

An analysis of politicians' understanding, conceptualisation and responses to rapid environmental change

This research will examine the implications of rapid environmental change for political theory and practice. It will link theoretical insights with empirical research, analysing the knowledge, views and values of UK politicians. It will examine why political theory and practice has yet to respond to rapid environmental change, and explore what strategies could help politicians begin an honest examination of, and response to, the issue.

The context: political responses to rapid environmental change

Rapid environmental change is with us now. Average global temperatures are increasing, and the risk of abrupt shifts in climate has also increased considerably. (IPPC 2013) Anthropogenic climate change, together with other, linked human impacts on ecosystems, biochemical cycles and so on, has led scientists to argue that we are overshooting 'planetary boundaries' (Rockström 2009) and that as a result, we have entered a new geological age, the Anthropocene, characterised by pervasive human impact on earth systems and potential for abrupt change, with far-reaching consequences for human society (Steffen 2011).

Yet politics remains unmoved. Notwithstanding some heroic efforts by individual politicians and parties, it is hard to find a political system that is seriously debating the consequences of rapid environmental change, let alone suggesting a way to tackle these new realities. Since 2009, I have worked with UK Members of Parliament, through Green Alliance's Climate Leadership Programme, introducing them to the science, policy and politics of climate change. A striking finding from this Programme is that, even when the politicians understand the significance of the science, they struggle to fit this new knowledge into their political outlook (Willis 2013). The main debates - justice, redistribution, the role of the state and the market, health, education and foreign policy – are still about how humans relate to each other. The bigger issue, that all this human politics depends on a stable natural environment, and that we are endangering this stability, rarely surfaces.

Very little research has examined the views, values and motivations of practising politicians, to find out why this might be. Reasons may include, first, a political tradition that has, since earliest times, defined the domain of the human and the political as separate from the natural world (O'Neill 2007). Modern politics developed at a time when one could largely assume the backdrop of a stable natural environment, enabling agriculture, providing abundant natural resources, and absorbing wastes. Second, confronting rapid environmental change is problematic in a society which, in effect, functions as a complex high-carbon system, and where meaningful solutions pose a challenge to dominant values and institutions (Urry 2011). Third, and linked, there is limited public pressure to act: in Latour's terms, rapid environmental change is not yet a 'political issue' (Latour 2007). No matter how strong the scientific evidence, or how compelling the solutions, unless an issue is articulated and supported by a public, it will not become political. As Marres writes, "No issue, no politics" (2005). If anything, climate change denial has a cohesive public, and is more akin to an 'issue' in this sense – despite the science (Antonio 2011).

However, it is not at all clear whether these *are* indeed the reasons for politicians' lack of attention to rapid environmental change. Discussions about political strategy happen in private. Speeches, campaigns and manifestos are all the public products

of private deliberations. To understand why politicians do what they do, we need to ask them, rather than just looking at their public output. This is the central focus of the research proposal.

The focus of this research

The research will focus on politicians' understanding of, and responses to, rapid environmental change. There has been a great deal of research examining technical and social responses: design of trading schemes for pollutants; strategies to change behaviour; blueprints for zero-carbon energy systems. Yet very little research has examined the political strategies that will be needed to implement these solutions (Wiseman 2013).

This research will link academic enquiry with my professional experience to analyse three central, linked questions:

1. What are the implications of rapid environmental change for politics in the UK?
2. How do politicians conceptualise rapid environmental change, and how do they consider whether it should be incorporated into their political strategy?
3. What are the impediments to the mainstreaming of rapid environmental change as an issue, and how can these be overcome?

The research method is designed as a dialogue between theory and practice. It will contribute toward the need identified for a "meaningful research agenda to acknowledge the profound implications of the advent of the Anthropocene epoch". (Palsson 2013) It builds on the work of Urry (2011) highlighting the need for a linked political and sociological understanding of rapid environmental change; and Clark (2011) calling for better social science engagement with the physical sciences – something that is central to the mission of the Lancaster Environment Centre. It will contribute to the ESRC / EPSRC DEMAND Centre at Lancaster; I have an affiliation as an adviser to this Centre, which examines the underlying social dynamics of resource-intensive systems.

The empirical work will employ a mixed methods approach in two stages: first, a wider study of the political structures within which rapid environmental change is (or isn't) considered; and second, a narrower, detailed study of the expectations, views and strategies of the politicians themselves.

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