/meetings/cop_10/items/2944.php
[2] www.mongabay.com/brazil_deforestation
[3] www.brazil.org.uk/page.php?cid=1845

Angel Green
China's government is already aware of the direct impact of the coal burning that fuels about two-thirds of the country's electricity supply. 30% of the nation's land has been eroded, and five Chinese cities are among the ten most polluted cities in the world.

At the 2004 Conference of the Parties (COP 10)[1], the Chinese government sent out a clear signal that if industrialised countries intend to create technology-transfer mechanisms, it will be ready to talk about an emission cap. It is arguable that among the Group of 77 (G77) developing countries, China is now taking the leading role.

Clifford Polycarp
Political leaders in India view climate change as a strategic issue rather than a fundamental problem that could have unforeseeable socio-economic consequences. They speak in catastrophic terms of the impacts of climate change when it suits them politically, without necessarily believing what they say.

Among our three nations, India's situation looks to me to be the worst. India is extremely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. We are increasingly contributing to the problem itself though our growing emissions without really attempting to do anything about it.

Rubens Born and Mark Lutes
Around 70% of Brazil's greenhouse gas emissions result from deforestation[2], and there has been very limited progress in addressing this problem over the past decade. By contrast Brazil's energy matrix – power generation and transport – has relatively low greenhouse gas emissions because of the extensive use of hydroelectricity and biomass energy sources such as alcohol and charcoal.

Public opinion and media coverage in Brazil is overwhelmingly in favour of action to prevent climate change. The small number of 'climate sceptics' has very little influence. But there has been little public debate of what form Brazil's eventual emission-reduction commitments may take, and the government's negotiating strategy – in line with the G-77 position – has been to resist any formal discussion of this issue. The overwhelming role of deforestation in Brazil's emissions makes it likely that this question will be central to future negotiations of Brazil's role[3] in the emerging global emissions-reduction regime.

For full text, see:
www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-climate_change_debate/article_2520.jsp

Africa: make climate change history

Camilla Toulmin

Climate change in Africa is likely to compound an already fragile condition. The future demands that economic development and environmental security walk together.

People often talk of 'environment' as an optional extra once economic growth has been achieved. Yet for climate change in Africa, the dichotomy between environment and economic development is particularly false. There is and will be no durable economic development unless it is based on sustainable management of Africa's land, soils, forests and water.

Those of us in the UK and other wealthy countries must recognise our responsibility for climate change. We must help address problems of adaptation, particularly for African nations. Africa is likely to suffer some of the greatest impacts of climate change despite its people having contributed among the least to the human impact on climate.

Admitting our responsibility for global warming means we can no longer adopt the 'lady bountiful' approach of charitable gesture towards those suffering from global warming. Instead, there are strong grounds for payment of reparations.

Giving small amounts of aid is the preferred course for most rich country governments – allowing them a warm glow of self-righteousness, while avoiding the much more difficult task of undertaking domestic measures which could lose votes, or damage the interests of powerful groups. As for trade and agricultural policy, so also for climate change – our governments provide fine words but little action, preferring to wait, establish a new commission to prepare a report, or set a deadline ten years hence.

Large-scale, disruptive climate change threatens to be the ultimate weapon of mass destruction (WMD) for us all.

For full text, see:
www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-6-129-2513.jsp

The global financial community will need to respond to the challenges of climate change.

The $20,000,000,000,000 question

Nick Robins

The global financial community is waking up to the risk of climate change, and the opportunities arising from doing something about it. But a smarter regulatory framework is urgently needed. Henderson Global Investors asks whether political and business leaders can rise to the challenge.

Links

[1] www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article.jsp?id=6&debateId=129&articleId=2510
[2] www.millenniumassessment.org/en/index.aspx
[3] www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article.jsp?id=6&debateId=129&articleId=2547
[4] www.iea.org
[5] www.defra.gov.uk/environment/climatechange/trading/eu

The climate crisis[1] results from a tragic misallocation of financial resources towards activities that fail to account for their environmental impacts[2]. If we are to make the bridge to a secure climate future, then fresh thinking is urgently required on how to steer the world's immense investment resources towards energy options[3] that simultaneously deliver sustainability and decent returns for the world's savers.

