



Regrets, they've had a few: where now for climate politics?

Climate change: the challenge for social democracy

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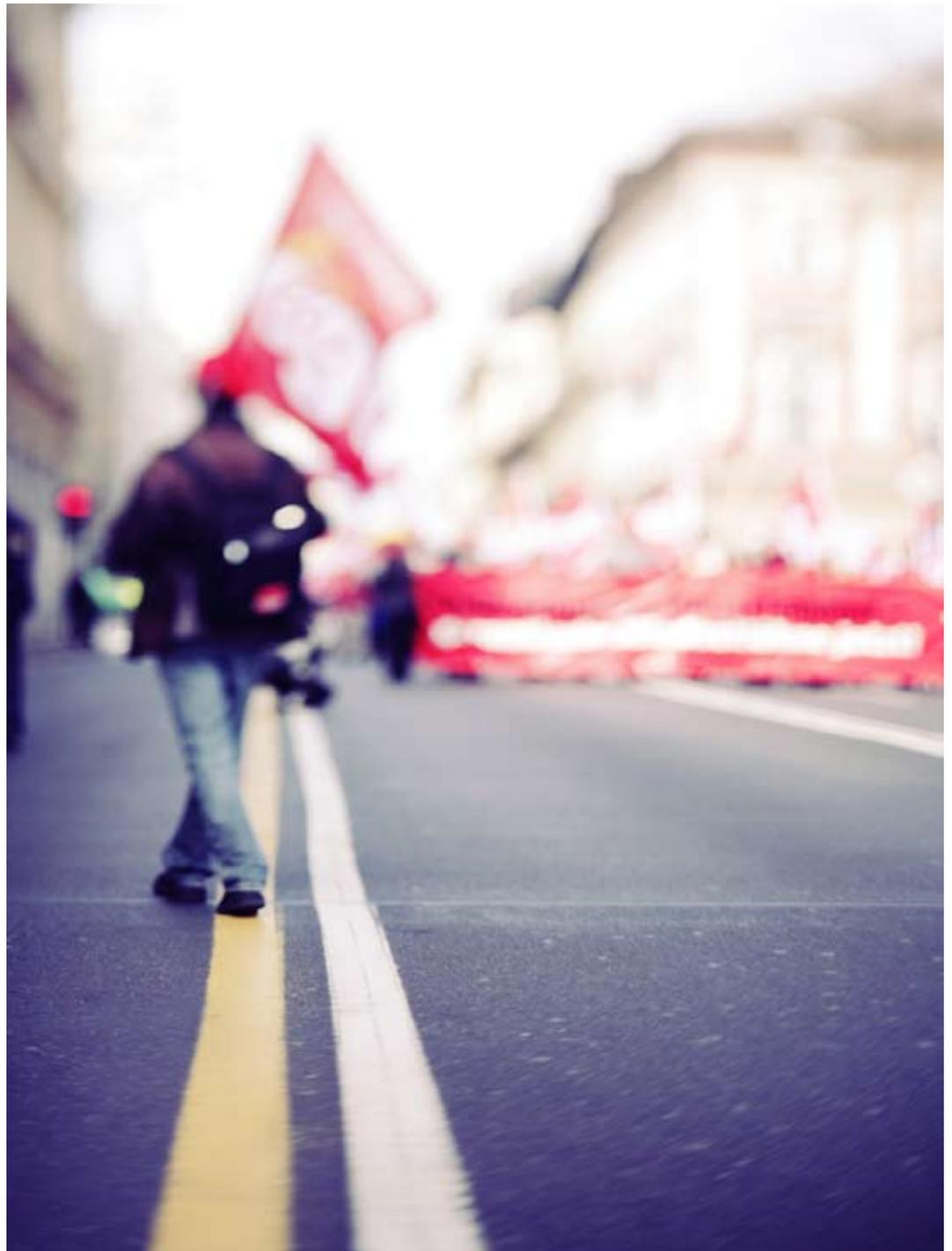
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The Copenhagen fiasco combined with the crisis of credibility afflicting climate science offers progressives a vital opportunity to inject a much needed dose of realism into the politics of climate change. The adoption of a radical green agenda that will have large-scale detrimental effects on the poorer segments of our societies, while condemning millions in the developing world to economic hardship, does not sit comfortably with traditional centre-left principles of social justice and collective prosperity. It is time for national governments and politicians to deliver “no regrets solutions” to the climate change challenge.

