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Climate change for the common man

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■ outlook: book review

Climate change for the common man

Climate Change for Football Fans

James Atkins; UIT Cambridge, Cambridge, UK, 2011, 255 pp, £8.99, ISBN 978 1 906860 35 6

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Increasingly, old climate policy hands are tending to become desperate (see e.g. Hamilton, 2010) when faced with two decades of international climate policy having little impact on the path of global emissions growth. In Atkins' book, this desperation has been sublimated into such a creative form that I can only recommend it to climate policy buffs for the wee hours of an overnight flight from a UNFCCC conference. Although not a scholarly book, it contains much food for thought. One might disagree with a fair number of the conclusions – which are also neatly summarized as a post-script – but the right questions are asked.

Atkins, who successfully makes money from the market mechanisms of the Kyoto Protocol with his brokerage Ver-tis Environmental Finance, weaves the plot around the tribulations experienced during a whole season of Burnley FC, an English Premier League football team. Despite its decidedly mediocre performance, the club has fervent middle-class supporters who care for climate change. A session in a pub triggers a daring wager in which aging Professor Rowbotham – obsessed by climate issues – bets that he can learn more about football in a season than a Burnley fan (Joe) can about climate policy. As the season progresses, each starts to understand the other's predicaments. The professor experiences narrowly avoiding relegation with Burnley at the last moment, while Joe starts to understand how his behaviour contributes to climate change. The metaphor is clear: we might still manage to resolve the climate problem, but only through dogged determination, at the very last moment and by pure chance.

Although the message is frightening, the book's style is extremely refreshing, and large passages really are

extremely funny, such as the mockery of a UNFCCC negotiation session or the discussion on improving the energy efficiency of a typical English house. Atkins superbly manages to convey the challenges of reaching the proverbial 'man in the street' with complex messages on climate policy. Joe and his Uncle Frank, a successful building entrepreneur who likes big cars, cannot be reached with academic messages about low-carbon lifestyles. However, through persistence, Professor Rowbotham manages to get them to think about their carbon footprint. The resulting heavily slang-laden dialogues are masterpieces.

Atkins' essential message is that climate change impacts warrant immediate, massive action and that human psychology is heavily wired in favour of emissions increases. As the middle class tries to 'keep up with the Joneses' they accumulate goods, and they are so stressed by daily consumerist life that putting effort into the identification of emissions reductions options is completely out of the question. People are mainly driven by instincts, and are dominated by habits and routines developed in childhood. Economic lobbies dominate politics, and democracy does not work as a corrective. Entrepreneurs and the rich have no incentives to engage in emissions reduction. City life has estranged us from nature and thus we do not think about the consequences of our behaviour.

Due to this psychological and political framework, carbon prices just do not elicit a response. Market mechanisms are seen as ineffective, as they would not spur sufficient reductions. This seems a surprising opinion for this author, who earns his living through these mechanisms and should know that the degree of action depends on

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the stringency of the underlying emissions target. Atkins dismisses the UNFCCC as 'unlikely to achieve anything useful whatsoever' (p. 243). Due to the urgency of tackling climate change, Atkins claims, the efficiency of policy instruments should not be seen as relevant, as long as the policy instruments introduced address all emissions sources at the same time. In my view, this is against all economic common sense. Atkins is correct to say that it takes decades to change the infrastructure that causes GHG emissions and thus efforts and credible long-term policies must be implemented soon.

Atkins sees a top-down authoritarian multi-decadal war-like effort, coupled with mandatory exposure of small children to nature, as the only way forward to address climate change; he calls this 'a matter of life and death'. Advertising for emissions-intensive goods and services should be prohibited, and car use should be made much more expensive and the hassles of long-distance travel graphically shown on public advertising. Packaging of meat products should carry photographs of slaughtered animals. A tax exemption should be granted for rich people who publicly engage in a low-carbon lifestyle and thus serve as role models. Ideally, climate policy would need to be condensed into one quintessential message – like the one provided by scoring a goal in football. And this message is not clear.

In my view, Atkins' frightening picture of consumerist human psychology and ineffective policy instruments does not take into account that there are significant

segments of society that underwrite ascetic values, such as active followers of the major religions, who spend their free time in low-emissions cultural pursuits and nature (instead of reckless consumption) and want to attain a balanced life. However, these segments of society seem to be shrinking and need to be actively nurtured. Obtaining utility from cultural uses of leisure time requires high-quality education and a substantial investment in time (Grant, 2010).

Moreover, there is ample empirical evidence that prices induce behavioural changes. Although the free-rider nature of climate change is a serious cause for concern, I would not want to see a 'climate dictatorship' take away our civil freedoms and engage in compulsory re-education. Let us engage in civilized policy instruments first. However, I agree with Atkins in that we cannot wait forever for climate policy instruments to bear fruit and to actually see the emissions curves bend downwards.

If only more carbon traders would write books like this, the climate policy world would be both a funnier and more self-reflective environment. . . and, hopefully, the man in the street might read and like the book too.

References

- Grant, L., 2010, 'Sustainability: from excess to aesthetics', *Behavioral and Social Issues* 19, 5–45.
Hamilton, C., 2010, *Requiem for a Species*, Earthscan, London.