

America or Asia: Priorities for the EU ahead of Cancun

2010 is shaping up to be the year of climate superlatives. It looks set to be the hottest year since records began. The Arctic Sea ice is melting faster than ever before. A shift in the jet stream has created a severe heat wave in Eastern Europe that has ignited Russia's forests and produced exceptionally heavy monsoon rains that have devastated the lives of twenty million Pakistanis, and buried villages in mud slides in China. Meanwhile the Gulf of Mexico witnesses the world's largest ever oil spill, a more visible form of our carbon pollution.

One might have expected a strong political reaction to such events, but everywhere the forces of sanity are in demoralised retreat. The coalition of forces that seemed so potent in advance of Copenhagen is now in disarray. Whatever the detail of the failure at Copenhagen, it was a major victory for the fossil fuel lobby and their argument that the world has more pressing things to worry about in these recessionary times than climate change. In the USA attitudes to climate change have polarised to such an extent that attempts to get any meaningful legislation through Congress have been abandoned. Despite its problems in the Gulf, Big Oil feels strong enough to attack the US EPA's regulatory authority over climate emissions and the Californian legislation on climate change known as AB 32.

California arguably has the most progressive climate law in the USA, but it is now under serious attack. Proposed by two Texan oil companies, Proposition 23 is on the November ballot in California. The argument is that action to address climate change in California should be suspended until unemployment in the State is below 5.5% for four successive quarters – a situation that will be a long time in coming, if indeed it ever does. Behind this attack by the Texan oil companies is the usual coalition of fundamentalist conservative money, activist foundations, and driven billionaires who claim to see climate change as “junk science”, promoted by a conspiracy of socialists to destroy America. The Proposition 23 campaign is likely to outspend supporters of the current law by a factor of four to one. Perhaps the most telling and demoralising detail is the reluctance of the defenders of Californian legislation to even mention the concept of climate change. They fear that it has become too dangerous a phrase to put before an American electorate, even in a State facing an acute crisis of rising temperatures and water shortage.

Meanwhile, in the White House, an intelligent and honourable President, with a substantial record of legislative achievement, is criticised for failing to run a bi-partisan Presidency. In the August edition of the New Yorker there is an article entitled “Covert Operations” by Jane Mayer in which leading conservative activist Grover Norquist is quoted as celebrating the success of an organisation called “Americans for Prosperity” in opposing Obama from last summer's raucous town hall meetings onwards. It would seem that one

carefully directed public affairs initiative is seriously threatening a whole Presidency.

An off-balance President has proved vulnerable to bad short term advice. Perhaps the worst example of which was the injunction to “show more anger” at the behaviour of BP. Academics will be dissecting the BP shambles for many years to come. The company that once bravely set off to go “beyond petroleum” ended up cutting costs and corners and taking ever greater risks to maintain its expansion and its profits by diving into deeper waters. It operated, as did all the oil majors in the Gulf, in a venal if not corrupt regulatory system. It simply ignored the possibility of disaster. In retrospect it had not invested sufficient resources in its global public affairs to protect itself from a nationalist reaction when it lost its gamble. Its hapless British leadership were then hopelessly vulnerable to the anti-British prejudices that have always lurked beneath the surface of the so-called “special relationship”. Quite apart from the obvious gaffes by an individual, the British and Americans use language in different ways in a crisis. British decency and understatement is easily heard as effete dishonesty while Americans expect “Can Do” responses from their corporate leadership in a crisis, rather than calm or cleverness under stress.

The symbol of the gushing oil leaking from the well was tailor-made to ignite American insecurities. For months it sat in the bottom right hand corner of television screens in the slot previously occupied by the “war on terror”. For a nation built on the subjugation of the environment, it was a standing and unsupportable symbol of loss of control. At the very moment when the Americans were being asked to accept that they no longer controlled the world, it stood as a daily reproach broadcasting American powerlessness to the world. US Presidents are expected to have super-human powers to control everything. Eighteen months earlier Obama’s glorious rhetoric had appeared to offer a way out of the dark frustrations of the Bush years, yet here was apparent proof that the President had feet of clay. An element of hypocrisy and theatre is built into every political system. American Presidents are not as powerful as the drama of presidential campaign suggests. The system is explicitly designed to prevent the exercise of monarchical power, but is encrusted with the residue of imperial razzmatazz, amplified by the Hollywood tradition that demands heroism and a happy ending.

