

Climate change 4: what next?

Social Issues briefing #064, 06/06/2007.

This briefing on climate change will be the last in our series for the time being. It will outline the directions that some future community discussions will take. It will also suggest a discussion that we may need to have with the most voiceless members of our community—our children.

As we reported in our briefing #063, the third Working Group of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its summary report, *Mitigation of Climate Change*, on 4 May, 2007. It assesses options for limiting greenhouse gas emissions and for ameliorating climate change in other ways.

At this point there will be a parting of ways. Those who have not travelled with or been persuaded by the conclusion of the IPCC's first two working groups—that the climate is changing and that human activity is contributing—will not accept the need for mitigation or even that human activity *can* mitigate climate change. However to a certain extent that public discussion is over: a community consensus seems to have appeared which accepts climate change and the need for mitigation. (As we will explain below, even the Prime Minister's conservative body examining emissions trading schemes accepts the need for mitigation through emissions abatement.)

Mitigation of Climate Change contains an extensive compendium of all that is available now, and what could be worked on in future, to reduce carbon emissions. The list of possible approaches includes various emissions trading schemes; energy alternatives (nuclear? solar? wind? carbon capture and storage on coal firing?); land management practices; city planning and industrial planning for energy efficiency; and changes to consumer practises and products for energy efficiency.

These ideas will fuel public policy debate for years to come. Christ is Lord over even these workaday problems, so there may be something that needs to be said in each of these debates. However human creaturely limitation means that it may not immediately be appropriate for those of us without expertise to contribute—yet. There is a place for respectfully and quietly listening to the expertise of others—expertise that is always being used by God to preserve his world. Of course there may be other thoughtful Christian people with the kind of expertise that means they are able to participate well.

A good example of a future discussion begins in the report by the Prime Ministerial Task Group on Emissions Trading, released on June 1. It accepts that abatement of emissions is necessary, and proposes that emissions trading be in place by 2012. But it seeks for the market to determine what emissions are the least costly to eliminate first. It is a softly-softly approach, with many details yet to be decided, and is designed not to scare the (business) horses offshore.

In response, an 'open letter' from the National Emissions Trading Task Force (representing the State and Territory governments) questions whether the PM's response to the proposals of his Task Force can pass this 'TEST':

- **Targets:** the PM's Task Force has not proposed any specific target for emissions reduction. (The Labor Party plans to commence emissions trading in 2010 for a 60% cut in emissions by 2050).
- **Early start:** the states propose a scheme that begins in 2010.
- **Support for emissions trading** is also needed, in the form of other mitigation policies; and
- **Together(ness)** will be required between all Australian governments in 'a reform agenda of this magnitude'.

These are interesting and important points; but in defence of the PM's Task Force report, we may say that it does try to deal very seriously with the mess we can make of real people's lives,

and the devastation that can be wrought upon whole communities, if the wrong kinds of economic change are planned badly or effected too suddenly. On the other hand, there are serious possibilities for injustice in some emissions trading schemes, and there is also the possibility of no scheme happening if debate bogs down into stalemate. But the Christian community will have most effect in this forthcoming debate if it speaks knowledgeably.

However there are those to whom we can speak now. Whether or not we have children, there will be children in our lives who have heard something about climate change at school or on television, and are harbouring silent, desperate fears. They are now growing up under a spectre of doom in the same way that many of us once endured the fear of nuclear annihilation.

This spectre is in part the creation of adults who have sought to stiffen the political will and resolve of other adults by painting worst-case scenarios. It turns out, according to one study, that alarmist scenarios only create hopeless apathy, even in adults (see the article by Ghosh, below). If that is so for adults, how much more likely are powerless children to feel sadness, fear and anxiety—probably in silence.

Our fear of nuclear annihilation had to be endured because it was real. It was a fear used by God to preserve humanity from itself. Our memories of that might remind us that Christians owe truth, clarity and hope to children. Their fears and their sadness may be real. On the present state of knowledge (as benchmarked by the IPCC), there are good reasons to be sad if God's good world has been damaged by human activity; and it is always wise to have some appropriate fear of human folly.

However the truth to children might also include apology: that adults, both well-intentioned and greedy, have made a mistake. The truth might include repentance: that adults are thinking hard and arguing with each other about how to start fixing the mistake. The truth will include the good news about God and the Lord Christ, who have not stopped caring for this world and who keep using people to repair it (think of doctors, or firemen, or environmental scientists). The truth might include a promise: that we won't be dumping this problem on kids.

A final thought: Parents will know what is best for their children, and undoubtedly some kids already enjoy constructive conversations about the environment with their parents and with other adults. But some children may not be worried about climate change, and so we might be careful about how to raise it with them, if at all. The truth about children also includes allowing them to be free to be kids.

*Andrew Cameron,
for the Social Issues Executive, Diocese of Sydney*

Sources/Further Reading:

IPCC: <http://www.ipcc.ch>

Prime Ministerial Task Group on Emissions Trading:

<http://www.pmc.gov.au/publications/emissions/index.cfm>

Ghosh, Pallab, "Climate messages are 'off target'", BBC News 15 May 2007.

Online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/6655449.stm>

National Emissions Trading Task Force: <http://www.emissionstrading.nsw.gov.au> and letter:

http://www.emissionstrading.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/7592/070527_Open_letter_to_PM_on_emissions_trading_WEBSITE.pdf

Note: This paper is intended to assist discussion and may be corrected or revised in future. Short responses to social.issues@moore.edu.au are very welcome, but the SIE cannot guarantee a reply. To access this free regular briefing, visit <http://www.sydneyanglicans.net/socialissues> and to receive it by email, follow the link 'Sign up for our free weekly briefing!' Visit <http://sie.moore.edu.au>, our second website, for other material.

Conditions of use:

1. You may forward this paper to others, as long as you forward it *in full*.
2. You may freely publish it (e.g. in a church newspaper) as long as it is published in full, not for profit, and including the 'Note' paragraph. (You don't have to include these 'conditions'.)
3. Media and academic publishers should cite this paper according to their professional standards. We would appreciate audiences being directed to <http://www.sydneyanglicans.net/socialissues> .
4. Not-for-profit publishers may use the ideas in this paper without acknowledgement; **but** if quoting it directly, please cite title, authors, and the web link <http://www.sydneyanglicans.net/socialissues>.
5. Permission may be given for use in publications for profit. Please send details of your proposal to lisa.watts@moore.edu.au.