

The Gleneagles G8 summit and climate change: a lack of leadership

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“While uncertainties remain in our understanding of climate science, we know enough to act now to put ourselves on a path to slow and, as the science justifies, stop and then reverse the growth of greenhouse gasses.”

“Around 2 billion people lack modern energy services. We need to work with our partners to increase access to energy ...”

“The World Bank will take a leadership role in creating a new framework for clean energy and development, including investment and financing.”

The Gleneagles Communiqué, G8 Meeting 2005, Scotland

When the G8 leaders met in Scotland in July 2005 one of the issues at the top of the agenda was global warming. More than a year before the summit Tony Blair summarized the importance very well when he described it as “long-term the single most important issue we face as a global community” (The Climate Group, 2004). Even the Pentagon has suggested that “The risk of abrupt climate change ... should be elevated beyond a scientific debate to a US national security concern” (Schwartz and Randall, 2003, p. 2).

Seen in this light the result of the Glen Eagles G8 meeting has been disappointing and can be summarized as 'business as usual'. The urgency of the situation as recognized in the statements above was watered down in the final communiqué of the meeting although it recognized “that climate change is a long-term and serious challenge” (Gleneagles Communiqué, 2005). In addition it failed to stress that present climate change is very much the product of human activities. Instead, the G8 statement attributes a considerable part of global temperature increase to natural variations. That is very worrying since many climatologists believe that we should be well on our way towards the next glaciation (see Ruddiman, 2005). Nevertheless, the G8 leaders acknowledged that humans probably contribute to some extent to global warming and that for this reason greenhouse gas emissions should be stabilised, just as a precaution. An emphasis has been put on the development of more energy efficient and new technologies to stabilize emissions. Furthermore, the communiqué puts much emphasis on economic development of poor countries in order to cope with the effects of global warming: “As we work on our own adaptation strategies, we will work with the developing countries on building capacity to help them improve their resilience and integrate adaptation goals into sustainable development strategies” (Gleneagles Communiqué, 2005). An additional aim set in Gleneagles is to give billions of peoples in developing countries access to modern energy services. This suggests that

economic development is seen as the recipe to deal with the environmental impacts caused by global warming. It looks like a license for unchecked global economic expansion.

Climate change language

Over the past 15 years the climate change language in the G8 communiqués has come full-circle. In the early 1990s, the then G7 recognised human related global warming and climate change as a serious problem. They also acknowledged that scientific uncertainty should be “no excuse to postpone actions”. The prescription for combating global warming and environmental problems in general was: economic growth, the free market, and democratic systems to ensure proper accountability. The exchange of scientific data as well as the development of alternative technologies were also seen as key factors in dealing with global warming (Sandalow, 2005).

Statements to this extent continued until 1997 when the tone of the communiqué of the Denver G8 summit changed dramatically under the influence of the publication of the second assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 1995). It recognised that human induced global warming is a reality: “overwhelming scientific evidence links the build-up of greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere to changes in the global climate system”. The communiqué further stressed that drastic action to reduce greenhouse emissions was needed in the decades to come. High hopes were pinned on the third Conference of the Parties later that year in Kyoto, to come up with a timetable and a plan for drastic action (Sandalow, 2005).

During the 1998 G8 meeting in Birmingham the first cracks appeared in the unity displayed the year before. The group repeated that it recognised global climate change as “the greatest threat to future prosperity” and it continued that they “welcomed the recent signature of the [Kyoto] protocol by some of us and confirm the intention of the rest of us to sign it in the next year” (Sandalow, 2005). Although the United States initially signed up to the Kyoto Protocol it indicated in 2001 that it would not ratify the agreement. This means that the US is not bound to meet its agreed target to reduce greenhouse emissions by 7 percent by 2012.

Full circle

In the years following the Birmingham G8 meeting the language with regard to global warming remained neutral and repeated the group's commitment to deal with Global warming. In 2003 the protection of biodiversity was added to the environmental agenda and linked to Global warming. The following year an action plan for encouraging science and technology for sustainable development was accepted by the G8 (Sandalow, 2005). This almost squeezed out the issue of global warming and the emissions of greenhouse gases and by doing so it had become a development issue. The G8 came full circle when economic development was reinforced during this year's meeting in Scotland in July 2005, and signalled a return to the emphasis on economic and technological development of the early 1990s.

One of the fundamental obstacles to G8 engagement with global warming is that the most industrialised countries are reliant on that key driver of climate change: fossil fuels, in particular oil. The G8 countries produce just under 50% of global carbon

dioxide emissions and are home to most of the world's large oil companies (Blair, 2004). Russia, which has the biggest oil reserves of all G8 countries, depends on its revenues from oil exports for its economic survival. This dependence of the G8 countries on fossil fuels and the attached economic interests makes it hard for them to radically change their ways and to become less oil dependent to satisfy their energy needs.

However, there is probably a way out of the carbon trap, even with a continued reliance on fossil fuels. The G8 leaders are right about investment in energy efficient and new technologies but that has to go hand in hand with a clear carbon reduction policy. At the moment the G8 are not committed to set clear targets and to enshrine these in international treaties, which is hard to understand. Treaties with clear targets for the reduction of CFCs in the 1980s proved highly successful and led to phasing out of this harmful gas within a decade. If that had not happened the ozone layer would have deteriorated even faster and CFCs would have overtaken carbon dioxide as the most important greenhouse gas by the early 1990s (Cicerone 2000).

Corporate and local action

It has been argued that there were good alternatives for CFCs available and that these do not so clearly exist for carbon dioxide producing activities. However, that argument is weak since new technologies that will reduce carbon dioxide emissions are becoming available. A good example is a technology that combines the capture of carbon dioxide emissions from coal power plants and oil refineries and their subsequent injection into geological formations for long-term storage (Socolow, 2005). More recently the Tennessee Valley Authority announced that it will install in one of its coal fired power plants a bioreactor containing blue-green algae that will remove CO₂ from flue gas produced by the plant (Di Justo, 2005). These techniques could significantly contribute to slowing down the rise of atmospheric CO₂ concentrations.

That the corporate world and local authorities are prepared to invest in these technologies becomes clear from mounting criticism by big companies, city councils and states in the United States and other industrialised countries, that something has to be done. Recently General Electric announced that it is going to increase its investments in the development of cleaner technology to \$1.5 billion per annum by 2010 (Ecomagination). In May local authorities of more than 140 North American cities promised at a meeting in Seattle that they will cut greenhouse emissions with 7 percent in order to meet Kyoto targets (Pearce, 2005). These are only a few examples of local and corporate initiatives around the globe which give hope that the problem of greenhouse emission can eventually be brought under control.

Leadership?

As the above discussion above clearly illustrates, what is most urgently needed to support long-term investment in carbon neutral technologies is political leadership, especially by the G8 countries. Furthermore, if the developed countries fail to take action, the political leadership of the developing world will not see the need to take drastic action either. In this scenario economic development can never be the solution to the problem of global warming. The G8 leaders are right about investing in energy

efficiency and new technologies as well as poverty eradication, but this is not sufficient. A lot of trouble could be saved if the G8 leaders were to set international standards and legally enforceable limits on greenhouse emissions. Eventually leadership by the most industrialised countries, not least the United States, becomes absolutely necessary to reverse global warming. Politicians can no longer simply “default” on their responsibility.

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