

Reply to Davenport on Climate Change

March 29, 2014

In a posting on March 4, 2014 **Nicholas Davenport** criticizes me for “a misunderstanding of activists’ arguments against carbon trading and, more fundamentally, a lack of attention to the dynamic of reform and revolution.”

Regarding Reform and Revolution: I will not bother to defend myself on this subject here at any length. I have been thinking about, writing about, and practicing the art of working for system reform and system change simultaneously for more than forty years. At this point in my life I have come to the conclusion that once a person comes to the conclusion that system change is necessary to fully solve problems they often become schizophrenic and lose their common sense about why people fight for reforms.

As much as leftists may try to convince those whom reforms will benefit that they truly do want a reform to work, many leftists are actually pleased when reforms do not work — because that proves them right, system change is necessary! What this attitude fails to account for is that the vast majority of the population does not support system change except in revolutionary moments. Moreover, the only way a majority will come to the conclusion that we in the leftist minority have already arrived at, is to work hard for reforms within the system and discover for themselves that they are still dissatisfied with the results. Some will become dissatisfied when they discover a reform they win only partially solves a problem. Some will become dissatisfied when they discover that the reform is at risk of being rolled back as long as the system is left in place. And some will become dissatisfied because the process of fighting alongside others for democracy, justice, or sustainability will expand their vision of what is possible and render them incapable of settling for anything less than a system that serves, rather than obstructs these goals. And that, my erudite leftist comrades, is all there is to the not-so-complicated “dynamic of reform and revolution”!

Regarding Carbon Trading: Davenport misunderstands my criticism of activists’ rejection of carbon trading. I have never defended the European Emissions Trading System (ETS) nor the American Clean Energy and Security Act (ACES) – both of which were riddled with counterproductive features industry lobbyists bribed and bullied weak-willed politicians to include. Nor have I ever criticized sound criticisms of the ETS and ACES – the best of which come from professional critics unencumbered by leftist mythology about what carbon trading does or does not do.

What I have criticized are leftists who reject carbon trading in any context or form; leftists who, even after a cap on global emissions is set low enough to prevent climate change, and even after remaining global emissions are distributed fairly among all countries, would still refuse to support emission trading; leftists whose criticisms of carbon trading *in this context* don’t hold water, but are in fact incompetent and “ill-informed.”

In any case, Davenport acknowledges all I require when he writes: “Hahnel is no doubt aware of the inadequacies of these cap-and-trade proposals.” [Yes, I am.] And: “His proposal does not share these problems—rather, it’s based on social justice and climate science.” [In which case I think Davenport should agree with me, instead of continuing to quibble.]

A Fair Shares Climate Campaign: When those who want system change – people who call themselves radicals or revolutionaries — and those who want to reform the system – people who realize the system needs reforming, but are opposed to or agnostic about the necessity or wisdom of system change — play nicely together, both do far better than when we bicker. It is long past time to put

aside squabbling over what are at this point mostly non-existent carbon trading programs and unite on a campaign all can support.

The glimmer of hope that emerged from an otherwise discouraging spectacle at the COP 19 meetings in Warsaw was that countries voted to announce publicly by the end of the first quarter of 2015 the level of emissions they individually pledge to commit to achieve by 2020. *This gives us a golden opportunity to mount an international **Fair Shares Climate Campaign** pointing out how much each country **should** pledge to reduce emissions, so delegates can agree to a treaty that makes fair reductions mandatory at the COP 21 meetings in Paris in December 2015.*

A civil society *Fair Shares Climate Campaign* can provide strong public support for governments making reasonable pledges and put intense international pressure on governments whose pledges are palpably unfair to increase their pledges. In short, it can provide a new focus uniting all groups in civil society who continue to put time and energy into trying to pressure international negotiations at annual COP meetings to approve an effective treaty that is fair before it is too late.

