

“THE POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE”

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A Political Challenge

The great crisis into which our species has stumbled, has at its heart, a political challenge. If 'History is past politics and politics is present history', how awesome the responsibility for the future of the species that lies upon those who articulate our current politics. How dangerous therefore that we have taken the word 'politician' from its roots in the art and science of government and larded it with overtones of compromise and duplicity. We have created a specialised and derided breed and called them 'politicians'. If the species is to recover its balance we will have to re-empower the political process and re-discover that man is a political animal. Politics is practiced not just by politicians, but by everyone who is concerned about the fate of our planetary polis. Individuals who speak out, non-governmental organisations, churches, businesses are as much politicians as those who are elected. We must not dismiss the positive lessons we have learned in the last two thousand years of living together.

There are wise ways of governing our species and foolish ways. In a crisis as deep as the one we now face we cannot afford the luxury of unnecessary division. The political process spans the full range of expression from the Noble Lord intoning solemn concern on a Royal Commission to the French tradition of the street theatre of demonstrations. Just as I do not believe that there is one answer to the challenge of climate change, not one party or one technology which holds a Grail-like solution, so I believe we must be tolerant of each other's methods and concentrate on integrating all our different skills and different energies in focussing mankind's attention.

Dramatising the Wake-up Call

I endorse the Declaration on Climate Change in this edition of the Ecologist. It rightly deplores the paucity of political action to date and the failure to direct political will on known policy options. There is no inevitability about the defeat of our species by its own greed and hubris. There is no reason why we should lapse into the paralysis of a gilded pessimism. Al Gore, who used to lead GLOBE, always argued that pessimism was the one luxury which environmentalists could not allow themselves. The reversal of our damage to our planet is do-able, difficult but do-able. Success lies in self-knowledge. We know how change can be achieved, even within the necessary confines of our imperfect systems of parliamentary democracy. De-carbonising our economies is a paradigm shift as dramatic as the industrial and agricultural revolutions. Unlike them, it needs to be done consciously, within tight deadlines and with a destination clearly in mind. Political scientists understand about the politics of step-change. We have achieved them in wartime and similar emergencies. Identify the players; calculate their understanding of their own options; devise the policy mix of stick and carrot. Identify the potential majorities in support of change and assess the emotional, fiscal and political barriers to mobilising such forces. Identify the minorities opposed to change and assess the exit strategies that will most rapidly reduce their power and desire to delay. All this is a well-trodden road in national and European Union politics. The case of Climate Change is however more complex in a variety of ways.

Timing

The urgency of climate change presents certain technical problems. The public imagination has trouble in grasping the timescales involved. Inter-generational politics may have sound roots in Edmund Burke, but is a difficult concept for generations brought up to expect instant gratification. Too great a tone of urgency is open to the charge of wolf-crying and produces either the paralysis of fear or the state of denial that demands 100% proof now. If this is a problem with electorates, it is doubly a problem with elected politicians trapped within a four year political time frame. NIMTO, 'not in my term of office', is as politically powerful as NIMBY. The increased openness of our political systems has entrenched the reverse of a system of platonic guardians. We are attuned to giving electorates what they want, minimizing personal political pain in the process. The Global Climate Coalition are masters at commanding the choke points of the American political process. Their well directed war-chest can only be defeated by a bigger and better directed campaign. Their coalition building spreading out from

the coal and oil companies to car companies, farmers and business in general will have to be carefully de-constructed. It is a public affairs battle of epic proportions which is beginning to be won. Each oil company that sees the threat to its long term prosperity and chooses to side with reform in its own interests, is a major victory and should be welcomed as such. Large companies are among the most sophisticated entities on the planet with access to data and models and strong survival mechanisms. The case of John Browne and BP is a dramatic example. We should help companies that want to change with the grain of reality. A BP Amoco that can see itself as a major provider of non-fossil energy in fifty years is part of the solution, not part of the problem.

Global Challenge; Global Response

A shift of this magnitude has abundant complexities. National efforts to redress past follies are expressed in technically complex negotiations, largely conducted using the ground rules of traditional diplomacy. The process is both geographically dispersed and bureaucratically arcane. The number of people party to the negotiations is inevitably small and their disagreements are not easily explicable to the general public. The scope of climate disruption is genuinely global and requires a global response, but current global institutions are inefficient, partial, untried and in some cases, as yet uninvented. The slow and painful process of institutional reform will most likely be hindered by current economic distress, unless the crisis proves so catastrophic that it provokes a fundamental reform of ideas.

As the process deepens, it inevitably involves a greater number of countries and a wider range of political elites. The work initiated by scientists and civil servants has been taken up by diplomats and environment ministers. It now also requires parliamentarians to ratify decisions while finance ministers consider the fiscal and monetary consequences. In each political system the climate change debate highlights the weak points of a national culture. The US administration finds itself blocked by a lobby-driven Congress. The European Commission must negotiate under the constraint of the national sensitivities of fifteen governments. In Japan, the issue is fought out by rival bureaucracies and reflected in the fractured party politics of the Diet. In China, only recently have the ecological costs of the country's intensive industrialisation been seriously acknowledged. In India, a new government seeks to be the regional superpower while most of her nearly one billion people continue a rural struggle for survival in an ever more fragile environment.

Contraction and Convergence and the GLOBE Campaign

As a small group of environmentally-committed parliamentarians, Global Legislators Organisation for a Balanced Environment (GLOBE) recognises the scale of the political task that faces us all. However GLOBE believes that there are ways to avoid being overcome by millennial pessimism. The group has sought to find a common language and an acceptable timeframe in which to conduct these political debates. GLOBE has adopted and promoted the 'contraction and convergence analysis' developed by the Global Commons Institute, which aims to determine the amount by which global carbon emissions must be reduced and how to distribute the burden equitably. The analysis is an elegant representation of the challenge that faces humanity and the solution that lies within our grasp. It is however merely a model to frame diplomatic and political activity. It is not an answer, a mandate or a magic totem. It illustrates the shared nature of humanity's predicament and points towards a conclusion that maximises both efficiency and equity. It provokes ideas to enable political elites to escape from the four-year time trap. It has visual impact, and it powerfully communicates the nature of the choices to the world's electorates. It seeks to use instruments such as markets to correct the malfunctions that we unknowingly stumbled into in the adolescence of our industrial age, all within an achievable political timescale. It has neither winners nor losers. It points to those habits that will destroy us, as well as to those survival instincts that can save us.

As the technical battles rage over sinks and senates, clean development mechanisms and dirty politics, we all must struggle to keep our heads above the wealth of detail. Our constant concern must be to keep our bearings and ask ourselves whether any particular decision takes us closer to the rendezvous with reality. Never before has humanity been so starkly faced with the choice of 'hanging together, lest we hang separately'.

