

# Climate Change – Political Dimensions

The Revd Dr Malcolm Brown

I was asked to look at the political questions around climate change, and I intend to try to do that under four heading: the International dimension, Local dimensions, Economic dimensions, and finally, questions of Politics and Conflict.

## 1. International

They say that Britain has “weather” – and “climates” are what the rest of the world has!

It’s quite important to distinguish climate from weather – during this year’s dismal summer I lost count of the number of times I heard comments to the effect of, “What do they mean ‘global warming’? There’s no global warming here”. The point, of course, is that the impact of climate change on the weather is not always predictable – but, more importantly, whilst Britain may have distinctive weather patterns of its own, the climate is nothing whatsoever to do with national boundaries.

But, as is all too obvious, our politics are structured around the idea of sovereign nation-states. Nations, quite reasonably, look to protect their own interests and cooperation between nations is always a fragile thing. Yet climate change – perhaps more than any other issue – manifestly requires nations to work together because the effects of climate change have no idea of respecting national boundaries. Yet, recall the outrage – which, no doubt many here shared – when the US/UK invasion of Iraq violated the principle that nations should not interfere forcibly in the politics of other nations unless one nation very directly threatens the security of the other. There are no short cuts to international action on climate change – only the painstaking, wearying and step-by-step processes of diplomacy and negotiation. And yet those processes are, necessarily, slow – and climate change is an urgent matter.

The other point is that the nations of the earth – all of whom are affected by climate change – are not equal in power, resources or needs. When concerted international action is required, the demands on individual nations must be adapted to the fact that the playing field is not level. Equality of sacrifice is absurd if one nation is rich and the other is struggling to feed its people. We have already heard the word “fairness” used a number of times – but appeals to fairness are not straightforward (and this is a point the churches often forget, imagining that the idea of fairness is agreed by all right-minded people). To take an example, I am currently working with a group of Christian charities who, together, put up half the money for one of the jobs in my Division. The agreed formula is that each charity pays in proportion to its turnover. But this means that two large charities

pay a great deal more than anyone else – and yet each charity gets about the same benefit from the job they are funding. So, not surprisingly, the big charities say “this isn’t fair – the principle ought to be that we each pay according to the benefit we receive”. But the smaller charities say, “Oh no, that won’t be fair, because we’ll be paying a much bigger proportion of our income compared to you”. How are we to resolve this? (I won’t tell you how we have, in fact, resolved it – it would take too long. I said that diplomacy was slow and complicated!) My point is that concepts of fairness are not easily agreed. Both versions, in my example, are demonstrably “fair” – until you end up paying more than is comfortable. So simple appeals to fairness in responding to climate change are not going to work. Sorting out how the developed nations should respond; how nations which are rapidly industrialising and which may well be massive carbon consumers should respond; how very poor countries should try to combine development with carbon limitation – these questions can’t be solved just by being “fair”. And, to repeat, time is not on our side. It’s good to see the graph which Fabiola shared of Contraction and Convergence – it shows that there are ways to recognise that the demands on different countries can’t all be the same and that change can’t proceed on a single timetable for everyone. But as the timeline of the graph progresses, and the relative achievements of the nations mean that their position vis-à-vis carbon reduction changes, be ready for the cry that “it’s not fair any more”! Overall, we are asking a very difficult thing – that the developed nations put the interests of others before their own. It’s something where we have been long on rhetoric but short on practice.

So what is the church’s responsibility in international politics? It is a sad fact that just when we need strong international structures, the structures we do have are often denigrated and are not especially robust. I mean especially the United Nations and (since we are members of it) the European Union. Powerful states tend to be the first to denigrate international political structures. And you don’t need telling about the bitterness which membership of the EU has generated in our own media and political parties. But if we believe that climate change demands urgent political action which transcends national boundaries, we need to work hard to make the international agencies which we DO have work well. Of course Christians will have differing political views and support different parties. But we have a duty to “talk up” the structures which offer us some hope of effective international action, even though we will be told we are “politically naïve”. Whenever the churches have ventured to comment on economic issues in the public sphere we have been told we don’t know what we are talking about. I suggest that the recent financial crisis suggests that the churches knew what they were talking about all along and often had the insight to see that the great Emperor of high finance had no clothes on. It is our task – and it is a theological task too – to tell a better story about belonging to one another across the world.

