

QUAKER ECO-BULLETIN

Information and Action Addressing Public Policy for
an Ecologically Sustainable World

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Rich Countries Must Pay their Emissions Debt

The following are excerpts from Bolivia's submission to the *Ad Hoc* Working Group on Long-term Cooperative Action under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

"Responsibility for the majority of the historical emissions contributing to current atmospheric concentrations and to current and committed future warming lies with developed countries. ...

"Developed countries now seek to appropriate a disproportionate share of the Earth's remaining environmental space. By basing their future emission allowances on their past excessive level of emissions, they seek an entitlement to continue emitting at 70% or more of their 1990 levels through 2020. ... At the same time, they propose limiting developing countries ... to much lower levels of per person emissions. ...

"The excessive past, current and proposed future emissions of developed countries are depriving and will further deprive developing countries of an equitable share of the much-diminished environmental space they require for their development and to which they have a right. By over-consuming the Earth's limited capacity to absorb greenhouse gases, developed countries have run up an "emissions debt" which must be repaid to developing countries by compensating them for lost environmental space, stabilising temperature and freeing up space for the growth required by developing countries in the future."

In this issue of *Quaker Eco-Bulletin*, we present two articles addressing our North American emissions debt, at the level of the U.S. Congress (Phil Emmi) and the international climate change negotiations in Copenhagen in December, 2009 (Keith Helmuth).

Congress, Carbon and the Common Good

Phil Emmi

It is time to speak out about Congress and its ability to promote the common good. Common property resources and Congress' regard for the common good lie at the heart of the Waxman-Markey bill—American Clean Energy and Security Act (H. R. 2454). This bill proposes rules for managing carbon dioxide emissions given their ability to wreck havoc with the climate.

The common good can be defined as the sum of those conditions in society that work toward the benefit of all. Examples include sound housing, public education, accessible health care, safe streets and neighborhoods, a just legal system, an honest political system, an efficient and equitable economic system, peaceful inter-group relations, and a resilient, pollution-free environment.

Property rights have a lot to do with the common good. We can distinguish between private property rights and com-

mon property rights. We evoke economic theories to affirm that upholding private property rights advances the common good. But this is not entirely correct. Exercising a particular private property right might possibly promote the common good but not necessarily and certainly not all the time.

Common property rights affirm the ability of all community members to enjoy access to a specified resource. Historically common property resources would include the right to timber or hunt in the king's forest, the right to use gill nets to fish in certain lakes, and the right to graze sheep on the village green. We don't need to evoke economic theories to affirm that common property rights promote the common good.

Garrett Hardin exposed common property to a bad rap by speaking of the "tragedy of the commons." Hardin elaborated a theory about human greed and the inexorable logic of common property exploitation. Others have used his argument to justify privatization of common property resources. Yet once again, logic proves to be a poor substitute for historic observation. History provides numerous examples of user communities evolving management strategies to regulate over-exploitation and ensure sustainable use of common property resources. In fact, doing so is a strong sign of a healthy community.

This bears directly on the Waxman-Markey bill and its proposed ground rules for the emission of carbon dioxide (CO₂) into the air. The air—that thin, globally interconnected sheath of gas that is our atmosphere and controls our climate—is and always has been a common property resource. If for our common good, it needs to have an "owner," then it belongs to all of us and we allow its use by everyone to his or her benefit, but we also curtail its use whenever over-exploitation leads to collective harm.

We now know that our carbon-dependent industrial civilization has over-exploited the atmosphere and is causing collective harm by wrecking the climate. Waxman-Markey purports to balance claims for continued access to the air against claims to freedom from collective harm.

The basic science of climate change is no longer an issue. We accept that scientific findings support claims that exploitation must be constrained. Collectively, private rights of access transgress the limit of public trust when CO₂ concentration causes harmful levels of global warming. CO₂ atmospheric concentration now stands at 387 parts per million by volume (ppm). A limit is transgressed at around 450 ppm CO₂ if unsp-

Quaker Eco-Bulletin (QEB) is published bi-monthly by Quaker Earthcare Witness (formerly FCUN) as an insert in *BeFriending Creation*.