The political response to climate change represents an increasingly perilous dilemma for the centre-left in Europe and beyond. Global warming and climate change policy are problems that now rank alongside the financial and economic crises – which did not, as expected, turn out to be politically advantageous for the left – and the challenge of immigration.

This quandary is made even more difficult because social democrats struggle to accept the legitimacy of self interest as a governing principle. Like multiculturalism, as prominent US progressive Michael Lind observes, “lifestyle environmentalism appeals to the better-off and educated social strata because it calls for altruism”, i.e. financial transfer to developing countries and self denial. “You are affluent, yet you volunteer to save the planet by voluntary, if usually symbolic and costless gestures,” while the less well off majority feel the pinch.

Many leading figures within the UK and the European centre-left came to believe – and may still do – that climate change and the response to it will be the decisive topic of our age, a topic which can mobilise the masses. Indeed, Sigmar Gabriel, the new leader of the social democrats in Germany, and David and Ed Miliband, ministers in Britain’s Labour government, are among those to have supposed that climate change represented an opportunity for their parties to revive flagging electoral fortunes.

Here was a challenge with dramatic and potentially catastrophic consequences that seemed to demand the sort of approach that centre-left parties instinctively favour: climate change demands an international framework, ideally provided by the UN, the willingness to accept legally binding solutions and far reaching international cooperation. Furthermore, the state will be, as Anthony Giddens points out in *“The politics of climate change”*, an all-important actor, “since so many powers remain in its hands”, and is needed to reign in the short-termist tendencies of markets.¹

The people will realise the danger for humanity, so the thinking goes, and turn to the political parties that commit themselves to radical green climate politics. The logic seems convincing: not only will radical green climate policies, designed according to the warnings and recommendations of the science promoted by the IPCC, help to save the planet, but also set the stage for a centre-left revival. One example of this thinking was a fascination, on the part of senior social democrats, with the concept of personalised carbon credits. Yet such a system would demand the control of all human activities, the collection of a huge amount of data and an Orwellian style bureaucracy.

The adoption of such radical green policies, including cap and trade and a rushed move to drastically cut carbon dioxide emissions or impose carbon taxes, has always been questionable, even before the credibility of the IPCC was badly affected by revelations about data manipulation, attempts to censor other scientists and exaggerated or even simply false claims. The reality is it would drive away voters, fearful of losing their lifestyle of mobility, warmth and comfort. It would fly in the face of some of the

corner stones of social and economic progress achieved over the last 60 or 70 years. Will this save the centre-left, or indeed will it help to save the planet?

After all, progressive politicians should naturally understand the reluctance of their supporters to join the journey into a world of higher taxes and dramatically rising energy bills – never mind in the midst of deep recession. Tough economic conditions and environmental ambitions have never gone hand in hand, and for the left they inevitably clash with the interests of a significant part of their traditional electorate.

Historically, the purpose of social democracy was to increase and improve the life chances of the many, to create a better life for the majority of people. Combined with this was the conviction that scientific and technological progress would help to achieve a better world. Until the sixties this conviction prevailed among progressives; they were even in favour of nuclear power, which was not seen as dangerous but one of the tools with which to create a better future. Yet, as James Lovelock observes, since then there has been a “systematic demonisation” of this technology – a phenomenon that social democratic parties across Europe embraced as they proceeded to lose confidence and belief in scientific and technological progress.²

Thus, “greenish-leftish” ideas proved increasingly attractive, as alliances were formed with green parties across Europe. In the process, the centre-left started to accept their sceptical, if not outright hostile attitudes to technological progress. Out of this grew the conviction among centre-left politicians in Europe that green policies were the way forward.

Climate politics in disarray

After Copenhagen, a watermark in global climate politics, the chances of electoral gain through such a strategy have become even smaller. Climate science is under siege and climate politics is in disarray across the world. Opinion polls show that in the United States, in Europe and in Australia, scepticism is growing among populations and with it the resistance to drastic action.

