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Governing Nature and Global Governance

Introduction

Global climate change challenges many of the structures, processes and practices of the international political community and threatens the key political visions, beliefs and practices that underpin the roles and capacities of core actors. As argued in Chapter 2, the political structures and institutions arising from consensus-based decision-making processes will not achieve effective, efficient or timely international climate change responses (Stern, 2009). While slow responses sometimes arise from a lack of political will, it is more often the case that policymakers become caught in uncertainties concerning risk assessments and fluctuating prospects of effectively managing changed practices (Young, 2002). The political impacts of global climate change go beyond the consequences they pose for the forms, locations and distributions of human societies and their centres of production. They challenge core political values and ideals that seem fitting for the most significant set of issues yet to have faced human civilisations. Problematically, the prospect that existing core political values are challenged by global climate change is a dawning realisation that few political actors readily accept and acknowledge.

We can no longer afford to overlook or ignore the importance of political structures and institutions to achieve effective mitigation and adaptation strategies. The levels at which greenhouse gas emissions targets are set, and whether or not they are achieved, and/or are regarded as tradable commodities are important to how greenhouse emissions will be reduced and how global energy production continues (Stern, 2009; Hoffman and Hoffman, 2008). Identifying who will support or limit such initiatives presents additional political issues that also require
urgent attention. Climate change policy outcomes will be affected by the status and capacities of those who enter into international agreements and the means by which they follow through in seeking to 'keep their promises' (O'Neill, 2009; Young, 2002).

Effective responses to mitigate the worst consequences of global climate change rely upon global governance mechanisms that commit states to more responsible courses of action. Achieving these will rely upon collective agreements and effective authorities to ensure that internationally agreed targets are met. Orderly and equitable mitigation strategies cannot simply be achieved through broadly based agreements concerning shared responsibilities and common goals of ensuring the longevity of human societies. Such goals necessitate changed international approaches to economic and social policies, including new structures for resolving contested interests (United Nations Development Programme, 2008; Najam, 2005b).

Incorporating ethical approaches into international decision-making and state-based authority structures will be an important component of effective global climate change responses. New political visions and international structures rely upon new ethical principles including new means of determining the legitimate status of states and other international structures (Eckersley, 2004). Lengthy re-negotiations between diverse actors will be required to enable joint agreements and the adoption of new practices. Like all major transformations in international politics, these changes will occur over a long period, emerging through the adoption of new customs and accepted behaviours (Edmondson, 2009; Nelson, 2009). This is part of the political context within which individual states and the international political community confront the challenges of identifying new ways of managing their rates of energy consumption, methods of production and environmental exploitation.

Creating the political conditions under which global governance might be achieved requires continuing persistence by those best equipped to demonstrate political leadership and patience among those whose lives are beginning to be directly impacted by climate change. The international political community is not without precedent in establishing collective means of managing environmental problems that cross territorial boundaries. However, many of the agreements currently in place impact upon only limited sectors of production within particular states, or require modest supporting domestic legislation. Additionally, many of these agreements were formed by relatively small groups of states seeking to address regional problems (O’Neill, 2009).