The vision of **Quaker Earthcare Witness (QEW)** includes integrating into the beliefs and practices of the Society of Friends the Truths that God's Creation is to be held in reverence in its own right, and that human aspirations for peace and justice depend upon restoring the Earth's ecological integrity. As a member organization of Friends Committee on National Legislation, QEW seeks to strengthen Friends' support for FCNL's witness in Washington DC for peace, justice, and an Earth restored.

QEB's purpose is to advance Friends' witness on public and institutional policies that affect the Earth's capacity to support life. QEB articles aim to inform Friends about public and corporate policies that have an impact on society's relationship to Earth, and to provide analysis and critique of societal trends and institutions that threaten the health of the planet.

Friends are invited to contact us about writing an article for **QEB**. Submissions are subject to editing and should:

- Explain why the issue is a Friends' concern.
- Provide accurate, documented background information that reflects the complexity of the issue and is respectful toward other points of view.
- Relate the issue to legislation or corporate policy.
- List what Friends can do.
- Provide references and sources for additional information.

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portable harm is judged to occur when continuing emissions push up global mean temperatures by 2° Celsius or more. If unsupportable harm occurs when rising global mean temperatures threaten an irreversible shift in the global ice-water balance with inexorable sea-level rise, then that limit has already been exceeded and will remain so until CO₂ concentrations are reduced to about 350 ppm.

The Supreme Court has affirmed the Executive's authority to regulate CO₂ emissions. This authority falls to the Environmental Protection Agency as implementer of the Clean Air Act. The simplest way forward would be to impose a carbon tax on fossil fuels upstream at mine mouth, wellhead and port of entry and to do so long and hard enough to drive CO₂ concentration down to a safe level by mid-century. The EPA has authority to regulate emissions long and hard enough to achieve the same result. The EPA might otherwise learn from Germany's experience with feed-in tariffs. These add a few mils to the price of electricity and use the proceeds to underwrite the competitiveness of renewable energy. They have proven to work exceptionally well. Regardless of approach, the quicker a safe CO₂ concentration is attained, the quicker claims for unencumbered access to the air can be honored once again but not a moment sooner.

Coal, gas and petroleum interests oppose all this. Electrical utilities do, too. These interests have let Congress know their concerns and have reinforced their message by doubling up on political lobbying. The House Energy and Commerce Committee has responded by weakening the way its proposed cap-and-trade program would work. Friends National Committee on Legislation (FCNL) documents the House bill's structural flaws in an article posted on July 2, 2009. FCNL outlines the ill effects of downstream permitting, generous offset allowances, emission permit giveaways, and procedural rigidities that dictate against future reform.

Committee members understand that a weak bill might not be enough if the EPA can still regulate CO₂ as a pollutant. So the bill would overturn the EPA's regulatory authority over CO₂. Also, it would specifically prohibit EPA from considering CO₂ emissions when permitting thermo-electric power plants.

The unspoken truth is that misinformation and media commentary has helped to contrive a system of belief that precludes from our sense of the common good anything but a few simple totalizing ideas. Likewise, we have excluded from our notion of property rights nearly all reference to common property rights and the claim to freedom from harm.

As we observe current legislative practice, we may distinguish between wise and expedient decision making. Making wise decisions requires an understanding of what causes harm and increases the risk of continued harm. It requires a disciplined sense of justice for those in harm's way. Anything less is an assault on reason and an affront to democracy. Yet, together with a contemporary confusion about what constitutes the common good, we find a sense of helplessness about how to restore wisdom to the public realm.

Legislators are now free to hide behind the current confusion and still claim to be securing the common good of America. Action that genuinely promotes the common good is immediately recognizable and broadly welcomed. But contemporary evidence suggests that, the legislative capacity for such action has been dropped from Congress's current repertoire.

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All Hands on Deck for Copenhagen: Carbon Control and Political Action

Keith Helmuth

To quote an old saw: “Nothing concentrates the mind like the imminent prospect of death” —or, in our collective case, “the vanishing face of Gaia.”

