

Emerging from Denial on Climate Change

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Climate change has quite rightly been high on this week's APEC agenda. But while we all have an interest in preventing vast changes in weather patterns, it is the poor who will suffer most from climate change. They live in some of the most vulnerable regions and can least afford to protect themselves against shifting rainfall patterns and the impacts of extreme weather events.

In its Fourth Assessment Reports released earlier this year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concluded that heatwaves, droughts and torrential flooding would increase in frequency and severity as temperatures rise. The floods that killed more than 2000 people and left hundreds of thousands homeless last month across Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Nepal, are a glimpse into our warmer future.

To compound the problem, the industrialised countries have already taken up much of the atmospheric space that developing countries need to use if they are to escape poverty.

There are still grounds for hope. But we have less than a decade to respond seriously to the greatest challenge humanity has faced, at a time when few leaders have truly absorbed what the science is telling us: that we need massive reductions in our greenhouse gas emissions if we are to avoid catastrophe.

Temperatures have already risen by around 0.8°C since pre-industrial times, and a further 0.2 to 1°C is guaranteed due to past emissions. Above certain temperature thresholds, natural reinforcement mechanisms will kick in that will amplify the warming beyond our control. To avoid that nightmare scenario, it is increasingly recognised that we must not pass 2°C. But to avoid 2°C, the rich countries will need to reduce their net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 20-30% below 1990 levels by 2020 and at least 80% below 1990 levels by 2050. Developing countries will also need to reduce their emissions well below what their 'business as usual' path would have been.

It is not simply the ecological and climatic effects of rising temperatures that are so alarming. It is also the potential for economic chaos and regional conflicts arising from the breakdown of human social systems under climatic stress. The IPCC projects that if temperatures rise more than 1.5-2.5°C, one billion people in Asia will be suffering water shortages by the 2050s, while the World Bank reports that a sea-level rise of one metre, well within the feasible range this century, would impact more than 56 million people.

We need to dance on a tightrope. We must leave the relaxed and comfortable fog of denial without falling straight into the indulgent comfort of despair. We must remain on that tightrope – staring potential catastrophe in the face, but working energetically and creatively to prevent it.

Two myths will prevent us leaving the fog of denial: The first myth is that a slow, ‘aspirational’ response is adequate for this global emergency. A merely ‘aspirational’ response will fail utterly because climatic processes that seem to be progressing slowly are in fact building up extraordinary momentum. Unless decisive action is taken soon, this momentum will carry the climatic system across critical thresholds and become unstoppable – well before events on the ground rouse our current leaders from being alert to alarmed.

The second myth is that Australia is too small to make much difference anyway. This is nonsense on at least three levels.

Scientifically, it ignores the fact that the consequences of our emissions may not be proportional to the volume of our emissions. Every small contribution brings us closer to an irreversible threshold. It is simply false to assume that our small contribution will have only a small effect and therefore it makes little difference how much we cut back.

Economically, it ignores the ways in which technological and institutional innovations are catalysed and transmitted through global economic systems. Clear policy signals and incentives can encourage innovations in technologies, legal frameworks and institutions. APEC itself is an Australian institutional innovation that has had an impact far beyond our shores. Australian technological innovations can be exported and Australian institutional and legal innovations can serve as models for foreign governments. Innovations developed in Australia can have an effect on global emissions far beyond any effect they have on Australia’s own emissions.

Politically, it ignores the political signals that our actions send to foreign governments. Australia being a laggard on climate change policy, rather than a leader, has only hindered rather than helped the international response. It is common knowledge that the Australian and the United States governments found comfort in each other’s refusal to ratify the Kyoto Protocol.

If any progress is to be made at APEC, our leaders must squarely face the catastrophe that unfettered climate change represents. Just like the founding of APEC, if Australians put their minds, creativity and energy behind this goal, we could tip the balance.

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