

Briefing: Rationing greenhouse gases—a flawed approach

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A new environmentalist idea to ration greenhouse gases, called ‘contraction and convergence’, is based on a faulty premise. So says Kendra Okonski, Director of International Policy Network’s project on sustainable development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent stories in the UK media have claimed that up to 1 million species may be lost by 2050 because of global warming, and that the phenomenon could even lead to social unrest and war. UK Government chief science advisor Sir David King claimed that ‘Climate change is the most severe problem that we are facing today, more serious even than the threat of terrorism.’¹ King and others blame global warming on our emissions of greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide and methane, and have called for dramatic reductions in these emissions. But are such restrictions desirable?

The Kyoto Protocol, an international treaty that obliges ratifying parties to restrict emissions of greenhouse gases, is currently at an impasse. To come into force, Kyoto requires the ratification of those countries who together produce at least 55% of worldwide emissions of greenhouse gases. In 2001, the US, which accounts for 36% of greenhouse gases under the treaty, decided not to ratify. That left Russia, with 17% of emissions, with the key to Kyoto. Then, in October 2003, the Russian Government suggested that it will not ratify Kyoto. Without Russia, Kyoto is dead.

A vicious debate subsequently ensued between EU vice-president, Loyola de Palacio and President, Romano Prodi (of the European Commission), and Margot Wallstrom, EU environment commissioner, on the viability of the Kyoto Protocol if Russia’s ratification is not obtained. De Palacio argued, reasonably, that Kyoto might harm Europe’s competitiveness and that if the US and Russia are not going to ratify then the EU should reconsider its commitment.

Interestingly, some environmentalist campaigners have started to sour on Kyoto. They point out that the treaty would anyway only be a first step as it would do nothing to prevent negative impacts of climate change. These environmentalists have been promoting a new idea to address climate change—‘contraction and convergence’—under which greenhouse gas emissions would be strictly rationed.

2. CONTRACTION AND CONVERGENCE

The goal of contraction and convergence is to stabilise atmospheric carbon dioxide at a certain level by a specific date in the future. For example, Aubrey Meyer says we must force an 80% global reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2060: ‘If we were lucky this level of cuts would return atmospheric concentrations to today’s value within a hundred years, and limit the worst of the damage.’² Under contraction and convergence, total global carbon emissions would be fixed and then allocated equally among countries according to their population size.

One of the motivations of contraction and convergence is the claim that industrialised countries owe an ecological debt to poor countries—because of their larger greenhouse gas emissions and ‘unequal’ resource consumption. As usual, it is claimed that poor countries got the short end of the stick: while they have not caused global warming, they will still suffer disproportionately from its effects—floods, drought, disease, biodiversity loss, crop failure.

Contraction and convergence would solve this problem, say its proponents, by ensuring an ‘equitable’ and ‘sustainable’ solution to global warming. People in wealthy countries would cut their consumption—getting rid of cars, airplanes, refrigerators, computers, and mobile phones should do the trick. Meanwhile, the poor would still have a ‘right’ to consume a few more rotary telephones, horse carts and abacuses.

The implied logic is that the wealth of some has caused the poverty of others, because the wealthy consume a disproportionate amount of resources. The fact that this wealth—and associated technologies—has enabled longer life expectancies, fewer infant deaths, and more leisure seems not to figure in the calculus.

3. A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Many will recognise this scenario. In the 1970s, well-known environmentalists such as Stanford University professor Paul Ehrlich believed that a growing human population would soon deplete the earth’s natural resources, fossil fuels and land, and millions of people would suffer from global famine. Without major changes to human behaviour, eco-apocalypse would ensue.

Critics such as the late University of Maryland economist Julian

Simon argued that such gloomy predictions were ill-founded. Simon suggested that people not only consume resources—they also create them. Resource scarcity is solved by our intellect—what Simon called the ‘ultimate resource’—which allows humanity to address resource scarcity by finding substitutes that are cheaper and more sustainable.³

Time has proved Simon right. By virtually any measure, human well-being has improved by leaps and bounds in the past 100 years: people live longer, are better nourished, have lower mortality rates, have better access to clean water, sanitation, and education. Affluence and the technologies of affluence mean that our environmental footprint is ever lighter. While the less affluent have benefited from some of these technologies (such as soap, vaccines, medicines, fertiliser and pesticides), they would be even better off if they were able to become wealthy.

Today, we no longer hear environmentalists yammer that we will suffer resource and energy scarcity. Quite the opposite, in fact. The basis of ideas like contraction and convergence is that our resources are too plentiful and too cheap. By diminishing consumption through green rationing, we *might* prevent a future environmental catastrophe.

Yet whether or not floods, drought, crop failure, vector-borne disease and extreme weather are exacerbated by human-

induced climate change, poverty means that people are more vulnerable to adversity in any form. Thus, our environmental priority for today and the future should be to decrease vulnerability and increase resilience to all adversity, including negative impacts from climate change.

Unfortunately, a continuing alliance between poor-country bureaucrats and Western environmental activists has used global warming and ideas such as contraction and convergence to distract from the need to address more urgent—but less sexy—problems resulting from poverty.

Improving infrastructure, encouraging sustainable economic development, and developing new technologies that allow humans to live a more sustainable existence is the best way to encourage efficiency in consumption. Rationing, even if motivated by good intentions, and whether it applies to bread, butter, taxi medallions or greenhouse gases, is not.

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3. SIMON J. L. *The Ultimate Resource 2*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1996.

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