## **2. Local**

But pontificating about international politics is not quite enough. Everyone has to “do their bit” – not just to help the reduction of our carbon footprint, but also to gain the moral authority to call for action at a political and institutional level.

Let me tell you about some of the things the Church of England is doing – others can add similar stories from other denominations and groups.

We have recently published two short, “user-friendly”, guides for local action to cut the carbon. They have both been written by my former and current colleagues, Claire Foster and David Shreeve. The first is called *How Many Lightbulbs Does it Take to Change a Christian?*, and the sequel is called *Don't Stop at the Lights* (both available from Church House Publishing).

I think these are not only excellent books but they have truly excellent titles. For Christians, tackling climate change is not just a political necessity, it is a matter of inner conviction. If we believe God's creation to be in danger, we not only have to do things but we have to orientate our beliefs so that our way of life follows. So: how many light bulbs does it take to Change a Christian?

Similarly, because we believe that God's Kingdom is coming incrementally – that the Kingdom was inaugurated in Christ, is sustained by the Holy Spirit, but is still a long way from being realised in all its glory – we can't be satisfied with one-off gestures or any action that leads us to think that, having done it, there's no problem any more. Working for God's Kingdom is never complete. So: don't stop at the lights.

### Shrinking the Footprint

The climate change responses in the life of the CofE are brought together in a programme which we've called *Shrinking the Footprint*. What can we do to reduce the church's carbon consumption? We started with the bits we control: church buildings, clergy houses, church schools, diocesan offices and the central offices where I work at Church House. We began by trying to measure our current carbon footprint – and putting all those bits together which I mentioned, the Church of England has a carbon footprint roughly comparable with one of the supermarket chains. That's quite sobering – especially when you recall that one or two supermarket chains like Asda are working hard to cut their own footprint. And that figure doesn't include travel by clergy or lay workers, and it certainly doesn't include the homes and the activities of the church's members.

Having measured where we are now, we're introducing Toolkits to help the people around the church who have direct responsibility for decisions affecting our buildings to do what they can to help us meet the government's target of 60% carbon reduction ... which has recently been put up to 80%! But the toolkits we have put together, if acted on, could save us about 10% of our carbon consumption with in 5 years – that's more or less in line with the Kyoto target of a 20% saving by 2020.

But – there's always a “but”.... If we can make that saving in carbon it stands to save us about £6.5 million on the costs of running church buildings and clergy

houses alone. However, to achieve that saving will require an investment of about £24.5 million. Of course, some of this money would have to be spent anyway – heating systems wear out and have to be replaced, so we should spend a bit more to replace them with energy-efficient systems, and so on. But it's a lot to find with a major recession about to hit us. I'll say about more about investment in a minute.

### Adaptation Scheme

Another thing we are working on is an Adaptation Scheme. I started with the international dimension and this is one way of addressing our international responsibilities. The churches are very well placed to work internationally because we are a global institution with, as they say, branches everywhere. So we are working in conjunction with Tearfund on a scheme whereby those of us who continue to have a large carbon footprint can offset our consumption by contributing to a fund which will support projects helping people most affected by climate change to adapt to the changes around them. Already, as I said, we are seeing climate-related migration as people's habitats become unable to support people with the water and crops they need to live. The scheme will work through the connections of the Anglican Communion to set up adaptation projects to help people to live in their own regions and survive. The scheme is still being developed but details, through Tearfund, should be public soon. There are, of course, many similar schemes. We are putting this one together on behalf of the Church of England in order to exploit the very close links we have with the Anglican churches of the worldwide communion. That way, people can sense a connection between their contributions to the fund and the impact it is having for the hardest hit peoples of the world. Other schemes will use other kind of connectedness.

### **3. Economic**

I could, I'm afraid, talk for a very long time about the way the global economic structures over the last 30 years or so have exacerbated climate change and made it harder for us to address the consequences. If you want to go into this in detail I can recommend Michael Northcott's book, *A Moral Climate* (DLT 2007) which is a tour de force. But whatever the failings of the past, we now live in a time of unprecedented economic volatility. Can our economic structures change in ways that make carbon reduction easier to achieve?