The total value of all the companies listed on the world's stock markets now amounts to over twenty trillion US dollars ($20,000,000,000,000). To date, precious little of this store of financial wealth has taken account of the cost of carbon emitted from these companies' products and processes. And, looking ahead, business-as-usual projections from the International Energy Agency[4] suggest that over $16 trillion will be invested in the world's energy infrastructure up to 2030, mostly in fossil fuel facilities, generating an additional 60% in greenhouse gas emissions.

The multi-trillion dollar question is therefore how to mould those old financial drivers of 'fear and greed' so that they work with the grain of a low carbon future rather than against.

This process has already started. The introduction of the European Union Emissions Trading Scheme[5] on 1 January 2005 has transformed the way that financial markets value companies affected by the scheme. The scheme has created a new market in carbon dioxide allowances estimated at some €35 billion (US$43bn) per year, potentially rising to over €50 billion per year by the end of the decade.

For full text, see:
www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-climate_change_debate/2570.jsp

Memo to the G8

Fred Pearce

The leaders of the seven biggest industrialised nations plus Russia met in Scotland from 6-8 July. What should have been agreed on climate change? The environmental writer Fred Pearce sent them an open letter.

Dear G8 leaders,
The current Downing Street draft of the final declaration of your July summit in Gleneagles, Scotland was leaked in late May.

It contains a fascinating gap, which as ever comes in those failsafe 'square brackets' so beloved of civil servants and diplomats. The first bullet-point in paragraph six reads: 'There is now compelling evidence [statement on scientific evidence of the need for action].'

The precise wording of whatever statement is to go inside those bureaucratic brackets is, clearly, sensitive territory. Downing Street diplomats and their scientific advisers can't quite agree on what to put in. They don't want to scare the Americans, after all.

So here is what you should be considering.

The world is approaching an abyss. We don't know exactly where the edge is, but there is a strong case that an average global temperature rise of 2 °C above pre-industrial levels will take us there. That is just 1.3 °C warmer than today. On current trends we will be there before 2050, and it may be too late to slam on the brakes any time after about 2020.

Somewhere around that two-degree figure, warming may start to trigger a series of irreversible shudders through the Earth system – climatic equivalents of a tsunami.

They may include the runaway melting of the Greenland and west Antarctic ice-sheets, which would add thirteen metres to sea-levels worldwide; a shutdown of the warm Gulf Stream, giving Western Europe near-Siberian temperatures. It could even include the release of huge stocks of methane currently frozen in the Siberian tundra and beneath the Arctic seabed – stocks sufficient to raise global temperatures by a further ten degrees or more.

Science fiction? Not at all. These terrifying prospects come from a meeting of the world's top climate scientists, organised by the UK government at the Met Office in Exeter, western England, in February 2005 (see Stabilisation 2005).

In their dispassionate way, the scientists present called these wild and sudden events 'type II climate change', as distinct from the more gradual 'type I' stuff you are probably more familiar with. John Schellnhuber, director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change in Cambridge, put it more bluntly: 'We now know that if we go beyond two degrees we will raise hell.'

Scotland: the host for the G8 meeting 2005.

It was the fear of type II climate change that encouraged European Union leaders in March to adopt the two-degree target. We may hope that, by the time Tony Blair's drafters have filled in their square brackets, it puts in an appearance in the G8 statement you will be asked to sign. If not, please put it in.

You may remember that at the Earth Summit in 1992 your predecessors, including the father of George W Bush, signed a climate change convention agreeing to prevent 'dangerous' climate change. At the time, nobody knew quite what that might mean. So the targets for cutting greenhouse gas emissions in the Kyoto Protocol five years later were a holding operation.

But now we have a scientifically coherent benchmark for how dangerous climate change might be. So let's use it.