What level of global emissions must be achieved by 2020 to avoid an unacceptable risk of cataclysmic climate change? Three widely discussed global pathways – a strong 2 degrees Celsius, a weak 2 degree Celsius, and a G8 pathway – nicely span the range of global emission reductions under discussion. What is a fair distribution among countries of 2020 global emissions? There is now a body of working knowledge that allows us to make a compelling case for what a fair distribution of any global reduction among countries looks like. The Greenhouse Development Rights “Equity Reference Framework” provides one compelling way to quantify the criteria that were unanimously agreed to by delegates at the initial “Earth Summit” in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and have been re-affirmed at every COP since, as what must be considered when addressing fairness – historic “responsibility” for having created the problem, and current “capability” of contributing to its solution. The EcoEquity calculator, available to anyone at www.ecoequity.org, allows users to select key parameters and calculate immediately the fair emission pathways they imply for any country, or group of countries. Fortunately, most choices for parameters do not generate widely different estimates of fair emission pathways for most countries. In other words, just as we have a broad consensus among climate scientists regarding different global emission pathways, we now have a broad consensus among climate equity experts on what a fair distribution of responsibilities for reducing emissions among countries looks like. *This means it is now possible for civil society organizations to explore and identify a range of emission pathways for each country that are fair.*

There is growing support for a *Fair Shares Climate Campaign* from major players like Oxfam, the World Wildlife Fund International, and Friends of the Earth International, from broad coalitions such as the Climate Action Network International, from faith-based organizations such as Christian Aid and the APRODEV network, and from many organizations in Third World Network circles. A Fair Share Campaign facilitates the broadest possible alliance and can appeal to organizations who may disagree about other issues and tactics. Membership in the coalition would be contingent only on support for fair pledges and condemnation of pledges that are demonstrably unfair.

So where is the disagreement? Davenport writes: “To his credit, Hahnel does not water down his proposal in order to make it palatable to the capitalist class and the politicians that serve them. He insists that a global cap-and-trade scheme would have mandatory emissions caps for all countries based on science, differential emissions caps based on principles of global justice, and enforcement mechanisms to prevent cheating and bogus carbon credits. It’s a principled proposal.” So what is Davenport’s criticism? He writes: “The problem is that, in order to keep it principled, [Hahnel] must put so many conditions on cap-and-trade that it might as well be a revolutionary demand.” While this is good sound bite, it actually makes no sense.

My program is one that an overwhelming majority of people on the planet, including a large minority in the US, could be won to support over the next year and a half. Unfortunately that cannot be said for an ecosocialist revolution – as leaders of organizations like Oxfam, World Wildlife Fund International, Friends of the Earth International, the Climate Action Network International, and Christian Aid understand about their constituencies, even if the far left does not. Between now and the COP 21 meetings in Paris at the end of 2015 a united global climate justice movement could win majority support for the *Fair Shares Climate Campaign* program. And that is who we are addressing – the majority of people on the planet. We are not addressing the ruling elites who respond only to power, not persuasion, as Davenport would be the first to confirm.

What would we discover if we polled a thousand random people in the US and asked them to answer two questions? (1) Do you support mandatory emission reductions for all countries that are effective and fair? (2) Do you support an ecosocialist revolution? As much as Davenport – or I! – might wish that as many would answer “yes” to the second question as to the first, I do not think that is what a poll would reveal.

*Disclaimer: A Fair Shares Climate Campaign is **not** intended to be a substitute for other campaigns currently being waged. In the US it is not a substitute for campaigns to stop the XL pipeline, the campaign to stop coal trains from Wyoming and Montana across Idaho, Washington, and Oregon, campaigns to stop fracking in the East and Midwest, campaigns for a domestic Green New Deal, and efforts to forge a more productive “blue-green alliance” between environmental and labor organizations. Nor does support for a *Fair Shares Climate Campaign* prevent ecosocialists from preaching against the evils of capitalism and the virtues of ecosocialism — to change the outcome of popular polls gaging support for system change in the future. This campaign would simply be a way to unite climate activists around the world now in a campaign that directly addresses international negotiations. It gives activists in every country a way to demonstrate to their fellow citizens whether their government is, or is not, making a fair share pledge leading up to COP 21 in Paris, and ties them to similar groups working in every other country. Any leftist who has stood up against imperialism in the past should have no trouble standing up for a solution to climate change that is fair, and not at the expense of the usual global victims.*