

Synopsis of Lord Giddens' book 'The Politics of Climate Change'

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Commentary by Andrew Gamble finds a nation-by-nation strategy on global warming persuasive

With the financial system coming apart in such spectacular fashion during the past 18 months, climate change has seemed less pressing. But the issue has not gone away. However deep or prolonged this recession turns out to be, it will end some time. But climate change will not end, and the prognoses for the future become more, not less, alarming.

The scientific consensus is now that global temperatures in the 21st century will rise by 4-7C rather than 2-3C. The international community will meet in Copenhagen in December to try to agree a successor to the Kyoto Protocol, but it will be difficult to get agreement on even the minimum package that most scientists now consider necessary.

Anthony Giddens' new book is novel in that it treats climate change as a political problem, rather than a moral or technological problem. He brings a sorely needed lucidity and political sharpness to the debate. Giddens is temperamentally an optimist, a rationalist and a believer in science as well as in the transformative potential of politics, and he also considers many views that run counter to his own.

He gives a brief account of the science of climate change and the sceptics who challenge it, but this is not primarily a book about that debate. Giddens notes the objections of the climate sceptics and the legitimate areas of uncertainty about the forecasts, but accepts that the evidence linking human activity with climate change is overwhelming.

Instead, he asks a different question. Since we know what we have done to the planet, and what we are still doing to it, why do we find it so hard to change our behaviour? Why are we so calmly sliding to disaster? The answer is what he calls "Giddens' paradox". Since the dangers posed by global warming are not immediate or visible to most people, they ignore them; but waiting for them to become visible and immediate before taking serious action will be, by definition, too late. This is a political and not a technocratic problem, he argues, and those in the climate-change lobby who get impatient with politics are wrong. Even the best technocratic scheme has little chance of success unless a way is found to achieve it through politics.

Similarly, although Giddens is sympathetic to green values, he is very critical of the means that are often advocated to achieve them, because they ignore politics. Radical decentralisation will not deliver the co-ordinated action that is required; the precautionary principle is deeply flawed because it can justify radically opposed courses of action; and the idea of sustainable development is simply incoherent. Giddens favours instead using the percentages principle, accepting that all action involves risks and that the task is to analyse the scale of the risk and make the best choice possible in conditions of uncertainty. This means, for example, accepting the need for new nuclear power stations.

For Giddens, any possible solutions to the climate crisis have to involve a big role for government and the return of planning. In his writings on the Third Way, Giddens was a strong advocate of markets and of the state performing an enabling rather than a command role.

He continues to stress the importance of markets and is very critical of those currents of green thought that reject markets altogether. But Giddens is also keenly aware of the shortcomings of markets in the face of a problem such as climate change, and although he thinks markets are still crucial in any solution (the financial services industry, particularly insurance, has an essential part to play), he thinks they will not participate fully unless governments take a much more active role. What is needed is not just an enabling but an "ensuring" state, a state that can actually deliver outcomes.

What may surprise some readers of Giddens' earlier work is that he puts such stress on national decision-making. He has little confidence that multilateral negotiations in forums such as the G8, the G20, the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation or even the European Union will yield much of value as far as measures to tackle climate change are concerned.

He thinks it much more likely that progress will be made nation by nation, and that international co-ordination will come through "coalitions of the willing" - groups of nations that share the same perspective and are willing to learn from each other and co-ordinate their programmes.

The attempt to strike grand, Kyoto-style bargains will always disappoint because of splits between key players, and divergent interests and perceptions between nations, and between blocs of nations. Deadlocks are much more likely than breakthroughs, and in climate change the world does not have the time to wait for the deadlocks to be resolved.

The only hope is for some of the rich, developed nations to start taking action now. There has to be a vanguard that will show the rest of the world what is possible, and their example may then spread.

Radical restructuring of energy, transport and production systems by a few pioneers is also the best chance of achieving the technological breakthroughs that are essential to enable all human societies to adjust to climate change.

Time is running out.

That was the message of the Stern review on the economics of climate change, and it is Giddens' message, too. But he does not think moral exhortation is enough. Any programme of change has to acknowledge the political context and make its proposals in ways that stand a chance of being accepted.

A new competition for resources is developing between the great powers, over Africa and over the Arctic. The more that great-power politics comes to focus on the availability of vital resources, the more new security doctrines will emerge to justify national policies, and the harder it will be to secure co-operation.

Giddens is refreshing in that he does not wish these problems away, or simply wring his hands at the folly and greed of humankind. He seeks ways in which great-power interests could be enlisted in a way that helps address climate change.

Robert Kagan has recently claimed that the international community is an illusion, that great-power rivalry is all that there is, and that, after a brief interlude after the collapse of the Soviet Union, we are returning to a normal world of the balance of power.

Giddens accepts that in part, but he thinks that the trick is to persuade states that they can pursue their national interests by pursuing climate-change goals. The governments that have the most success in achieving environmental targets have often linked climate change to other objectives, such as energy security.

The more that policies to tackle climate change can be integrated with other policies, the more likely they are to succeed and to command wide public support. Changes in public opinion and grassroots initiatives are essential, as is bipartisan support. It is essential that climate change does not become a Left/Right issue politically.

Most vital of all, however, is the contribution of an active government to changing the policy agenda, developing new incentives for agents at all levels and driving through policy solutions. Giddens' is a simple message, argued with great clarity and power, that brings a new dimension to the debate.