I think it was Silvio Berlusconi who was quoted the other day as saying that the global recession meant that we can no longer afford to take steps to limit climate change. Now, for years, those of us who have dared to question the established economic structures have been told patronisingly that we are wedded to "old ways of thinking". I venture to suggest that it is the likes of Berlusconi who are stuck in old ruts these days. I do believe that talk of "the end of capitalism" are absurdly over-stated, but it is clear that the nostrums of the free market are deeply discredited and, as a result, the notion that governments can intervene to correct imbalances and secure desirable outcomes has received a new lease on life.

If indeed we are seeing a resurgence of Keynesian principles in economics, I think we have a glimmer of hope. Keynes argued that, in a recession, governments have a duty to invest strongly in programmes which stimulate economic activity and thus keep people in work and prevent complete stagnation.

I said that the CofE would have to invest about £24.5m over 5 years in order to achieve savings of £6.5m p.a. and carbon reductions of around 10%. All very much worth having – if you have the resources to invest. Now, translate the church's situation into the national framework. Where the unregulated market tended to regard investment of this kind as giving insufficient return and taking too long to make any real return, government investment programmes can take the longer view. The question is whether there is the political will – bravery, perhaps – to fly in the face of market orthodoxies, and whether the government's commitment to addressing climate change is profound enough for them to take the risk.

#### **4. Politics and Conflict**

Lastly, it's not just about what we can do politically to reduce carbon emissions. It's also about what we must do to guard against other political consequences of climate change.

I said that we need robust international structures. We need them, not only to achieve the savings in carbon consumption but to cope with what is already happening as a result of climate change. As whole areas of the earth's surface become hotter, or wetter or change in all sorts of ways, patterns of human existence have to change too – and, with a desperate sort of inevitability, it is the most vulnerable people who stand to be hardest hit. As migration takes large numbers of people across political borders, tensions always ensue. We shouldn't need telling about humanity's capacity for demonising others who are perceived as a threat. As climate change provokes even greater migration movements than we have yet seen, the possibility of violence and genocide becomes proportionately greater. The best we have in response are the UN peacekeeping forces. We need to uphold them, strengthen them and make sure their peacekeeping brief is matched to the seriousness of the occasions that are already coming.

What is more, we know that addressing climate change adequately could lead to falling living standards for the richest nations – or the perception of falling living standards, which is politically just as serious. When people feel that their living standards are under threat, it is not uncommon to see a rise in the fortunes of extremist, authoritarian or nationalist political groupings, racist policies and a contempt for democracy. We have to ask whether our existing political culture is robust enough to fend off that sort of development without giving up on the idea that change is necessary if the planet is to survive. Like market economics, democratic politics is not well-equipped for taking a very long term view. But democracy is still a better bet for a sustainable planet than any other system. There's a real tension here. How do you get a democratic mandate for measures

which will not benefit present generations but our grandchildren and beyond? The only hope is that people are persuaded to vote according to a long term view of the common good across the generations – if that sort of political education programme is to happen, it takes time and needs to start very soon. Again, the churches have a key role here – we have a great deal of moral authority still.

And yet the tensions within the churches today – and especially among Anglicans at the moment – reflect some of the tensions in political thinking. As the US presidential election shows us the alliance between a certain sort of Christianity, a certain sort of right-wing politics and a set of policies which bring together free markets, social authoritarianism, and climate change denial, is still very strong in the USA and is being aggressively exported elsewhere. If you ask why the likes of Richard Dawkins are so vehemently anti-religious, it is because (not entirely unreasonably) they look for religion in practice and they see American Christian fundamentalism and Islamic fundamentalism. The gently reasonable faith, socially inclusive politics and concern for a long-term international common good which has been mainstream in the European churches for a long time, is very much on the back foot right now. American evangelicalism regards Europe as a mission field – because our levels of churchgoing and Christian adherence are in decline, but also because they regard our social attitudes as sub-Christian. Lots of American evangelical resources are being directed at changing the European churches into churches in their image. This is not primarily a climate change issue, but I doubt that our concern for the planet would have a prominent place in a deeply Americanised version of the church. My point is that there is a struggle to be had within the church before we can confidently align Christian belief and concern for addressing climate change.

Unless our political systems – nationally, internationally, and in the churches' own affairs – can prove themselves able to respond adequately to the unprecedented challenges of climate change, the future climate could be, not only hot, but very dark indeed.