

Global Warming: More Inconvenient Truths

By Diana Trimble

It's not just the planet that's hotting up, it's the whole debate about global warming. Especially now that we can see and feel its effects every day. Yet you've probably noticed that when it comes to taking action, the focus always seems to be on what each of us can do personally. We the people must use energy-saving light bulbs, fly less, recycle, use green energy, take our appliances off standby, and so on. But perhaps, like me, these entreaties leave you feeling a bit ripped off. Perhaps you, too, are wondering what part business, industry and governments have to play? It's certainly true that there are things individual citizens can and must do, but surely really significant reductions ultimately depend on tough, international legislative action. After all, if personal responsibility were all that has ever been necessary to solve problems, why were political systems and governments invented in the first place? Once we've taken individual action, is that it? Or is there more to be done? What really seems to be needed is a way of acting collectively to ensure that governments around the world start co-operating to solve global warming instead of talking more hot air while the planet burns.

In his film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore rightly points out that collective action depends on political will, but this, he says, is in short supply. Right again! The reasons for its scarcity, he suggests, are that it's simply not in the short-term interests of the main polluting nations and their industries to take substantive action. So far so good, but the cartoon image he uses to hammer his point home is an unfortunate one: a pair of scales with gold bars on one side and the entire planet on the other. Gore uses this to demonstrate the absurdity of those who see economic prosperity and a healthy planet as an either/or choice: after all, what value could gold bars have if there's no habitable planet in which to enjoy them? It's plainly ridiculous, and so too, suggests Gore, is the reluctance of some to give up the gold bars.

But rather than ridicule those who fear for their short-term interests, shouldn't we be trying to look at what may be their perfectly legitimate point, and trying to understand the forces that keep it relevant? Gore may have faced the inconvenient truth of global warming, but he is yet to face a second inconvenient truth: that stiff action on the part of the rich countries WILL have adverse economic effects, at least in the short term. And if global warming is dealt with in isolation, those costs WILL fall heaviest on the USA and on other big polluters. To deny the barrier to action that these short-term costs and disincentives represent, as Gore seems to, is to fall into the same trap as those who deny global warming itself.

I laughed along with everyone else when I saw the gold vs earth cartoon, but making fun of those who are wary of economic backlash is hardly likely to elicit the consensus Gore seeks. It also seems like a cheap shot when you keep in mind that had Gore actually become President in 2000, he would inescapably have joined the ranks of those he's poking fun at. The president of the U.S. has only four years before facing another election, so Gore's popularity and tenure in office would have been directly influenced by his corporate funders and their support for short-term gains to the US economy.

Today, there may only be few people who still cling to denying global warming. But knowledge and acceptance can't effect change by themselves. What is urgently needed is a means to unlock the short-term barriers and disincentives that prevent decisive collective action – nationally and internationally. Make no mistake: in today's globalised and largely borderless world, capital and jobs generally move to wherever in the world environmental and social costs are lowest and profits therefore highest. Any government moving first to significantly increase environmental costs or regulations in a bid to reduce emissions would definitely see investment and jobs moving elsewhere, thus making the nation uncompetitive. That's why nothing changes except the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere just keeps on rising. Prime Minister Tony Blair at least seemed to recognise these realities when he pointed out 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

Unlike Gore, Blair clearly recognises this second inconvenient truth and he should not be blamed for stating it. But his statement only holds true IF nations fail to act together. This is the barrier that keeps the gold bars firmly on one side of the scales. However, if all nations co-operated, the necessary regulations could be implemented *without* any nation fearing capital or employment flight because there would be no low-cost haven for them to run to. Corporations, too, would have nothing to fear because all corporations would be subject to the same additional costs, so maintaining their relative competitiveness and their relative profitability. Think about that for a minute.

But there is a further problem: the biggest polluter, the USA, would have the biggest adjustment cost, so it has the least incentive to sign up to any cooperative agreement. This is why the Kyoto Protocol is not supported by the USA and Australia, another big polluter. It is also why the provisions of the Kyoto agreement are so mild and relatively ineffectual. Because if the nations supporting Kyoto agreed to tougher, more significant curbs, the costs involved would make them uncompetitive with nations, such as the USA and Australia, who refuse to participate.

The net result is a recipe for missed targets and an intergovernmental dead-lock of a kind which raises the third, final and most important inconvenient truth; this time one that concerns not so much governments or businesses but each of us as individual citizens. It's a truth which all citizens around the world must urgently take on board: that we can no longer abdicate responsibility for taking collective action to politicians and governments alone. If free-riding governments are to be compelled to co-operate, then it must be *citizens* who force them to do so. We have no choice but to take the initiative, and stop assuming that politicians are in the driving seat of the global economy. It's time to grab hold of the steering wheel and find a way of driving our politicians and governments toward co-operation. What's needed is a method of achieving cooperation which removes the barriers and objections, takes away the fears of being uncompetitive, and replaces those fears with an enthusiasm for shared problem-solving.

When Al Gore became fully aware of the dangers of global warming, he travelled far and wide to gain a deeper understanding of the science and its real-world effects, and justifiably so (although I do hope he planted plenty of trees to personally offset his carbon emissions). But Gore and the rest of us have so far failed to embark on another, far more urgent line of enquiry. If we genuinely wish to solve global warming and other global problems, we need to gain a deeper understanding of the barriers to collective government

action under globalisation. For the deeper truth is that global warming and many other global “problems” are not the real problems at all. They are merely symptoms, albeit terrifying ones, of our failure as a global human society to co-operate. Until we understand the dynamics of co-operation and how to achieve it, and what we as citizens can do to unblock the barriers to it, international inaction, missed targets and deepening chaos will continue and global warming may well destroy human civilisation.

The Simultaneous Policy, a global citizen’s initiative, claims to have begun this vital journey and to offer a plausible and effective way that citizens can use their right to vote in a new way that drives the politicians of all parties and nations to collectively implement the measures we so desperately need. It seems that political representatives would find it a welcome relief to be freed from the restrictions that keep them beholden to big business interests and confined to wholly inadequate policies dictated by the need to keep their nations “internationally competitive”. This is reflected in the fact that already politicians from opposing sides of the spectrum – nationally and internationally - are pledging their support for the Simultaneous Policy as a result of voter pressure and/or enlightened social responsibility. Check it out for yourself at www.simpol.org – as Noam Chomsky commented, “Can it work? It’s certainly worth a serious try!”

Diana Trimble
Campaign Support and Outreach Officer
Simpol-UK
November 2006.

ⁱ As reported in *The Guardian*, 3rd November 2005.