James Lovelock has written a new book with this ominous title, *The Vanishing Face of Gaia*, followed by the subtitle, *A Final Warning*. At ninety years of age, a scientist of Lovelock’s stature is entitled to a “final warning.” But before we accept the post-apocalyptic adaptation strategy that dominates his thinking, we have the opportunity to concentrate our minds and action on the potential of the Copenhagen negotiations in December 2009 for reducing and regulating Global Greenhouse Gas (GGG) emissions.

The Moral Economy Project of Quaker Institute for the Future recently held a Symposium in Montreal on its new book *Right Relationship: Building a Whole Earth Economy*. This event gathered over sixty participants and charged them to critique and develop the ideas and proposals of the book, and to help create a deeply discerned basis for continued outreach and witness. The elephant in the room was, of course, the capital-driven growth economy and its rapidly growing offspring—climate disruption. And right in front of us at all times was the road to Copenhagen, December 2009. This round of international negotiations is seen by the climate science community as the last chance to effectively intervene in the climate disruption and global warming trajectory that is now underway. Beyond this point, the velocity and intensity of climate disruption will likely outrun and overwhelm any future attempt at mitigation. Catastrophic ecological collapse and adaptation failure will emerge in many regions of Earth.

At the last round of GGG negotiations in Bali in 2007, the U.S. and Canadian governments were completely obstructionist until they were shamed, at the last minute, into modifying their stance by an organized deluge of 40,000 emails in one day. (An organizer of this singular political event participated in the Montreal Symposium.) It is critical that the U.S. and Canada, in particular, do a complete about-face at Copenhagen and provide the leadership that puts agreement on carbon emissions into an effective context of global governance.

There is another aspect of the GGG negotiations that is critical but often not well understood—the stake that regions and communities in poverty have in GGG curtailment. These regions need to *increase* their economic development to achieve a decent and secure way of life. This means overdeveloped regions must curtail their material and energy consumption in ways that allow development space for those in poverty. Recognizing and allowing for this differential in GGG regulations has been a major stumbling block in previous negotiations, but doing

so is both strategic and morally essential. Economically poor regions have little incentive to cooperate on GGG regulations if it means they remain trapped in poverty. Global environmental governance has to include certain basic development goals for regions in poverty or no effective agreements will be possible. Without such agreements, we are all on our way to “the vanishing face of Gaia.”

One might look at this and say the global South has a gun to the head of the global North. Precisely! No adequate development space for the South means no adequate global GGG regulations. The South may feel that a mutual suicide pact is better than total disaster for the South while the North continues business as usual.

But beyond this strategic consideration is the huge moral issue of extreme wealth in the midst of persistent poverty. The return of this moral issue, now linked to climate change, raises the question: will the wealthy of the world evolve a new ethic of global cooperation and sharing based on the well-being of the commonwealth of life, or will they continue flying a “two-deck spaceship” (Kenneth Boulding) into dysfunction and breakup? If you were on the lower deck with starving children, and those on the upper deck were feasting, what would you do? In this circumstance, with no prospect of change for the better, and with even meager resources vanishing (often to further enrich those on the upper deck), it would not be irrational to crash the ship.

Tom Athanasiou, one of the foremost researchers and writers on “climate justice,” puts this issue in the following way:

“The climate crisis is fundamentally a crisis of injustice. As such it cannot be understood, let alone mitigated, apart from the poverty and inequality that are its backdrop. ... There’s still time, but not much. If anything is certain, it’s that this coming year, as climate negotiations finally get serious, can’t just be a year of tactics and pragmatism. ... We’ve got to ... deepen the conversation about justice and solidarity. ... What is needed is an emergency global mobilization. And to do its proper part in such a mobilization, the U.S. must shoulder its fair share of the costs, even as it strains with equal vigor on the domestic front. The hope, of course, is that all this effort can be composed into a green New Deal that snowballs into a great transition that not only stabilizes the climate but lifts up the poor as well. ...

