

Too Much of Nothing

By Tom Athanasiou | August 1, 2005

*Oh, when there's too much of nothing,
No one has control.*

Bob Dylan

It's getting harder to hide the climate crisis.

February, for example, saw a landmark conference¹ in which leading scientists, one after the other, stepped forward to draw a clear, unambiguous line. No more "uncertainty" for these guys. As John Schellnhuber, director of Cambridge's Tyndall Centre for Climate Change, put it: "We now know that if we go beyond two degrees we will raise hell."

Note to Americans: he means 2 degrees *Centigrade*. Which, since the warming already clocks in at 0.7C, gives us about 1.3C to go, with an additional half degree, or more, already "locked in." And beyond 2C degrees, which is, alas, exactly where we're headed, the projections pass from grim to terrifying. Which means that not only do global carbon *emissions* have to drop, soon and substantially, but so does the atmospheric carbon concentration itself, which has already passed the highest point that can be plausibly called "safe." And it has to do so while the developing world, well ... develops.

If, of course, we want to avoid "hell." To help you decide, imagine the current global drought deepening, and settling in to stay; imagine 3 billion people, packed into Southern mega-cities, under "severe water stress;" imagine a loss of 1/3 or more of terrestrial species, including, of course, polar bears; and imagine the die-off of a drying Amazon. Imagine the melting of the Greenland and West Antarctic ice, and the rising of the oceans. Imagine, too, that "development" itself goes Up in Smoke.² Do so because global warming threatens to make the international targets on halving global poverty by 2015, the "Millennium Development Goals," entirely unattainable.

No wonder, as all this seeps gradually into our resistant minds, we're getting a wee bit alarmed. We have, in effect, run out over the edge of the cliff, and

just now, like Wiley Coyote tempting the laws of physics, we're looking down.

The G8 (plus 5)

Obviously, this situation requires a global response. What seems less obvious, at least among the elites, is that this can't be a business-as-usual response in which the climate crisis becomes just another excuse for strengthening the winds of neoliberalism.

The stakes would be clearer if it weren't for the Bush regime. Because, frankly, even neoliberalism—especially the European sort—can look pretty good when compared to the kind of fundamentalism now being exported from Washington. Case in point: Tony Blair, and his attempt to focus the recent G8 summit on two areas, climate change and Africa, that rarely rise to the top of the elite agenda. Was this an attempt to cover over the stench of his Iraq policies? Absolutely. But the question here is if, whatever his motivation, he accomplished anything useful.

Did he, in particular, manage to accomplish anything at the G8 summit?

Plenty of voices say he did, particularly on the debt relief side, though he clearly failed in his (currently pointless) effort to bring the United States back into the international climate regime. Even on the climate front, however, the optimists cite Mr. Bush's acknowledgement that climate change is real, and



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that human activities lay beneath a significant fraction of the recent warming. In fact, however, it wasn't Blair who won the point here; it was the scientists, who with the help of some recently extreme weather have begun to drive the denialists back toward their holes. And it was the climate movement itself, which is weaving initiatives at every level—local, regional, national, and international—into a net that even GOP realists know they can't avoid much longer.³

The real action, though—and this gets us back to neo-liberalism, and geo-politics as usual—is the one where the rich world and the poor world circle each other on the global playing field, each working towards a climate regime that, somehow, satisfies their “national interests.” Here, the big news at the G8 summit was the attendance of high-level representatives from Brazil, China, India, Mexico, and South Africa, and the summit's concluding plans for a “dialogue” with these same countries that will continue, quietly, before the next session of the formal climate negotiations this November in Montreal.

This was interesting. Because if we're going to avoid global climate catastrophe, we're going to do it by way of a new future in which the South takes a low-carbon path. Everyone (serious) knows this, though when it comes to the shape of this new future, and the best strategy for pursuing it, the consensus immediately breaks down. The Europeans want real engagement with the South, at meetings that begin with clear-eyed, cold-coffee presentations from the scientists, while the Americans still prefer to leverage their old faiths in power politics and technological salvation. As for the developing world, well let's just say that the tension is rising. Soon now, very soon, the formal debate on the future regime is going to begin, and one thing we know for sure is that neither Beijing, New Delhi, nor Brasilia has any intention of bargaining away its “right to development.”

Not that the G8 is a proper venue for global negotiation. But the G8 communiqué (one of Blair's small victories) is quite explicit that the proposed dialogue is not to be seen as an alternative to the official UN talks, which after all won the Kyoto Protocol against all efforts by the Bush administration and its allies.

And, frankly, the G8+5 dialogue may well make for a reasonable sort of ad hoc executive session, and even offer a helpful supplement to the official negotiations.