Social democrats may pay a high price for embracing the politics of climate change

In the US, President Obama’s chances of getting a cap and trade climate bill through the senate have always been small, now they seem outright impossible. As if to underline this, major corporations like BP and ConocoPhillips, until now supportive of Obama’s green energy agenda, have recently decided to drop out of the coalition of business groups and environmental organisations that had lobbied Congress to pass the climate change legislation. Only super optimists still believe, against all contradictory evidence, that this year will bring the long expected and hoped for breakthrough in the position of the US.

In Australia, Kevin Rudd’s Labor government has so far failed in its attempts to get its climate change bill through the Senate, where an alliance of Conservatives and Greens voted against the plan to introduce a cap and trade system. Further trouble lies ahead. Climate change is shaping up to be one of the defining issues of this year’s general election. If so, it could be regarded as the first “climate election” in the history of western democracy.

The outcome of the election seemed until recently a foregone conclusion. Kevin Rudd is a popular prime minister, riding high in the opinion polls, leaving his conservative opponent far behind. Nobody in Australia gave the newly elected leader of the Conservatives, Tony Abbott, who disposed

2. See James Lovelock (2009), *The Vanishing Face of Gaia: A Final Warning*, Allen Lane

of the former leader Malcolm Turnbull because of his support for emission cuts and cap and trade legislation, an iota of a chance to succeed. Not any longer. Abbott's open disdain for the theory of global warming and his rejection of new green taxes has made a significant part of the Australian electorate warm to him – a nasty surprise for Labor cannot be completely ruled out.

It seems that social democrats may pay a high price for embracing the politics of climate change without taking into account the complexities of climate science.

Time for some cold international truths

A moment of reflection is urgently needed. Progressives should take stock and assess the situation unfolding after Copenhagen. The accord signed by the participants is not even useful as a figleaf. What is clear is that the Kyoto era of climate policy has come to an end. Its attempt to bring about collective international action and its aim to create a global framework for carbon trading and legally binding agreements to cut CO₂ emissions has fallen by the wayside.

This is hard to swallow for parties and governments of the centre-left, who are strong believers in the virtue of a multilateral, UN-driven approach. But the dream of a global climate agreement is over. Nation states are in the driving seat, as the outcome of Copenhagen demonstrated. There is no world community; there are only national and regional interests, pursued vigorously.

Another lesson of Copenhagen is that such a gathering, of 190 or so governments, plus many lobby groups and NGOs, is unwieldy, impractical and does not bring about decisions.

Furthermore: the bitter truth is that almost all of the Kyoto signatory states failed to produce the promised cuts in CO₂ emissions. One could even argue that Copenhagen signals a welcome return to realism – governments have recognised the futility of trying to achieve the impossible.

We know there will be no legally binding agreements, and even if there were, there is nobody to police them.³ Who would take action against states that don't live up to their obligations? The inconvenient truth is that before Copenhagen all the major players – Europe, the United States as well as China and India – made announcements, promising to cut greenhouse gas emissions, yet one look at the small print reveals that these commitments were either minimal or, in the case of China and India, in fact meant that CO₂ emissions will rise over the next decade or so.

Governments have recognised the futility of trying to achieve the impossible

At least this period of empty promises and false targets has come to an end.

Another important, albeit painful lesson that we can draw from Copenhagen, relates to the sidelining of Europe and the complete failure of the EU strategy. The minimalist face-saving "Accord" came about through negotiations between China, the US, India, Brazil and South Africa. Europe's absence was indeed conspicuous. The European countries thought that by setting an example and announcing deep cuts in greenhouse gas emissions, they would set the rest of the world an irresistible and heroic example which they could only follow. It was from the beginning an astonishingly naive approach, reminiscent of other unilateral intentions in the past, i.e. unilateral nuclear disarmament, a policy unfortunately quite popular among activists on the left wing of Labour and other social democratic parties.

3. See Anthony Giddens (2009), *The politics of climate change*, London: Polity.

4. Ipsos Mori poll as reported in *The Guardian*, "Sharp decline in public's belief in climate threat, British poll reveals", 23 Feb 2010.

