

The politics of climate change

Written by Simon Latham

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SIMON LATHAM, DEC 7 2009

The Copenhagen Summit typifies the paradox of the globalised age in which we now live.

On the one hand, it is a crucial global event; the very fact that the summit is taking place, with the successive rounds of negotiation that buttress it, has further served to illuminate the political, economic, and moral, let alone climactic, imperative of radical emissions reductions shared across the world. The looming spectre of the summit and the onus placed on it by many in the climate change debate have served to foster and build consensus among the often disparate and divergent members of the international community, driving states and civic opinion together to support ambitious reduction targets.

And, yet, on the other hand, the summit is somewhat circumscribed. In recent days, one of the world's most pre-eminent climate scientists, James Hansen, has argued that any of the likely agreements that emerge from the negotiations in Denmark would be so deeply flawed that it would be better to start again from scratch. "I would rather it not happen if people accept that as being the right track because it's a disaster track," he says.

The question of whether and how an international agreement is reached at Copenhagen on a global commitment to carbon reduction is rightly an issue of the first order, not only for the reasons outlined above but for many more besides. There should be a great deal of optimism that a positive agreement will be reached – the international understanding of the necessity of radical emissions reduction has, after all, advanced considerably since the Kyoto summit.

While international agreement has a key role to play in setting targets, distributing responsibility for reaching them, and acting as a discipline on free-riding, effective action beyond Copenhagen, whatever the outcome there, essentially depends on action by industrialised countries to develop effective national policies that make a real difference on the ground. An international agreement is undoubtedly crucial; but it is not pivotal.

In essence, this is because, as the eminent LSE professor Anthony Giddens has convincingly argued, we lack an effective politics of climate change in the developed world and that to realise a low-carbon future, with all the radical cuts in emissions this entails, requires a strong political narrative of hope and opportunity, underscored by a revitalised co-existence of markets and the state.

To this end, Policy Network, the international centre-left thinktank based in Westminster, has over the past 18-months developed a research initiative entitled 'The Politics of Climate Change', led by Anthony Giddens. This is a project which not only seeks to compare differing national perspectives but revels in them. The climate change challenge demands that we have a common interest in reducing emissions but it should also recognise that there is no common way of dealing with this issue.

Instead, the climate change debate should seek to move beyond questions pertaining to the likelihood, bargaining trade-offs and detailed design of an international emissions reduction agreement in Copenhagen and thereafter, and focus analysis on national action in developed countries.

This task is a tall one. Finding the requisite solutions and alternatives to decrease our consumption of dangerous

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greenhouse gases poses a huge technological challenge and necessitates the formulation of a sophisticated economic response to correct what Nicholas Stern has rightly described as the biggest market failure in history. In order to facilitate these technological breakthroughs and to create a more rational economic framework to tackle climate change effectively, a profound change in politics and public policy is required.

To ensure long-term emissions reduction targets are attainable, the challenge for domestic policy is how to develop new and sophisticated forms of government planning. The climate change challenge is such that it poses complex problems of governance that the current composition of the state makes it difficult to overcome. This is because it cuts across the normal boundaries of departmental responsibility and established public policy priorities.

It also requires a greater steering role for government in the economy, especially in the long term planning of infrastructure that is necessary to facilitate a low-carbon economy. This need for “planning” goes against the neo-liberal orthodoxies that have dominated approaches to public policy for the last generation, while at the same time requiring governments to avoid the mistakes of centralised economic planning in the post-war era. Some states are more advanced than others in this respect – and, of course, this challenge of renewal is a daunting prospect indeed for the developing world. Nevertheless, it is only at the national level in the developed world that real progress first has to be made in tackling these challenges.

It often seems like the rhetoric surrounding the Copenhagen summit is based on a false premise: that if a binding international agreement remains unobtainable, efforts to tackle climate change will inevitably weaken and lose traction in domestic political discourse. But this fails to recognise the growing consciousness about the importance of combatting climate change, both morally and economically, across the world.

Efforts to combat climate change will proceed apace regardless of Copenhagen; indeed, the possible shortcomings of the summit should not detract from the task that national governments have already embarked upon and will continue to face over the decades to come. This is because globalisation means that problems are precisely that: global. So states tackle global problems together, as they are all affected by them in one way or another. Being bound by an international agreement is but a bonus.

Simon Latham is principal adviser to Roger Liddle, the chair of the international thinktank Policy Network. His views do not necessarily represent those of Policy Network.