I was in New Orleans in November of last year for the Religion, Science and Environment Symposium on Katrina. I returned in June of this year. New Orleans may be known as the “Big Easy”, but its inhabitants and those of the whole Gulf coast are tough, resilient and cynical. Louisiana in particular understands that it is the victim of an American version of the “Oil Curse”. Wealth from the oil industry corrupted and deformed existing political structures. The inhabitants of New Orleans have always known that Katrina was a man-made disaster, brought about by the damage done to a massive delta system by the channels cut to facilitate the day-to-day working of the oil

industry. They recognise the Faustian bargain that their State struck with Big Oil. Such a capital intensive industry does not generate large numbers of jobs worldwide, but it is a major employer in Louisiana. Something of the mythic quality that used to be shared with noble steel workers and miners still clings to oilmen. Listening to their conversations in bars and airports was a useful antidote to the carefully tailored rebuttals of oil industry spokesmen. The oilmen themselves concede that the industry has taken more and more risks. Some will even go as far as to tell you that they see themselves as the last generation of oil workers in the classic style. Their mythic sense of rugged individualism is built on having a job. Employment is the relevant currency in systems both democratic and undemocratic in 2010. It is the metric by which individuals relate themselves to the vast and impersonal system changes of the current crisis. Karl Rove always maintained that political campaigning was about destroying the core proposition of one's opponent, rather than fiddling around with marginal weaknesses. The fossil fuel lobby understands this. It has buttressed its bogus employment case with the psychology of personal identity.

There is an emerging consensus amongst gurus, both old and new, about how successful the lobby has been. Thomas Homer-Dixon, Professor of Global Systems at the Balsillie School of International Affairs is an old and respected Canadian war horse. He penned an op-ed piece for the New York Times on 22nd August. The core of his argument is that: *"Climate policy is gridlocked, and there's virtually no chance of a breakthrough. Many factors have conspired to produce this situation. Human beings are notoriously poor at responding to problems that develop incrementally. And most of us aren't eager to change our lifestyles by sharply reducing our energy consumption. But social scientists have identified another major reason: Climate change has become an ideologically polarizing issue. It taps into deep personal identities and causes what Dan Kahan of Yale calls "protective cognition" – we judge things in part on whether we see ourselves as rugged individualists mastering nature or as members of interconnected societies who live in harmony with the environment. Powerful special interests like the coal and oil industries have learned how to halt movement on climate policy by exploiting the fear people feel when their identities are threatened. Given this reality, we'll almost certainly need some kind of devastating climate shock to get effective climate policy. That's the key lesson of the recent financial crisis: when powerful special interests have convinced much of the public that what they're doing isn't dangerous, only a disaster that discredits those interests will provide an opportunity for comprehensive policy change like the Dodd-Frank financial regulations."*

Wouter Veening, President of the Institute for Environmental Security, writing from the Dutch experience, echoes Homer-Dixon: *"In my communications I use a concept related to the "protective cognition" mentioned in the article, which is the concept of "cognitive dissonance", the awareness of the tension between the kind of behavioral change the progressing climate science implies or prescribes and the actual (consumptive) behavior we practise. Nobody can live with such dissonance. Either you have to make your behavior consonant with the science, or you have to discard the science. Psychologically, the latter is the easiest. It is easier*

to reconnect a few threads in your brain, than to step out of your air-conditioned or well-heated car and wait for the bus in a bus station which is cold or hot, dirty and full."

I understand where Homer-Dixon and Veening are coming from, but I have my doubts about the efficacy of "some kind of devastating climate shock" as a way to break the climate change deadlock. On the 24th August 410 AD Rome was sacked by the Visigoths. The memory of this devastating shock lived on for hundreds of years. Despite subsequent periods of apparent recovery, the Roman world was changed forever. The conundrum for those who look for salvation from a major shock to the system is clear. Anything short of a global catastrophe will be dismissed as not relevant for Western societies by the fossil fuel lobby; while the impact of the "full Monty" of a climate catastrophe, triggering irreversible tipping points, would be that our very societies become untenable.

