

## **Where We Stand:**

# **Honesty about Dangerous Climate Change, and about Preventing it**

**By Tom Athanasiou and Paul Baer | December 7, 2005**

We stand, first, with the emerging scientific consensus, which tells us we have very little time to act if we honestly expect to avoid a global (as opposed to a “merely local”) climate catastrophe. Further, we insist, contrary to the pretended realism of those who seek to be “reasonable,” on a rather direct approach. We do not, for example, imagine that carbon concentrations that would quite probably yield 3°C or 4°C of warming can reasonably be considered “safe.”<sup>1</sup> Instead, we prefer to stay in the reality-based world of those (the E.U., the Climate Action Network) who draw the line at 2°C maximum (which is itself not by any means safe) and who admit that avoiding a global climate catastrophe is going to be difficult indeed.

Like the larger social-ecological crisis, the climate crisis is fundamental to our real conditions of life. If admitting this simple truth makes us appear “unrealistic,” so be it. There is no honest hope in dissemblance and spin. Besides, the news isn’t all bad—the bottom line is that it’s still physically possible to avoid a global climate catastrophe.

We stand, therefore, for specific, articulated emissions caps. We believe, that is, that we must work backward from the temperature target to the extremely small global carbon budget that we can still allow ourselves, and to the highly constrained emissions trajectories that any plausibly precautionary carbon budget must therefore imply. The brute fact, however we choose to interpret the demands of short-term “realism,” is that physical reality is quite implacable. Global emissions curves must decline, soon and sharply, and there’s absolutely no reason to believe that this can be done without firm caps expressed as targets and timetables.

Low emissions caps, of course, imply an extreme scarcity of atmospheric space, and therefore the problem of allocation. Such allocation does not have to be explicit, but it will occur, one way or another. Moreover, the traditional way of distributing natural resources, in which, roughly speaking, the top 20 percent of the population gets 80 percent while the majority must make due with the remains, is simply not going to work this time around.

Adequate precaution requires that we, all of us together, stay within a limited global climate budget. Unfortunately, this simple truth has some fairly momentous implications. How can it not when the science now tells us that, to have a good chance of avoiding a global climate catastrophe, total global 21st Century emissions must be held to about 400 Gigatonnes of carbon? It is directly from the limitations of this budget that we conclude that allocation necessarily means reallocation, a global redistribution of emissions rights. And this for the obvious but rarely remarked reason that this reallocation is a precondition for the “development” of the poor.

Just now, of course, most everyone is shying away from such unpleasant conclusions, for the obvious reason that our society is so riven by economic and social divisions that it’s difficult to imagine anything like a feasible and acceptable response. Better, many argue, to go on quietly, in tactical silence, as if the fundamental political challenge of the climate crisis would solve itself in time. But it will not.

### **Climate Radicalism**

Clearly, we are climate radicals of some kind or another. But what kind? The kind that will say that, in the face of looming catastrophe, it seems to us that many of our fellows are taking contradictory and even short-sighted positions. For example, many folks in the

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climate justice camp support emissions caps, but does that mean that they also support “cap and trade?” Does it mean that, to be blunt, they support the Kyoto Protocol? Often times they do not, and this we think is a serious mistake, yet at the same time we see their point. Many among us, after all, have concluded that emissions trading—global emissions trading in particular—will only allow the rich to evade responsibility by buying cheap, low-quality carbon offsets in the poor world. Further, many believe that climate mitigation projects tend to have negative and sometimes substantially negative impacts on the host communities. And these are not altogether unreasonable conclusions, at least not judging from the current state of the CDM.

Still, this is not where we stand. Rather, it seems obvious to us that, given the brief time we have to bend the emissions curves, efficiency and common-sense political realism both demand that mitigation be connected to markets. This is not to say that such markets must not be strongly and creatively regulated. Nor is it to deny that markets are easily exploited by the wealthy and the powerful. Nor is it to claim that markets are the only institutions by which significant mitigation efforts can be channeled, that carbon taxes, emissions permit auctions, and development funds do not have critical roles to play, and that these might not someday eclipse carbon markets. The point, though, is that many of the criticisms that trading skeptics have focused on markets applies as well to the alternatives, that, whatever the institutional structure of the climate regime, vulnerable communities, in the South and in the North as well, must be empowered to protect their own interests during the transition to a low-carbon economy.

## Getting Carbon Markets Right

Getting carbon markets right will not be easy, and it is unlikely that they will ever be well-suited to the drive for sustainable development. But they ought at least to provide the right incentives for mitigation, and thus the complaint that, so far, they’ve been designed to keep the price of carbon low is a critical one. Still, we do not worry overmuch about this, for we think that, in anything like a precautionary low-emissions future, attempts to keep the price of carbon artificially low will necessarily fail. Indeed, if the global cap is low enough, and if it is enforced, not even the World Bank will be able to keep emissions permits cheap.

And there’s more. Like all markets, the carbon market must be rooted in institutions that define its rules—and indeed, given the artificial nature of the carbon “commodity,” the rules that control carbon trading will be even more foundational than regulations are in many traditional markets. It may even be that we can contrive market regulations that help drive sustainable development. And it’s important to recall the fundamental principle that the atmosphere is a global commons, and that both decision-making rights and the benefits of its use belong equally to all.

Debates about how rapid mitigation can best be pursued, and about how to do so while best protecting vulnerable communities—like all such matters as these—turn on matters of judgment about what is right, and, of course, about what will work, what is realistic. Realism, in fact, is a central problem, and we do not presume to know its exact demands. But we do know this: Just as short-term realism is rooted in the particularities of specific times and places, its limits unknowable in simple global terms, so too long-term realism also makes its demands, and claims to short-term realism must ultimately be judged by their conformance, or lack of conformance, with these.

