

Talking Sense About Global Warming

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2010-05-13

LONDON – In February, 14 distinguished climate scientists, economists, and policy experts came together to discuss how to tackle global warming. This week, the London School of Economics and Oxford University are publishing their conclusions. They are worth considering.



The group was brought together by Gwyn Prins, a well-regarded expert in security policy and international relations who heads LSE's Mackinder Programme for the Study of Long Wave Events. Participants included climate scientist Mike Hulme of the University of East Anglia, climate policy expert Roger Pielke Jr. of the University of Colorado, and climate economist Christopher Green of McGill University.

The group's report, "The Hartwell Paper," outlines a new direction for climate policy after the collapse of last year's attempts to negotiate a global climate deal. The authors note that 18 years of the "Kyoto Protocol approach" to international climate policy have failed to produce any discernable real-world reductions in emissions of greenhouse gases.

What defines the Kyoto approach, of course, is a single-minded focus on cutting carbon-dioxide emissions. "The Hartwell Paper" argues that the Kyoto approach, based as it is on past experience with relatively simple environmental problems like acid rain, was always doomed to failure.

The group points out that it makes no sense to compare climate change to other environmental challenges that we have faced and solved. Climate change is much more complicated, involving open, complex, and imperfectly understood systems. Unlike, say, acid rain or smog, it is not "a conventional environmental 'problem.'" It is as much "an energy problem, an economic development problem, or a land-use problem."

Climate economists widely acknowledge that there are only four policy levers that can be used in an attempt to lower carbon emissions and rein in climate change: reducing the world's population, shrinking the global economy, increasing the efficiency of energy consumption, and decreasing carbon intensity (meaning that we create less carbon for each unit of energy that we produce).

Reducing global population is implausible, and deliberately reducing the size of the global economy would result in increased hardship for billions. "The Hartwell Paper," then, sets out to develop a strategy that identifies a number of ways of pulling the levers of energy efficiency and carbon intensity.

The Hartwell group proposes that we adopt three basic climate-related goals: ensuring secure, affordable energy supplies for everyone (which means developing alternatives to fossil fuels); ensuring that economic development doesn't wreak environmental havoc (which means not just reducing CO2 emissions, but also cutting indoor pollution from burning biomass, reducing ozone, and protecting tropical forests); and making sure that we are prepared to cope with whatever climate changes may occur, man-made or natural (which means recognizing, at last, the importance of adapting to climate change).

Achieving these goals will obviously require heavy lifting. The Hartwell group correctly notes that in order to be successful, our approach to climate policy should offer obvious advantages ("rapid and demonstrable pay-back"), appeal to a wide variety of people, and produce measurable results. The Kyoto approach, of course, does none of these things.

Instead of single-mindedly trying to force people to do without carbon-emitting fuels, the Hartwell group suggests that we pursue a number of other worthy goals – for example, adaptation, reforestation, encouraging biodiversity, and improving air quality – each of which is important, and all of which may also reduce carbon emissions. As the report notes, "the all-inclusive 'Kyoto' type of climate policy...needs to be broken up into separate issues again, each addressed on its merits and each in its own ways."

At the same time, the group adds, we must recognize that we won't make any real progress in cutting CO2 emissions until we can provide developing economies with affordable alternatives to the fossil fuels on which they currently depend. "In short," the report notes, "we need to ignite...an energy technology revolution."

The Hartwell group argues that mass improvements are needed across many technologies, requiring the determined participation of governments. They suggest partially funding the required research and development with a "slowly rising but initially low carbon tax" that would avoid undermining economic growth.

If any – or all – of this sounds familiar, it may be because I have been arguing much the same points for some time. If my experience is any guide, the members of the Hartwell group should expect to be attacked as heretics for questioning the Kyoto orthodoxy. But that is a small price to pay. As the saying goes, "insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result." With respect to global warming, it's time we came to our senses.