How do we go forward? For the answer, listen to David Warrilow, Head of the global atmosphere division at Britain's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), at a mid-May meeting in Bonn of government experts on what should follow when the Kyoto targets expire in 2012.

To prevent a two-degree warming, Warrilow said, we probably have to restrict the amount of the main warming gas, carbon dioxide. This would mean that from 2000-2100 we would need to put fewer than 600 billion tonnes into the atmosphere. But on current trends, he said, we will have emitted 400 billion tonnes by 2030.

Do the maths: big cuts are needed. Quickly.

Warrilow followed up with an overhead of the Titanic. The captain of that ship received five warnings of icebergs ahead, but only slammed on the brakes when he actually saw the ice in front of him. Too late. You might conclude that we too are sailing full steam ahead, oblivious to the warnings of icebergs ahead.

We are inclined to believe such disasters as those outlined at the Exeter meeting couldn't happen. But they have in the past. Within the past 20,000 years, nature has shut down the Gulf Stream, lowered temperatures by six to eight degrees within a couple of decades, and raised sea-levels by twenty metres in 400 years – or five centimetres a year. Nature could do so again, and climatologists say our reckless management of the climate system makes that a racing certainty.

You might think that Earth's ship is unsinkable. But it may be no accident that the entire period of human civilisation has happened during a period of climatic tranquility on the planet that now appears to be quite unusual. We mess with it at our considerable peril.

Don't despair. There is a reassuring range of technologies available that could cut our emissions quickly and relatively cheaply. Even the high end of the estimated bill suggests that only a couple years' delay in raising GDP – spread over many decades – would be involved. A small price to pay, you might think.

You aspire to be the leaders of the current flowering of human civilisation. Your countries are responsible for almost half current global warming. You can't solve all the problems in Gleneagles. But do check that bullet-point, and consider your options.

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http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-climate_change_debate/2561.jsp

The ghost of Gleneagles

Myles Allen

The G8 leaders should take courage and admit that making polluters pay through the law courts is the simple, straight, if scary solution to global warming.

Links
[1] www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/OCHA-64BHTQ?OpenDocument
[2] www.climatelaw.org/media/german.suit

[Climate change] is a simple problem of waste disposal. The fossil fuel industry has yet to implement an effective method of disposing of their key waste product, the carbon dioxide generated by the stuff they sell. As long as dumping it in the atmosphere was apparently harmless, it would have been a waste of their shareholders' money for them to do so. But as the impacts of climate change become steadily more obvious, that situation is changing.

Past emissions of greenhouse gases, easily traceable to products sold or used by only a couple of dozen major corporations, very likely increased the risk of the heatwave of August 2003 by at least a factor of two, and probably more like a factor between six and ten. The factor of two is significant: that is the level at which a court might conclude that the victims were entitled to compensation from those responsible. If this had been a toxic chemical spill or an unexpected by-product of a drug, the courts would surely already be involved, even in litigation-shy Europe. Unlike most victims of smoking, it would be hard to argue that many victims of climate change had much choice in the matter.

Europe will be better prepared for the next heatwave, whether it comes this summer or not; but it cannot prepare for every storm-surge, flood or other hazard that climate change rolls its way. If you own a property in a floodplain[1] in northwest Europe, your personal wealth may be depreciating by several thousand euro per year as a direct side-effect of what is officially recognised as the most profitable legal activity humankind has ever come up with. How do you feel about this?

Lawsuits have already been filed against greenhouse gas emitters, but none has yet grasped the nettle of demanding compensation for damage. Emitters have responded by arguing that this is a matter for government regulation, not for the courts[2] (ironically, the same voices argue elsewhere against any form of greenhouse gas regulation).

This is why the politicians may have become part of the problem. A flaccid regulation regime that pre-empts any claims for compensation is the worst of all possible worlds. If you lose money because of climate change, you want to take your case to the richest corporations in the world, not some World-Bank administered compensation fund that will ask intrusive questions about what you will do with your settlement.

For full, text see:
www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-G8/ghost_2640.jsp