This approach was doubly misguided in the wake of the financial and economic crisis. Climate unilateralism is untenable and electorally disastrous, because it involves a dramatic financial transfer from the west to our competitors China and India; transfers our economies can ill afford and our populations won't accept. Public opinion in Europe and America, according to latest research, is hardening, with scepticism on the rise. For instance, a recent UK poll shows a sharp decline in the public's belief in the climate threat; the proportion of adults who believe climate change is "definitely" a reality has dropped by 30% over the last year.⁴

Realistic renewable targets

There are too many illusions propagated and circling around alternative and renewable technologies: about their promise and potential; about the time frame in which they can be introduced; about when the changes can be realised; and not least about the number of jobs that the new "green Keynesianism" will help to create.

As far as the ambitious targets for emission cuts or renewable energy sources that exist in the UK and other EU member states are concerned, one is compelled to agree with professor Roger Pielke Jr. when he points out that "setting unattainable targets is not a policy, it is an act of wishful thinking". He calls it a politics of symbolism "with little or no impact on real-world outcomes", adding that the focus on "magical solutions" is leaving little room for the practical.⁵ Symbolism of course has a place in politics. But it is dangerous if it becomes too detached from reality or when it leads to the exclusion of realistic proposals – the inevitable failure to reach the envisaged aims will create disillusion and could damage the credibility of politics.

Leading business figures also agree with this verdict. The CEO of Eon, Wulf Bernotat, said that British politicians need to stop misleading the public about what is achievable. He is scathing about the target of 30% of UK electricity coming from renewables in 2020 and refers particularly to the plan to build 33 gigawatts of offshore wind power up from the present 0.6 gigawatt, a plan he calls naive and unrealistic.⁶ BP, a company very interested in getting their hands on subsidies for renewables, whatever their merits, have adopted a similar stance.

The arguments against the extensive use of wind for base-load electricity indeed highlight the onset of wishful thinking. They should be well known but have been widely ignored in the clamour for renewables.

Wind is intermittent; it only hits the required strength around 25% of the time. It needs conventional backup systems, the more so the higher the percentage of electricity created by wind. The reserve capacities would have to be based on coal, gas or nuclear. This fact makes wind even more expensive than it already is. Electricity created by wind is not only extremely costly - feasible only with high subsidies - it is highly inefficient, destructive to the environment, swallowing vast acres of land which might better be used for food production; and its claim to be "renewable" is hardly justified, because of the high proportion of energy and material needed for producing, repairing and renewing the massive number of turbines which will have to be built, on land or offshore.

On top of this, wind won't even deliver the promise of jobs: wind turbines can and will be more cheaply built in China, as was demonstrated last year, when a turbine factory on the Isle of Wight was closed and the production moved abroad.⁷ Likewise in Germany, there proceeded further disappointment on the jobs front when it turned out that a major factory for the production of solar panels was relocated to China.

5. Roger Pielke Jr., 29th July 2009, The Folly of "Magical Solutions" for Targeting Carbon Emissions, available at <http://e360.yale.edu/content/feature.msp?id=2175>

6. See comments made by Wulf Bernotat, 19th October 2009, Reuters, available at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/idUKLJ67336020091019>

7. Britain's only wind turbine plant to close – Guardian 28th April 2009 available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2009/apr/28/vestas-wind-turbine-factory-close>

8. James Lovelock (2009), The Vanishing Face of Gaia: A Final Warning, Allen Lane

Of course this does not stop business being keen on wind power or any new technology. They are attracted by the huge subsidies offered by governments and driven by “the pressure of fashionable, green ideology”, as James Lovelock observes. His judgement could not be clearer: “Europe’s massive use of wind as a supplement to base-load electricity will probably be remembered as one of the great follies of the twenty first century”.⁸

Therefore, if we are to credibly navigate a path through the politics of climate change we need to move beyond the fantasy that rules the world of targets. For instance, if the UK really intends to cut CO2 emissions by 34% by 2022, then it would need to build, in the next 6 years, the equivalent of 30 new nuclear power stations. The telling comment of the (Labour) chairman of the “Climate Change Committee” of the House of Commons: “Well beyond our political capacity to deliver.”

