

SPOTLIGHT

SPOTLIGHT: CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change: what needs to be done

Finding the necessary political will to act is the biggest challenge facing climate policy, says **Tom Burke**

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If we are to meet the challenge of generating political will, the climate conversation must involve everyone, from all professions and all walks of life. Political will is built into the base of society; it is not something that you can manufacture in the headlines or leave to those politicians we increasingly distrust.↓

Our analysis of the climate issue is unusually clear. We know exactly what we need to do—construct a carbon neutral global energy system by the middle of the century.

We know how to do it—all the technologies and engineering knowledge we need to get there by that time are already available. We know we can afford it—the International Energy Agency estimated last year that the net cost of doing so might add only a couple of trillion dollars to what we will be investing in energy anyway over the next 25 years. That is a few tens of billions of dollars a year—I used to think that was a lot of money until the bankers taught me otherwise.

What we do not know is how to put the technology and capital together in a timely manner. Doing that will require political will. Political will is built by making clear the connection between what is happening to the climate and all the other interests and preoccupations that concern us in our daily lives. Health and security are two of the most important of those preoccupations. One of the bigger barriers to building the necessary political will is the tendency of the climate conversation to fall too quickly into the elephant trap of mind numbing detail and impenetrable acronyms. Far too often the climate narrative is framed in a way that excludes rather than includes most people.

Unless we correct this fault we will not build the necessary political will to take up those technologies and to use that capital, however good our analysis is and however hard we try. So I want to steer clear of the detail and begin by looking at the very big picture of the political challenge that climate change presents. We need to identify just how different this problem is from any other that humanity has ever faced. It is different in at least three ways.

We're all in this together

Firstly, it is a problem that is more truly global than any other. The livelihood of literally every person in every nation will be affected by a changing climate. Far too many people lead lives constrained by poverty, violence, ignorance, and ill health. But they share the planet with others who lead lives that are affluent, peaceful, educated, and healthy. Everyone, for better or worse, will live with the consequences of climate change.

This characteristic creates an entanglement of interests unprecedented in history, and unprecedented in any of the efforts diplomacy has ever had to meet. And, although there might be hard power consequences of a failure of climate policy, there are no hard power solutions to the problem.

The problem cannot be solved by one nation imposing its will on another. Therefore, solving the problem requires an intensity and persistence of cooperation between nations not yet seen.

Cooperation between governments is never one dimensional. This means climate policy success is ultimately predicated on the continuance of a global system where cooperation takes precedence over competition.

Policy failure is not an option

The second difference is that policy failure is not an option. The development of public policy is typically empirical. Human beings learn by doing. Policy measures are adopted, monitored for effectiveness, reviewed to take account of changing circumstances, and revised as necessary. Economic, social, or political goals that are not achieved today can be pursued again tomorrow. This is not true for climate change.

The long lifetime of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere—many centuries—means that we are committed irrevocably and, in policy terms, indefinitely, to whatever climate is generated by the carbon burden in the atmosphere at the point of stabilisation—that is, the point at which the amount of carbon we add to the atmosphere is balanced by the amount natural processes remove.

If we fail to stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations at a level compatible with the temperature rising by less than 2°C we cannot try again later to achieve this goal. This conflicts with the automatic reflex of all politicians when faced with a truly difficult problem: prevarication. And we cannot afford prevarication with this issue.

The clock is ticking

Thirdly, there is a specific timeframe within which action must be taken. The build up of carbon in the atmosphere is cumulative and effectively irreversible. Most governments now accept that a 2°C rise in global average temperatures marks the boundary between manageable and unmanageable climate change.

To remain within this boundary condition, global carbon emissions must peak within the period 2015-20 and decline rapidly thereafter. Climate change will lead to a complete transformation of the prospects for humanity. This is true whether climate policy succeeds or fails.

If climate policy succeeds the transformation will take place over the next 30 years. If it fails, the transformation that is already under way will accelerate gradually and become dramatic in the 30 years after that. The choice is whether events or people drive that transformation. If people make the choice, then over the next 30 years the way energy is used will be transformed. This transformation will bring with it a wide range of co-benefits in terms both of economic efficiency and human wellbeing. Food and water security will be maintained. However, the pattern of economic winners and losers will be significantly disrupted.

If events drive the transformation then the global average temperature will rise inexorably and, for all practical purposes, irreversibly. Food and water security will be undermined and ever larger numbers of people will be displaced, exposed to conflict and disease, and subject to deeper climate induced poverty.

Failure threatens prosperity

In those circumstances preserving political support for the international institutions that have sustained the prosperity and security of billions of people over half a century will become progressively more difficult. The health and defence professions will be the first responders picking up the consequences of that failure.

The international negotiations on climate change did not fail in Copenhagen through faults in the process—though faults there were—but because world leaders lacked the political will. As we saw with the formation of the coalition after the last UK election, when the political will is there, processes can be adapted, worked around, or simply ignored.

Building that political will is about the conversations that occur in the capitals of the key countries—not the conversations that go on in the negotiating rooms. International treaties are the output of political agreements, not the input to them.

The mismatch between the intensity and urgency of the effort required and the perceived remoteness of the threat to everyday life is the major obstacle to our success.

Governments everywhere are both distracted and constrained by the current fiscal crisis. They are faced with large and deeply entrenched economic interests, some of which are openly antagonistic to the measures needed to prevent dangerous climate change.

The additional costs of making the transition to a carbon constrained economy are inevitably resisted by both businesses and consumers. But more importantly, the scale, urgency, and nature of the policy measures required are a poor fit with the core political projects of both the left and the right. For the right, the prospects of higher taxes, more regulation, constraints on personal choice, and a more interventionist government are very hard to swallow. It is no accident that in politics almost all climate deniers are from the right.

For the left, the need to put growth at risk, to dislocate existing patterns of employment, and to shift public expenditure from entitlements to investment in a low carbon infrastructure are equally difficult. This means that we cannot rely on our existing political parties to offer voters a clear vision of the choices we must make to preserve our prosperity and security.

To deal with the problem of climate change we need a much deeper political analysis than we have had to date. This analysis needs to address the tension between markets and planning and the tension between entitlements and investment. So far, we have not begun to do that. My own very strong feeling is that what it's really going to take politically to solve this problem is an insurgency of those under 40 against those over 40. We need to shift the axis of politics from a battle between the left and the right to a battle between those who care about the future and those who want to stay in the past.

TB has worked on climate change issues at senior level in government, business, and the NGO community for 25 years. He has a particular interest in the geopolitics of climate change. This article reflects his conclusions on the political challenges facing the world as we build on the success of the Durban round of negotiations at the end of 2011.

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