Or maybe not. Again, the problem is that the Bush people can make even neo-liberalism-as-usual look good. Paul Wolfowitz, as the new head of the World Bank, was already on message at the end of the summit, emphasizing that the G8 has asked the Bank to construct a “new framework for mobilizing investment in clean energy and development.”⁴ Other commentary makes it clear, as if there was any doubt, that the Bank sees its role as one that will persist even after 2012 when, if the Bush people get their way, Kyoto will expire without an heir.⁵

This is neoliberalism as usual. For the Bank, as we should all know by now, is part of the problem, not part of the solution. It has single-handedly financed over \$25 billion in fossil fuel-based projects since 1992, when the UN Climate Convention was signed at the Earth Summit. And even when taken together with the Global Environmental Facility, a nominally autonomous financing arm that was created to, in part, finance climate change mitigation, it has invested over 17 times more in fossil fuels and fossil power plants as in renewable forms of energy and energy efficiency.

You'd think that this would be enough, but not for the Bush crowd. Only a few weeks after the G8 summit faded into the echoes of the London bombings, the United States moved to undercut the G8 process, as it has sought to undercut the UN negotiations themselves, by pursuing a high-concept, technology-centered strategy of overlapping bilateral agreements in which it can maneuver freely, without the troublesome presence of either grim climatologists or European surrender monkeys.

The Asia-Pacific Partnership for Clean Development and Climate

The Partnership, as I will call it, surfaced on July 27th, though it's clear that its building blocks—a series of bilateral technology agreements between the United States and other countries—have been in the

works for at least three years. Now, as the run-up to the Montreal climate conference begins, White House managers decided it was time to go public. And going public requires, as well all know, a good marketing plan and flashy packaging. Thus the “Partnership,” and thus the very focused messaging about the “post Kyoto” era that went along with it. The *New York Times* story, for example, *began* by announcing that “The United States plans to join China and India in an Asian-Pacific climate agreement intended to replace the Kyoto pact as a method to control greenhouse emissions ...”⁶

This isn’t actually what the agreement says—the Partnership “vision statement”⁷ goes out of its way to say that the partnership “will be consistent with and contribute to our efforts under the UNFCCC and will complement, but not replace, the Kyoto Protocol”—but it’s the spin. And this is all about spin.

The Partnership consists of the United States, Australia, China, India, South Korea, and Japan, and is designed, unsurprisingly, to address the climate crisis without mandatory emissions targets. Instead, it emphasizes the development of a variety of energy technologies, many if not most of them focused on coal, and implies some as-yet-unspecified terms for transferring those technologies to the developing world. It is entirely voluntary; in fact, under the wrappings, it looks a lot like a trade pact. And it vividly displays the U.S. political/rhetorical strategy, which far too few climate analyses have taken seriously enough: it grants the primacy of development to the South, beginning with “Development and poverty eradication are urgent and overriding goals internationally,” and going on to remind us that “the international community agreed in the Delhi Declaration on Climate Change and Sustainable Development [this was three years ago] on the importance of the development agenda in considering any climate change approach.”

Be clear here. There’s absolutely no chance that we can avoid a climate catastrophe without a massive energy technology revolution, and without financing and tech-transfer regimes that rapidly spread the best

new low-carbon energy technologies around the world. The question is if the menu here, which (like the Energy Bill) is heavy with “clean coal” technologies and puts in a good word for nuclear, is the proper infrastructure of the greenhouse transition. The question, too, is if Wolfowitz’s World Bank is soon going to announce a link between the Partnership and its “new framework for mobilizing investment in clean energy and development.” And, ultimately, the question is if China and India—both countries with huge coal reserves—are going to throw their lot in with the United States.

It’s possible, especially in the short term, and especially if the bribes are large enough. The bribes and the linkages. The Bush administration is in the process of radically upgrading its “strategic partnership” with India,⁸ and the next few years could see even joint U.S. / India military operations. And as for China, let’s just say that its need for energy has been prominent in the news lately. It’s not really very hard, all things considered, to understand why either country sees “The Coal Pact,” as it’s being called in Australia, as being in its national interest.

In the long run, and probably soon, the Partnership will pass, for at bottom it’s mostly packaging. It’s not like it’s going to mobilize the capital and initiative needed to open a real road to low-carbon development, a road wide enough for China, and India, and the rest of the developing world, to actually take. Not like it’s going to set off an efficiency revolution in the North. Not like it’s going to close the gap between the threat and the still-missing response. Not like it can actually work.

But it is clever, and it is dangerous, and it is a warning. It certainly portends another wave of political sleaze, as the U.S. and Australian governments campaign, once again, to declare Kyoto irrelevant, and to further muddy the waters of the post-2012 debate. And there’s this: The South really does not intend to agree to anything that does not guarantee it a path to developmental equity, and until a regime that meets this rather daunting criteria is on the table, the Bush people, and indeed the whole

fossil-fuel/development-as-usual cartel, are going to find it easy to sow discord and division.

The bottom line: there's nothing much here, but it's a dangerous nothing.

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END NOTES

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