Whatever happens, the next twenty years could be called the “the new age of carbon.” More oil, gas and coal will be burned than ever before - and carbon dioxide emissions will continue to rise. Renewables can’t and won’t deliver the scale of energy needed for a rising world population. For the time being only fossil fuels and nuclear power will be able to deliver the necessary energy. In the light of these facts it is worrying that Britain and Germany, once leading nations in nuclear technology, have either neglected it or given up on it completely, leaving the field to other, more far sighted nations like France.

30 years ago Britain had 15 000 nuclear engineers, now the figure is just a tenth of that. This will create substantial difficulties in realising the recent decision to build new nuclear power stations in the UK. In Germany the situation seems to be frozen in time. The nuclear exit strategy will not be reversed even by the new centre right government, while the SPD, since in opposition, has become even more hostile to nuclear power.

What to do? The crisis of credibility in climate science

The crisis in credibility currently afflicting climate change science and the authority of the IPCC, coupled with the growing question marks behind even the widely assumed and accepted global warming of the next few decades, should be seen as a chance for a cool headed reassessment of the progressive approach to the politics of climate change.

The reputation of climate science has undoubtedly been damaged, its integrity is in doubt and many of its claims, outlined in the last IPCC Report from 2007 and which have hitherto been treated as scientific tablets of stone, now seem highly questionable.⁸

Likewise, the hacked or leaked email controversy of the Climatic Research Unit (CRU) of the University of East Anglia, reveals an astonishing amount of uncertainty surrounding the most basic and fundamental assumption that the world is warming due to man-made emissions. The emails further reveal the alarming unwillingness of scientists to let their assumptions and predictions, based on computer models, be tested and checked. This is clearly unacceptable. Politicians and governments should use this state of affairs to demand a return to an open and critical science.

Politicians have in fact gained a degree of breathing space in which to reflect before they need to commit to expensive decisions. The global warming trend has stopped, for the time being at least, as since 1998 global average temperatures have not risen, despite the fact that CO2 emissions have been rising relentlessly during this period.⁹ This places a significant question mark over the CO2

8. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change fourth assessment report (2007) available at <http://www.ipcc.ch/>

9. See comments to the BBC made by Michel Jarraud, the World Meteorological Organisation’s secretary-general, 4th April 2008, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7329799.stm>

10. Hans von Storch, Good Science, Bad Politics, Wall Street Journal Op-Ed 22nd December 2009 – available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704238104574601443947078538.html>

paradigm, a question mark of which even IPCC scientists, and the “CRU cartel” of alarmists whose computer models predict apocalyptic scenarios, as Professor Hans von Storch, a leading climate scientist, has named them, are painfully aware.¹⁰ Furthermore, it weakens the claim of these models not only to be able to accurately reflect what happened in the past, but even more importantly it undermines their claim to be able to predict the climate of the future.

Climate change scientists have been reluctant to admit to the recent halt in the global warming trend. Professor Mojib Latif, a leading IPCC climate scientist, had the honesty to admit last August at an IPCC conference in Geneva “the inconvenient truth” of stable temperatures, and he suggested that climate scientists should admit to this truth, because otherwise the sceptics would raise the issue. He expected “one or two decades more of cooling”, before global warming would start again.¹¹ Maybe, but neither he, nor we, can be sure.

One thing is clear. Not only has the belief in the accuracy of computer models suffered, but, contrary to what the chairman of the IPCC and many climate researchers have claimed in the past few years, the science itself is far from settled. This claim not only goes against the essence of scientific principle and should never have been made in the first place, but alarmingly it hints at a darker, authoritarian side to the “mission” of climate scientists. Many believe that democratic societies are not conducive to dealing with urgent problems such as climate change; convinced that they are right and drastic action is needed, they openly demand a “transformation” of politics, one which will place decision-making powers in the hands of a small scientific political elite, more informed than the general population.¹²

Some scientists and influential commentators praise the authoritarian Chinese model of governance, and some have gone still further. James Hansen, a well known NASA scientist, has openly stated that the “democratic process does not work” and, in his frustration over the failure of multilateral climate negotiations, now openly applauds extremist ideas of eco-terrorism as the only way to bring down the global economic system.¹³ While one should of course be aware of the shortcomings of the democratic process as regards decision-making,¹⁴ progressives should always seek to emphasise and re-emphasise that open democratic societies in combination with market economies are better equipped than any other political system to deal with such complex global problems. The poisoned environmental legacy of totalitarian communism should act as a permanent warning against the lure of an authoritarian system, one which elements of the left have historically found it all too easy to fall for.

