

Politicians Failed Us in Copenhagen. But We Only Have Ourselves to Blame



We like to think failure in Copenhagen was the fault of short-sighted, action-shy politicians. But calling for “action”, or simply recognising that action is needed, is only the first step to solving any complex problem. It’s not our politicians so much as our *own* collective failure to understand complex problems that has made Copenhagen a failure.

Suppose, for example, we see babies drowning in a river. We might dive in fast and rescue as many as we can.

But as more drowning babies come down the river one after another, we’d soon have to admit the problem was more complex than we thought. We can save a few, but if someone doesn’t go up-river to stop them being thrown in in the first place, saving just a few can hardly be described as a solution. Neither, by the same token, can action by individuals – be it individual citizens, corporations, or nations – to unilaterally reduce their carbon emissions. For unless *everyone* does so globally, the impact will be insignificant and thus inadequate.

Complex problems thus require at least two different kinds of action.

One, down-river, is *direct and immediate*, and can be taken by anyone; the other, up-river, is *strategic and preventative*, and requires cooperation and a strategic approach. Or to put it more bluntly, one deals with symptoms, the other with causes. Both are necessary and complementary, yes, but if we fail to distinguish between the two and instead simply scream wildly for “action!”, chaos, or simply no action at all, are the only likely outcomes. Little wonder, then, that Copenhagen resulted in failure and future talks hardly offer better prospects.



The climate recognises no national boundaries: it is a global commons. This should immediately tell us that direct and immediate action by individual citizens or by individual nations, although useful and welcome, can never be enough unless all or sufficient nations co-operate to solve the problem globally. For personal actions, or the limited actions an individual nation can take, will only be drowned out unless fast-developing nations like China or India, as well as developed ones such as the USA, can be brought to cooperate. Governments are patently failing to act, so let’s find out why.

Politicians and the media are giving us good clues if only we’d take notice. Tony Blair, for example, once said that “The blunt truth about the politics of climate change is that no country will want to sacrifice its economy in order to meet this challenge”.¹ The implication is that, while it’s clear there can ultimately be no economy without a stable climate, there is

nevertheless a very significant short-term economic disincentive for any nation wanting to rein in its industry's emissions. Why? Because a nation that did so would only risk losing investment and jobs to countries that didn't. The *Financial Times* confirmed this, noting that "...governments remain reluctant to address this [global warming] threat because any country acting alone to curb its greenhouse gas emissions, without similar commitments by other governments, risks damaging the competitiveness of its industries." With all governments fearing to act first for fear of losing capital, jobs and investment to other competing nations, it's hardly surprising there's little action.



"Rubbish!" say some alternative energy advocates and environmentalists. Far from incurring a competitive disadvantage, a country moving first to reduce its emissions would, they suggest, give its economy a competitive advantage because government regulation would spur investment in carbon-saving technologies, so creating jobs and wealth. But in a globalised world there's no guarantee that new jobs would be located in the UK or in whatever country made that first move. More likely, the bulk would quickly be outsourced to some lower-cost country just as they are with most other industries. Also, whatever relatively small advantage may be generated by new green industries would be drowned out by the more general disadvantage suffered by the nation's many other industries. After all, if there really *was* a clear competitive advantage to be gained by any nation or industry that moved first, it would already have happened! The fact it hasn't indicates that Blair, on this issue at least, was right: the problem of first-mover competitive disadvantage cannot be ducked.

To achieve strategic international action, then, the problem is not any lack of *awareness* about global warming. It's the problem of *how to secure sufficient international co-operation*. It is not a question of *what* needs to be done but *how* it can be done when each nation justifiably fears moving first. It is a question, in other words, of going up-river; of *strategic and preventative* action.

A further, as yet largely unrecognised problem is that global problems like climate change are unlikely ever to be solved if we deal with each global problem one at a time. The problem is that, even if all nations reduced emissions simultaneously, the cost for big-polluters would *still* be far more than for low-polluters, thus making it unlikely big-polluters would cooperate at all. Or, if they did, their reductions would likely be token or inadequate. But if emissions reductions could be coupled, for example, with a global tax on currency speculation (a Tobin Tax), considerable revenues could be raised which could then be used to compensate big-polluting nations and oil-producing nations, as well as providing adequate funding to help developing countries, thus keeping all of them on-side with the emissions part of the agreement.

But trying to solve global problems only one at a time, and not having any capacity to raise new global taxes, governments, on their own, are unlikely to find a solution to climate change, or to any other global problem. They're



just too preoccupied with the need to keep their economies competitive to see that they're in a vicious circle. We may like to *think* politicians and the global financial institutions are in control of the global economy, but patently, they're not. So, calling blandly and blindly upon governments to "act decisively" on global warming (or on any other global problem), as we've done so far, will not bring us further forward.



The same, I might add, goes for direct action, for example to stop the building of a third runway at London's Heathrow airport. Because such action will always be over-ridden by the government's need to keep the economy competitive, as *The Guardian* reported: "Ruth Kelly, UK Secretary for Transport, said abandoning expansion plans might salve green consciences but it would have no impact on the environment because ... if Heathrow is allowed to become uncompetitive, the flights and routes it operates will simply move elsewhere."ⁱⁱ And so the third runway will be built regardless.

So while governments certainly *do* need to act co-operatively if our problems are to be solved, the point is that they're unlikely to do so unless *we citizens* make them – not by asking them, but by *compelling* them. We citizens must take not only immediate action to curb our personal carbon footprints, we must also take *collective political action* to drive our governments to co-operate with one another at the global level. "But how can we do that?" you might ask. "Governments rarely do what the people want and my vote has become ineffective and meaningless anyway, and what's more, party politics turns me off. So what can I actually do, politically, to get my government to co-operate with other governments? How can I make a real difference as far as collective international action is concerned?"

Fortunately, there's one organisation that offers citizens across the world a way we *can* use our right to vote in a completely new and very powerful way to drive the politicians of all parties and nations to co-operate, not just on global warming, but on just about any other global justice problem you care to think of.



Just when you thought politics had become a waste of time, the International Simultaneous Policy Organisation (Simpol) and its national affiliate organisations allow us to make our votes more powerful than we could possibly imagine. Simpol provides citizens around the world not just with a way to set the global policy agenda, but a way to drive politicians, political parties and governments to *implement* that agenda. "But how can this be? And how can it work?"

Since politicians alone can't solve global problems for us, it's *your* responsibility to find out!

International Simultaneous Policy Organisation, December 2009.

www.simpol.org

ⁱ *The Guardian*, 3rd November 2005

ⁱⁱ *The Guardian*, 22nd November 2007