

Opinion: Time of useful consciousness

August 5 2015

Pilots know that there is a brief window of time between losing oxygen and passing out, a period in which some life-saving action is possible. With climate change, we are at that moment now. As climate destabilisation gathers pace, balanced democratic decision-making in many countries will become more difficult, and short-term palliatives will prevail over more rational long-term mitigation strategies.

This country has spent most of the last twenty-five years dithering on [climate change](#). Inaction poses an increasing risk to New Zealand's reputation. We are lagging behind in action and in planning to address climate change, and this is being noticed by our international partners. In advance of the UN [climate summit](#) in Paris this December, New Zealand has proposed a weak mitigation offer that has rightly been dismissed as 'inadequate' by Climate Action Tracker, a highly credible group of European policy analysts.

Now, with Mr Obama's latest clean power plan, the pressure on all countries to act is ratcheting up.

A reputation as a good international citizen carries weight. I know from personal experience in helping to negotiate the Kyoto Protocol, some years ago, that New Zealand can be effective in encouraging other nations to act in the common interest. The recent publication of a global soft power index in The Economist shows New Zealand scoring well on the 'ability to coax and persuade'—we are not irrelevant when it comes to diplomacy, or in our capacity to act as a global conscience.

But we can make no claim to being a useful global conscience if we are falling behind in addressing climate change. Where is New Zealand's comprehensive low-emissions strategy? Even where we are not behind, such as in our use of renewable electricity, the Government offers feeble excuses for inaction. It is illogical to claim that, because our electricity is already largely renewable, we cannot do more. We can. Take wind power, for example. New Zealand has about 700 MW of wind installed and this generates about 5% of our total electricity output over a year. But an additional 2,000 MW is consented, and still has not been built. Pushing ahead with these wind projects, now, might increase New Zealand's wind power to over 15% of total electricity output, an amount that would bring us much closer to the 100% renewable ideal.

One of the main reasons renewable electricity is not being developed more quickly is the low carbon price on gas and coal, a laughable \$7 per tonne of CO₂. This could be lifted to around \$50 per tonne by, for example, the Government introducing a rising floor price in the emissions trading system (ETS). This price would be in line with estimates of the 'social cost of carbon' (the damage caused by carbon emissions). With such a floor, it is likely the remaining coal power plant at Huntly would close, for example. The price of electricity would rise marginally, but carbon emissions would fall.

Real progress requires positive action by both central and local government. The momentum for this is building, but it must be accelerated. A fundamental danger posed by New Zealand's policy stance on climate change is that our inaction will add to a sense of global powerlessness in the face of climate change, perpetuating indecisiveness at precisely the moment when it is most critical to act. The scientific evidence is now absolutely compelling about the urgent need to act on climate change. Increasingly ominous warnings have been sounded by many, from the World Bank to the International Energy Agency. These point to climate change as intensifying the threat to global security.

Every country, no matter how small, should be taking urgent action. We need to do our absolute best to cut emissions over the critical next two decades, or we run the medium-term risk of the international community starting to fracture under the stress of growing climate destabilisation. It is time for robust policy from a Government that no longer says 'we can't do much more', but says instead, 'we will do everything we must'.

More information: *The commentary is provided by associate professor Ralph Chapman, the Director of the Graduate Programme in Environmental Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, and the author of Time of Useful Consciousness: Acting Urgently on Climate Change.*

Provided by Victoria University

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