We are faced with an awkward and uncertain situation: nobody knows what the future holds, and even if we are still prepared to follow the lead of the IPCC, we are faced with huge and quite often irreconcilable differences of opinion. One school of thought predicts catastrophe, if not apocalypse, another forecasts at the very least a fundamental challenge to our usual way of life, while other models suggest a manageable degree of warming. Some sceptics, among them an astonishingly high number of scientists, go as far as to suggest that, in a few years time, we will collectively wake up to the fact that global warming was just another of the many unfounded scares which modern mass media societies are prone to fall for.

No regrets solutions

The question thus remains: what to do? We need more energy efficiency; we need, in the long term, to decarbonise our industries; we need to diversify our sources of energy as much as possible – energy security remains an important concern; and we need new, clean technologies. We should not,

11. See New Scientist 9th September 2009, World will ‘cool for the next decade’, available at <http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg20327254.000-world-will-cool-for-the-next-decade.html>

12. See for example David Shearman and Joseph Wayne Smith (2007), *The Climate Change Challenge and the Failure of Democracy*, Greenwood Press

13. See “Leading climate scientist: ‘democratic process isn’t working’”, *The Guardian*, 18th March 2009 – available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2009/mar/18/nasa-climate-change-james-hansen>

14. See David Held & Angus Fane-Hervey (2010), *Democracy, climate change and global governance: democratic agency and the policy menu ahead*, Policy Network paper: <http://www.policy-network.net/publications/publications.aspx?id=3406>

however, rush headlong forward into large scale spending commitments based on uncertain science, but must instead concentrate on “no regrets solutions”.

We should start building nuclear power stations, which at the moment remains the only effective way of producing carbon free electricity. At the same time we in the west should avoid damaging our economies, either by transferring too much money to our competitors or falling into the trap of the “green-industrial complex,” about whose malign influence even James Lovelock, founder of the Gaia theory of earth and biosphere being a self-regulating super-organism, and a man convinced that it is too late to stop “global heating”, is scathing.¹⁵

We should in future be much more sceptical of computer-based predictions and scientists who behave like the guardians of a dogma, and instead seek to focus our attempts on observing what is actually happening.

Is there, for instance, any sign that the rise in global temperatures or the rise of sea levels is accelerating?

In both cases the answer is no.

Global warming has come to a halt; in other words, the planet is not currently warming. New research points to the role of a much more aggressive greenhouse gas – water vapour – in the recent cooling. The amount of this gas in the stratosphere has decreased by 10% since the end of the last century which could go some way to explaining why global temperatures have stopped rising despite ever higher CO2 emissions than before.

Recent studies have not found evidence for an accelerating rise in sea levels. Instead of pursuing the losing battle of targeted CO2 emission cuts, we should concentrate more on adaptation. Climate change is the historical norm, thus changes in climate are inevitable; much of it is driven by cycles, some shorter than others, such as the sunspot cycle over a period of 11 years, while others occur over the longer term. One thing is clear: many cycles influencing climate change are still not understood.¹⁶

We need, therefore, to prepare for adaptation, and furthermore we need an insurance policy in the form of geo-engineering, in case the worst alarmist predictions should come true. Geo-engineering is recommended as a common sense approach by many scientists, including the IPCC’s Dr. R K Pachauri, and might prove to be a significantly cheaper solution than the desperate, expensive and most importantly unsuccessful attempt to mitigate climate change by cutting emissions, the approach set forth in the Kyoto protocol.

It does not make sense to create economic misery and hardship for billions of people in the industrial and in the developing world. Climate policy and the speed of decarbonisation should not, and will not, be determined by scientists and their theories, but by governments and parliaments guided by what is in the interest of their nations. In the future political action to deal with climate change must and will take a more rational path, and proceed at a slower, more incremental pace.

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15. James Lovelock (2009), *The Vanishing Face of Gaia: A Final Warning*, Allen Lane

16. See Peter Taylor (2009), *Chill: A reassessment of global warming theory*, Clairview Books.