

Communicating Climate Change

The science of climate change is one thing, but communicating the results of that science to the public is very much another. Climate change is one of the issues that will come up at the World Conference on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, in August 2002. But apart from when there is suffering from unexpected heat or cold, flood or drought, it is always hard to give climate change the appropriate urgency.

The science itself is not in doubt. Of course there are continuing uncertainties about the proportion of natural to human-driven change, but the existence of human-driven change is clear. The conclusions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the main national academies of science (including that of the United States) represent a broad international consensus with little serious dissent.

There the problems of communication begin. I remember the editor of a leading British broadsheet dismissing climate change as yesterday's story. News has to have a beginning and an end, and often has to be artificially polarized. A process that occurs over years or centuries is hard to report on very often. Moreover, the story carries uncomfortable implications. Making unwelcome changes now to avoid possible consequences in an uncertain future is a difficult proposition to sell to anyone. With a few honorable exceptions, politicians and economists do not calculate more than a few years ahead. There are also none so deaf as those who don't want to hear.

Yet the message of climate change is being increasingly, if incrementally, registered. At the beginning of the 19th century, everyone knew that slavery was wrong. But there was a tacit conspiracy to do little or nothing about it; too many interests were at stake. Leadership, public agitation, and a few visible disasters were needed to bring slavery to an end. It also needed a new morality and sense of public and private responsibility.

The Framework Convention on Climate Change of 1992 and subsequent agreements fixed large obligations on governments. None was under the illusion that the modest reduction of carbon emissions by industrial countries envisaged under the Kyoto Protocol would solve the problem, and all agreed that the arrangements for doing so were imperfect and incomplete. But at least it was a start. Public opinion in Europe, Japan, and elsewhere broadly if reluctantly accepted the idea that a change of direction was necessary, at least in the way in which energy was generated and used. The industrial countries could scarcely preach change to the rest of the world if they did not give the example.

Hence the dismay when the Bush administration pulled out of the Kyoto Protocol, pleading national self-interest, and later produced a climate strategy that included substantial increases in carbon emissions. How could the most powerful country in the world, with the strongest scientific base (and yet the world's largest polluter), behave with such apparent irresponsibility? Lack of public awareness in the United States may be part of the answer. The American way of life is built on the car economy, cheap energy, and faith in market forces. Vested interests are strong in Congress and the media, and the rest of the world seems far away.

Yet change is on the way. Already business is reading the signs. The notorious Global Climate Coalition, dedicated to discrediting the science that demonstrates global warming, has fallen apart. Such major companies as DuPont in the United States, BP Amoco and Shell in Europe, and Toyota in Japan aim to do better than anything in the Kyoto Protocol to curb emissions. Even the U.S. administration shows signs of unease. There is talk of greater energy efficiency and application of new technologies. The impacts of the greenhouse effect have become common parlance. And already the Chinese claim to have reduced their carbon emissions in absolute terms. They see where their real national interest lies.

What, if anything, will be the message from Johannesburg? We shall see. Communicating the fact of climate change is a complex process involving political leadership, science, public pressure, and even perhaps a useful catastrophe or two to illuminate the issues. We should not forget the moral dimension: a sense of responsibility to future human generations and a respect for the totality of ecosystems.

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