“Any true climate mobilization must solve the problem of developmental justice. It must open the ways forward for the poor, and this despite the fact that greenhouse-gas concentrations are already far too high, leaving almost no “atmospheric space” to support energy and food production, water purification, reimagined cities and settlements, transportation, and health services that will be needed if the poor are to have an honest chance at decent lives. Be clear here – if the poor, clustered in the world’s developing regions, don’t see better futures flowing from an international climate accord, then while it may be negotiated and even ratified, it will not stand.” <ecoequity.org>

So who pays? The answer must be “the rich,” or at least “the unpoor,” which is to say that the climate transition will not be cheap, and those who have the capacity to pay must do so. This must be true regardless of whether they live in rich countries like the U.S. or developing countries like China. This won’t be easy to contrive, but it has to be our goal. Nothing else will work.

When we came to the end of our policy workshop at the Montreal Symposium, we had a critical list of specific measures that addressed carbon emissions and the ecological retrofit of the economy. We then asked ourselves, “Now what? What are the next steps? We have a boatload of policies for the road to Copenhagen and beyond, but, as one person put it, what do we do Monday morning?”

We looked at each other around the table and realized this is not a difficult question. There is a clear and straightforward answer—political action. Everyone concerned with this level of moral responsibility and this critical path of change toward a livable world for all peoples and species, can put December on the calendar, and then do everything they can to influence their political representatives to get behind positive, cooperative leadership at Copenhagen.

Here are the stakes: Will the wealthy of the world go into an enclave, self-protectionist mode of adaptation, or into a global equity mode of adaptation? The enclave mode will, by policy, attempt to write off the poor and vulnerable. This way lies resource wars, endless violence and oppression, and accelerating ecological degradation. The global equity mode has the prospect of mutually enhancing regional and cultural relation-

ships and the stabilization of human economic activity within a resilient earth ecology. For this latter outcome the U.S. and Canada, and all other jurisdictions of great wealth, must lead in Copenhagen on an integrated strategy of climate stabilization and poverty elimination.

Obama is reversing the Bush legacy with amazing speed, and, in this, there is hope for Copenhagen. But the American Congress must be brought on board as well, and this is far from settled. The Harper government in Canada remains, as yet, obstructionist and regressive on climate negotiations. Canadians have a hard row to hoe. We all need massive grassroots support to influence our respective governments toward cooperative leadership at Copenhagen.

We all long to do something significant. Now is the moment. Here is the opportunity. It is not inaccurate to say that, in important respects, the quality of the human future, and the future of the biosphere is on the line in Copenhagen. If that seems an exaggeration, so be it. Better to risk exaggeration now than the black hole of regret that will accompany the “vanishing face of Gaia.” If world political leadership succeeds in turning a corner on carbon emissions regulation, our efforts will have helped make it happen. If it fails, we will at least know we did everything we could to support a different and better outcome. Faith can do no less.

Keith Helmuth is a member of New Brunswick Monthly Meeting (Canada) and a member of the Board of Trustees of Quaker Institute for the Future. He is a research associate of the Institute and the coordinator of its Circles of Discernment Program.

What Can Friends Do?

Everyone who cares about children, and all the fauna and flora of Earth should be prompted by their faith and love to take political action on this issue at this time.

- 1) Learn all you can about what is coming up at the Copenhagen negotiations.
- 2) Use all the communications tools at your command to create political and policy leadership for a positive outcome.
- 3) Write letters to your Senators and to your member of the House of Representatives, or, in Canada, your Member of Parliament, asking them to support and work for government leadership in achieving effective greenhouse gas regulations at Copenhagen. Handwritten letters are best. Letters receive a qualitatively different level of attention
- 4) Meet directly with your Congressional representatives, or, as is often the case, with their senior office staff.
- 5) Link up to climate action networks to amplify a growing worldwide voice:
 - Friends Committee on National Legislation <fncn.org>
 - EcoEquity <ecoequity.org>
 - Bill McKibben’s global campaign <350.org>
 - Al Gore’s global campaign <theclimateproject.org>
 - UN Copenhagen websites <en.cop15.dk> and <unfccc.int/2860.php>

than do emails or phone calls. In the U.S., be sure to send your letters to your Congressperson’s local office address. Letters sent to Washington are routed through remote site security screening and are delayed for a month or more.