

America faces reality on climate change (slowly)

Jim DiPeso

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

From the outside looking in, Washington DC seems locked in permanent hostility towards even acknowledgement that human 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 United States capital.

But despair not. Look a little closer and cracks are starting to show in the forbidding wall of resistance and denial around the Beltway. Game-changing ideas now stand a better chance of seeping through and putting America back into play on climate change.

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

No one expects near-term approval of either bill. But there are early signs of a changing political dynamic that could result in passage of "McCain-Lieberman", or

something like it, if not during the current presidential administration, then in the next.

That, in turn, could serve as the keystone for a global grand bargain where all nations – including the US, China and India – accept a glide path of steadily falling per-capita greenhouse gas limits, but on an asymmetric schedule that puts the early onus for reductions on industrialised nations. This is envisioned by the "contraction and convergence" proposal mooted by the Global Commons Institute (GCI) in the United Kingdom, which the GCI's director Aubrey Meyer outlines in his [openDemocracy](#) article.

But what's in contraction and convergence (C&C) for the United States? Two things.

First, US companies will be unleashed to find business opportunities in international cap-and-trade markets.

Second, by accepting emissions limits, the US would instantly recover a large measure of international political goodwill, which would give the country important leverage in negotiations over climate and a host of other global issues. With all nations covered by greenhouse gas emissions limits, the US will have scored an important political point, namely that solving a global problem requires global participation.

What's in contraction and convergence for developing nations? They would score their own political point, namely that the down payment 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, namely unneeded per-capita emissions allocations, at least in the early years of the deal. Sale of those allocations could be dedicated to economic development, including deployment of energy technologies that will clean up urban 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 is reason 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. There are four reasons why.

The early signs of a political climate change are worth cautious optimism.

A time to hope, and change

First, science. Many government and business leaders have accepted, some more reluctantly than others, 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, 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.

What this means is that 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 in 2004.

A related uncertainty issue is "regulatory balkanisation". Tired of waiting for an outbreak of political will in 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, 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 points the way for climate sceptics to edge away from the "no, never" corner they're in and engage 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", 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, a serious effort to reduce oil dependence would have spin-off 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.

No one should expect the American federal government to change course overnight, but the 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, endlessly applied at the political leverage points that have opened could bear fruit. It had better, because the uncontrolled science experiment we are performing on the only atmosphere we have is becoming increasingly dangerous.

Jim DiPeso was one of the founding directors and is the policy director of Republicans for Environmental Protection

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