

Scaling down climate action

Written by Rodger A Payne

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RODGER A PAYNE, JUN 29 2011



In the June 2011 *The American Prospect*, Grist's David Roberts reviews a couple of new books on the politics of climate change. Though I have not yet seen the book, I'm interested in a central message that political scientist (and long-time climate change player) David G. Victor apparently offers in his *Global Warming Gridlock: Creating More Effective Strategies for Protecting the Planet* (Cambridge University Press, 2011). As Roberts lays out Victor's argument, international climate negotiators have sought a top-down "grand solution" to climate change that is not easily attained — for all kinds of reasons.

If that strategy cannot succeed, what strategy can? It begins, Victor argues, "by slowing down and refocusing on fundamentals," namely national interests and capabilities.

Above all, he says, climate campaigners must abandon their scientism and take emission-reduction targets off center stage. National leaders cannot credibly promise particular emission levels in the short- to midterm. Emissions are determined by too many forces outside governmental control, including fossil-fuel prices, trade, and the pace of economic growth. The focus on targets is an invitation to empty grandstanding and lowest-common-denominator agreements. What leaders can credibly promise are policies, and policies, not numerical targets, should be at the center of climate accords, Victor argues.

What kinds of policies should be pursued?

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Policies of any ambition are best coordinated among a bounded group of participants. By requiring unanimous consent among 193 participating countries, the UNFCCC process effectively guarantees treaties that reflect the lowest bid of its least ambitious members. Yet there is no substantive reason to require the involvement of every single country. After all, the top dozen emitters (counting the European Union as a single emitter) account for 74 percent of global emissions from fossil fuels. To make the size of the negotiating table more tractable, Victor suggests a “carbon club” along the lines of the World Trade Organization. Members would “bid in” with policies geared to their own national circumstances and, crucially, add contingent offers predicated on action from other members. Within the club, those contingent offers and shared benefits would create a virtuous cycle. Meanwhile, the club would craft smart incentives to lure in new members.

As Roberts notes, Victor has not offered a particularly new insight, “the notion that smaller groups than the UNFCCC are needed for serious climate negotiations is now practically conventional wisdom in developed countries. Climate has moved to the center of discussion at the G-8 and the Major Economies Forum.”

Indeed, over the past few weeks, several actors have taken promising steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. These have not exactly been below the radar, but they do suggest that more-and-more groups recognize the need for diverse kinds of climate action.

For instance, in Sao Paulo earlier this month, the World Bank and the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, a set of 40 large cities tackling climate change, announced their intention to cooperate with one another. According to the Bank’s press release, “C40 cities account for 8 percent of the global population, 12 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions and 21 percent of global GDP.” It is not yet perfectly clear what the Bank and C40 cities plan to do together, but their aspirations seem worthwhile:

The World Bank will also establish — by December 1, 2011 – a single, dedicated entry point for C40 cities to access World Bank climate change-related capacity building and technical assistance programs, and climate finance initiatives. This will assist city governments – who often do not have the familiarity with World Bank programs that their national government counterparts have – to know what World Bank resources exist and how to tap them.

In addition, the C40 will identify and work with national governments who are interested in funding climate change projects, and identify private sector partners to provide project financing in C40 cities. In turn, the World Bank will identify opportunities from among sources of concessional finance, carbon finance, and innovative market and risk management instruments as well as the private sector through the International Finance Corporation. These may be accessed by project developers supporting climate action in cities.

Both the C40 and the World Bank will direct resources expressly to this partnership to ensure its implementation, sustainability and long-term success.

The initiative is meant to pay special attention to the needs and vulnerabilities of the urban poor. Since 2006, C40 cities have also been involved with the Clinton Climate Initiative — and the former US President was typically quoted in the stories about the new relationship. In his words, the “partnership with the World Bank will provide essential tools to help cities become more sustainable, grow their economies, create jobs, promote energy independence, and ensure a stable future for generations to come.”

The other initiative I noticed last week involved a group of Republicans, including four former Administrators of the US Environmental Protection Agency, several governors, and many members of Congress, weighing in on a current regulatory policy debate in the US that is supposed to yield a decision by the end of the summer. These former officials wrote President Barack Obama on June 22, 2011, to ask for a doubling in the Corporate Average Fuel Economy Standards on automobiles sold in the US. Specifically, their letter seeks “aggressive” but “achievable and cost-effective” 6% annual improvements in fuel efficiency for the period 2017 to 2025, yielding vehicles averaging 60 miles per gallon.

The letter was signed by EPA Administrators serving every Republican president since Nixon, including Christine

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Todd Whitman, Russell Train, Bill Reilly and Bill Ruckelshaus. The letter does not emphasize climate change per se, but does emphasize reductions in “carbon pollution.” In any case, the link between fuel economy and greenhouse emissions is obvious.

This particular political act is significant because the overwhelming majority of Republicans in the US Congress have worked to block climate change legislation and to stall fuel efficiency improvements. Remember my prior post about Senator Jim Inhofe of Oklahoma? Some current Republican candidates for President are demonizing the EPA and calling for its abolition — even though it has a terrific track record in promoting regulations that reduce pollution in a cost-effective manner.

As David Roberts points out in his review of Victor’s books, these smaller initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions might not keep the world from passing dangerous climate change thresholds. However, the international negotiating pathway is clearly not moving very fast and we may have to start thinking more seriously about adaptation — and its role in development, even as energy and auto companies experiment with “electric technologies, advanced biofuels and other innovations.”

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