We cannot know, in advance, if a particular short-term initiative (a legislative bill, a climate registry, a treaty, or protocol proposal) is well placed or well conceived, but we can, and must, be cautious in the claims we make for them. Short-term initiatives will not necessarily build to successful engagement with the long-term challenge. We must seek, and forge, that engagement. Short-term realism is absolutely necessary, but let’s not pretend that it’s enough.

And just now, as the Kyoto-Plus negotiations begin in earnest, this need to examine the short-term in the light of the long is particularly pressing. Blair’s recent dalliance with quasi-Republican pragmatism (for “technology” and against “targets”) is only the latest marker of a much deeper stalemate. And it is no longer reasonable to claim that this stalemate should be kept quietly on the sidelines.

## Fairness and Inequality

Here then, is the problem in a nutshell: If we are to move fast enough to avoid global climate catastrophe, the rich (a category that will have to be precisely

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defined) will have to pay the extra cost that will come with that speed. They can do so (the economy is not in any danger, not if we act rationally), but it will not be easy to make them, and it will not be possible at all unless “the fairness question” is both asked and answered. This, alas, is a most difficult question indeed, not least because, **in practice, fairness means accounting for not only inequality between nations, but inequality within nations as well.**

The best, it is said, must not be allowed to become the enemy of the good, and we try to keep in mind this wise advice whenever we find ourselves moving beyond the parameters of climate politics as usual. Still, the fact remains that economic inequity cannot be ignored. It may, in fact, be a key to the climate stalemate. If you doubt this, consider that our inability to address the issue of intra-national inequality in a serious way has become a critical impediment to honest dialogue on the climate crisis.

### Who Pays?

We have no illusion that negotiating a global climate agreement which takes account of intra-national inequality will be easy, but we believe that doing so will be necessary if we want a proposal that hopes to impose serious costs on any parties at all. There’s more at stake here than “fairness,” at least in the most obvious senses of the term. As a matter of realism, consider that Northern countries will not tolerate Southern elites getting a free ride; but the legitimate need of Southern elites to fund human development domestically will require that nonetheless the North pay for almost all climate mitigation in the South. And this is not going to happen unless national “obligations to pay” are calculated in a manner that takes intra-national equity into account.

This is a strong claim, and for now one we will leave largely unsubstantiated. However, it is the centerpiece of our ongoing work on Greenhouse Development Rights, which we presented at a side event in Buenos Aires and which we will publish, in much refined form, in early 2006. For now, let us just say this: a truly realistic climate regime must be one that works in the long term, and this is only possible if the problem of development is addressed, and answered, in a way that takes account of both the drive for “development as usual”

and the need for “sustainable human development.” And this implies a debate about development that is not limited to poverty, but also ventures into the more difficult and dangerous territory denoted by the old word **class**.

In more policy-oriented terms, this means that the all-important “Who Pays?” question has to be answered in a way that explicitly measures both responsibility and capacity. These are the unavoidable metrics of fairness in the allocation of obligations. Yet in the realism of the moment, anything more than their rhetorical invocation runs immediately into the wall of national (and class) interest. For first and foremost in the United States, but also throughout the North and certainly among the elites of the South, those who patently have the greatest responsibility and capacity are rejecting any corresponding obligation.

### Beyond Contraction and Convergence

It was one of the great strengths of Contraction and Convergence (C&C)<sup>2</sup> that its focus on the disparity between Northern and Southern per-capita emissions highlighted the reasons why the North must compensate the South for its overuse of “environmental space.” Yet while C&C never offered the South anything in exchange for the permits it grandfathered to the North, it was nevertheless dismissed as, well, unrealistic. And this is a bad precedent, and one to brood over, for the fact is that C&C’s allocation of emissions rights is demonstrably generous to the North. Yet, given the large financial transfers that C&C still implied, realists summarily dismissed it.

There is little time left for such avoidance. We must actually figure out how much it will cost to rapidly reverse the continuing global growth in emissions. And we must then fund these costs in a way that is globally progressive, and in terms that distinguish the obligations of the rich world from those of the rich in the developing world. The “Who Pays?” question, in other words, has to be answered in the only terms that are even potentially adequate to the challenge, those of a global climate treaty that is foundational to a **Global New Deal**.

To be very clear: **We believe that, if climate mitigation is to be adequate, the rich must pay for it, but that this can never happen unless the rich in the**

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**South, as well as the rich North, split the tab fairly.** In practice, we believe, this means that the rich in the South have to pay for real development (which is also fundamental to real climate adaptation), even as the rich in the already developed world pay for accelerated decarbonization.

This is, to be sure, not a realistic position, not in the short term, but there is more to this than short-term politics. More precisely, we must prepare for the long term as we fight in the short term, and doing so demands that we find a way, now, to put the politics of long-term climate justice on the agenda.

It's not going to be easy, and not just because of the power of the fossil-fuel cartel, the neo-liberals, the party of business as usual. The bottom line is that, even if all the world's rich were to fairly split the tab, most all the costs of accelerated decarbonization are ultimately going to have to be picked up by the North. And even when the "North within the South" is fully engaged, this will not significantly reduce the size of the bill that the North within the North will have to pay. (We leave the discussion of the "South within the North" for another time).

We can, all of us together, afford a rapid and adequate climate transition. And we had better get started on it. But it's also time to put the "Who Pays?" question firmly onto the agenda. Because we're not going to get anywhere until it's answered.

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## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See this 2004 essay for technical details:  
[http://www.ecoequity.org/ceo/ceo\\_8\\_2.htm](http://www.ecoequity.org/ceo/ceo_8_2.htm)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.gci.org.uk/>

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