Jay Gulledge at the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, is a new guru to whom I believe we should be paying much more attention. In a brilliant 2008 article "Climate Change Risks in the Context of Scientific Uncertainty", he draws attention to two carefully cultivated myths that buttress the strength of the fossil fuel lobby's case. The first of these is that climate change will be smooth and gradual. We now know that climate change occurs in fits and starts, with abrupt and often irreversible shifts. These 'spikes' vanish in the work of the IPCC because forecasts are averaged over space and time. We are in for many more unpleasant surprises in the next few years. The second important myth is that these impacts will be moderate in industrialised countries. As Cleo Paskal of Chatham House reminds us, complex Western societies can be more easily disrupted than more robust, less developed societies. Jay points out that "the US, Southern Europe and Australia are likely to be amongst the most physically impacted regions". The sophistry here is the confusion between the concepts of 'impact' and 'vulnerability'. In a sentence that the victims of Katrina will recognise, he stresses that "having the potential to devote resources does not imply that the foresight and political will required to divert resources to managing impacts will prevail".

Jay's most recent work, "Lost in Translation: Closing the Gap between Climate Science and National Security Policy" for the Center for a New American Security, should be required reading for all policy makers. At a recent conference at the Center for Environment and National Security at Scripps, San Diego, there was much debate about whether we need a new institution to overcome this gap in communicating between scientists and policy makers. With only a few distinguished exceptions, scientists do not feel it their duty to explain their work in terms that policy makers can understand. The 'gap' however is not a neutral space, rather it is an opportunity for creative public affairs to disrupt the transmission of good science into the public world. We have seen this most obviously in the argument over Darwin and evolution. In the late twentieth century the tobacco industry very successfully concentrated on this gap with their mantra

that “uncertainty is our friend.” The fossil fuel industry has both learned from tobacco’s experience and in some cases used the same consultants. Excellent work is being done on the communication of science to policy makers by the Royal Society in London. At the end of the day however it is up to policy makers to recognise the danger and to override the vested interests of those who would pollute the tradition of scientific enquiry for short term gain.

Europeans will not want to repeat their dismal performance at Copenhagen in Cancun. We have our own problems with electorates who are having second thoughts about climate change, but we do have our legislation in place. Rather than waiting for some ‘Deus ex machina’ climate change disaster to break the deadlock, policy makers will have to be as disciplined and rigorous as the climate deniers. We must press on with the effort to restrict the emission of CO₂, while recognising as Nobel Laureate Mario Molina and his colleague Durwood Zaelke note, that there are other climate forcers, such as Black Carbon, that we can make progress on with less opposition from the fossil fuel industries. Indeed, half of our warming is from pollution other than CO₂. We need to explore the whole new world of ‘carbon negative’ technologies. Given that 25% of CO₂ emissions stay in the atmosphere virtually forever – 400,000 to a million years. We need to perfect technologies that can draw down excess CO₂ on a time scale of decades, including biochar – the simple cooking of biomass with low oxygen to produce a stable form of carbon that can re-build our geological stores. We need to deploy alliances with new players such as the military, who increasingly see the need to reduce their dependence on fossil fuels. We need to escape from our own silo thinking that divides the development community from the environment community.

The history of our societies is crowded with examples of special interests who have sought to maintain their privileges in the face of change. In this case the stakes are higher, the canvas is broader and the timescales are compressed, but there is no alternative to the careful, persistent re-assertion of the truth. In the twentieth century the dynamism of an America in its prime served humanity well. It would be a tragedy of epic proportions if humanity were to allow malfunctions in the American political system to close off our escape route to a sustainable world. Sad though it may be after the excitement of the Obama dawn, but the rest of us may have to look to ways of breaking the climate deadlock without the Americans. This summer’s climate disasters in Asia may yet lead to a re-alignment of climate geo-politics. The forest fires in Russia have brought a new awareness of how climate change will impact on its vast geography. A shift now could lead to a future in which Russia and the rest of the world mutually benefit from the capture of methane escaping from the melting permafrost. The Chinese rightly remain focused on the question of employment and political stability in Western China which has this year seen extreme examples of floods, droughts and melting glaciers. The Indians have not been slow to recognise that what happened to the Indus can also occur on the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. The attempt to structure a

climate deal around the G 2 of China and the USA failed last year with the European Union sidelined. Europe's interest this year will be to stay open to new ideas, new technologies and new alliances.

Tom Spencer
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