

A Commentary on democracy, climate change and sustainability

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Democracy and climate stability are often not compatible bedfellows.

We live in a carbon dependent world. And we are loath to forego this somewhat cosy arrangement. Carbon dependency is promoted in part by technology which gives us many good things on the cheap: electricity, personal mobility, affordable consumer goods, cooling and warmth. It is also encouraged by governments which promise easy options to low carbon outcomes, without delivering these options. For the most part, we do not seem to care, as the goodies continue to arrive.

We all know, in our hearts, this is a copout. We are duped but we connive in the deceit. And we use our democracy to continue the contradictions. We want to live in a sustainable society but too often we are not prepared to vote for it. Political institutions manipulate us, as do the power brokers who shape political opinion and guide policy.

Democracy shuns the long term. This is especially the case when the costs of present action cannot be justified as benefits for an unknown future tribe. This tribe may be our grandchildren, but we hope they will not need our largesse. This apparent sacrifice is all the more likely in a time of austerity. Household incomes are falling and day to day costs are rising. What is more, the gap between the rich minority and the poor majority is being filled by a former contented middle class who, for the first time in living memory, cannot be sure their children will be better off than they are. Confronted by this austere prospect, this group, the natural allies of climate stability, become unsettled.

Already the Canadians have laid down the gauntlet. In the face of ensuring the future of their energy gobbling Athabasca tar sands, they are prepared to tear up their legal commitment to a global climate stability compact known as the Kyoto Protocol. In doing so, the Canadians are pretty sure their southern cousins in the United States will buy their Faustian product. If there was a true “moral” democracy, the tar sands would be black listed throughout the world, just as whale meat was stigmatised in the 1970s.

Recently here in the UK, finance minister George Osborne, has admitted that he cannot accept the strictures of escalating energy costs afflicting the high energy requiring companies, whose continued trading he so craves to protect. So carbon levies, the basis of the “polluter pays principle” to which successive UK governments have signed up, are dumped in favour of more pressing needs.

Whether Osborne will get away with all of this is a moot point. In 2008 the UK Parliament passed, unusually almost unanimously, the Climate Change Act. This unprecedented legislation sets a legally binding framework for all future governments (similar legislation applies in Scotland and Wales) to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80% by 2050, with 34% achieved by 2020 and 50% by 2027. These guardrails are determined by an independent Committee on Climate Change. Technically speaking, this is a non democratic arrangement. The Committee on Climate Change has the final say on government targets. Its Adaptation Sub Committee has a similar role on all governments (in England) for meeting adaptation strategies based on their considered assessments of climate change related risk.

It is too early to tell whether the Committee will get its way in the teeth of austerity and voter unease. Up until now, the UK has sought to meet its obligations. In a fading period of prosperity, this has been a manageable process. But some of the Chancellor's recent remarks show the signs of strain. His "autumn statement" included a window for petrol levy stability when he had earlier promised an increase. It also encouraged new investments in roads and more flexible rules on planning decisions, both of which encourage increased vehicle usage. The Climate Change Act may be statutory. Good old fashioned popularism is difficult to discard.

The challenge that continuing climate change poses for democracy may be more demanding than we realise. In the first place, we have to ask how far democracy is actually working nowadays. There is a growing sense that genuine participatory democracy is no longer working. Governments are no longer fully accountable. The rise of the technocratic state in a world of continuous financial crises suggests that some variants of *markets* are actually in control. The increases in inequality and in unemployment in the name of market stability suggest that democracy is not delivering betterment and wellbeing for all.

If democracy is indeed breaking down, then the chances of finding a democracy that will work as the earth cooks are remote indeed. There just may be no democracy for climate change.

Sooner or later the only workable democracy that will take us to a genuine low carbon future is a local democracy of community engagement and exaltation. And just maybe this vision is closer than we imagine. If the Euro collapses, and if the global economy falls into prolonged recession, then localism will be reborn. It will be an internet localism. And it will be a technological localism. Yet it will also be a meaningful communitarian localism, where creating sustainable livelihoods will be possible through the release from formal work for up to a third of the population. Then it will be possible to create small social enterprises, to self build homes, and to share in the maintenance and energy (plus ware and waste) reduction of every household, to grow food and to care for the wellbeing and betterment of all neighbours.

The income for such a democracy could come from locally financed 'sustainability not for profit charities'. There could be a willingness on the part of those who knowingly add more than their fair share of carbon to the atmosphere to pay their carbon dues into such a fund administered by accountable local trustees. This is where the Chancellor gets it wrong. His Treasury are frightened stiff of earmarked taxation (hypothecation in the official jargon), so they seek to raise energy and carbon taxes for the general national pot. This is crazy. People may pay into a locally delivering fund where the outcome is overall betterment of living. The coming crisis may well precipitate such a profound shift in local income generation and sharing.

This combination of local communitarian democracy and sustainable trust funds just maybe can embrace low carbon living with joy and prosperity, cooperating and innovating, experimenting and learning. It can be fun, and it may just be the phoenix of the messy capitalism which is proving such a failure at present. Birds evolved from the dinosaurs, so local democracy may emerge from the dying embers of electoral democracy. We shall see.

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