John Adams

Re: Public Consultation on New Zealand's Post 2020 Climate Change Target

Scene setting

My name is John Adams and I am a middle aged professional male with a family, a job and a mortgage. That's all pretty normal. I understand science and I understand human greed; so I can see how the two are out of balance. I understand about the finite nature of resources on the planet and the impossibility of continuing exponential growth. I understand that climate change is a symptom of the social illness that is caused by greed and manifests as the political willingness to sacrifice anything for “growth”. In fact I understand far too much to be taken in by the stale rhetoric of the current government.

The government has made the claim that this consultation is part of a “national conversation” on climate change and our collective response to it. But the government is lying again:

- The document is prejudiced in favour of economic growth over real action;
- The document has received zero publicity from the Minister, any Ministry or the media;
- The timeframe for the “public meetings” was absurdly tight;
- The timeframe for submissions is absurdly tight;
- No politicians have fronted at the meetings to defend the indefensible;
- In keeping with the Government’s desire to marginalise issues as “environmentalism”, the process has been left to the MfE; clearly a whole-of-government approach is required.
- Whatever is submitted will have to be filtered through Mr. Grosser before it reaches Cabinet;
- The Prime Minister has already stated his opinion (in Parliament) that a 40% cut in emissions is too much.

So we are asked to take part in a secretive and un-democratic process to comment on biased material and to make suggestions knowing that the outcome is already decided.

The whole process is reminiscent of Soviet Russia.

The Questions Raised

It is in the nature of the process of analysing public submissions that comments will be removed from their contextual introduction and placed alongside comments from other submitters on the same topic. Thus I will use the framework as established by the MfE.
1a Objective (i) Fair & Ambitious at home and abroad

The PM has already stated his intention that our INDC should be less than 40% - presumably he was referring to the 1990 baseline figure. Unfortunately for him, such a target fails on the counts of both “fair” and “ambitious”. The concept of fair would need to include some recognition of NZ’s high per capita emissions and the relatively high historic use from our country. It would need to reflect the genuine difficulties that some other nations will have in reaching their targets and therefore commit NZ to doing a generously determined fair share. It would need to acknowledge that NZ is currently going in the wrong direction on emissions and has failed to plan to reverse that trajectory. It would need to acknowledge that the ETS has been a predictable disaster although it continues to be used as a fig leaf of a policy. All of this would be fair – none of it has been raised in the discussion document or factored in by the PM’s glib comments in parliament.

For NZ to set a target that could qualify as “ambitious” we would need to fully and philosophically accept the science and humanity’s brief window of opportunity to redress the situation. We would need to re-direct governmental and societal energy to reducing emissions. We would need, as a nation, to accept the implications of a “state of war” type of response. But the government, and the authors of the discussion document would like us only to be ambitious as far as it doesn’t impact on their precious economic data.

YES, this target needs to be fair, YES it needs to be ambitious, YES it needs to be enshrined in legislation, YES the plans and policies needed to reach the target need to be the subject of a cross party agreement, YES we need a genuine national conversation on all of this but NO, the current document does not raise to any of those standards.

1a Objective (ii) Costs & Impacts

There is an implication in the wording of the question that the costs might not be borne equally. That would no doubt be the preference of the ruling elite – they have largely avoided the whole “polluter pays” principle in the past and I have no doubt they would seek to do so again. Any costs should be carried by those who have benefited the most from reliance on fossil fuels / expansion of dairying / felling of forests. Any benefits should be share fairly throughout society.

1a Objective (iii) Guide

I am uncertain if this question should be taken seriously; is it reasonable to imagine that a target would NOT guide us in the future? When we have a fair and ambitious target, inevitably it will guide our actions.

The real danger of this question is in raising the issue of the "long term". No. What we need here is sudden, significant and sustained action. Many actions see below for a selection) could have been started years ago and many should be started ahead of the Paris meeting. Yes we will need long term actions, but more urgently we need short term actions.

1b Most Important

When the INDC has been agreed it must inform and underpin all actions of society at every level. We will expect to hear no more of the nonsense we currently suffer of decisions being taken for "economic" reasons – instead emissions reduction will become the one
motivating factor driving decisions at the individual, family, community, council, national and international levels. Nothing less is acceptable.

2 Fair Contribution

Previous targets set in NZ were weak and have not been met because the Government gave them no mana and refused to put in place a plan. So any target agreed by NZ and taken forward to Paris will only be as meaningful as the government’s willingness to meet those targets. In the firm belief that the current government will have no part to play in the effective future management of the country I suggest the following targets.

- 40% below 1990 emissions by 2030
- Zero emissions by 2050
- Accelerating net absorption of all GHGs thereafter.

There have been various attempts over the years to pretend that the whole problem could be solved by creative accounting. To reduce this possibility effective and independent monitoring will be needed. Similarly, there is to be no cheating by "buying" credits on an international market. That possibility should be reserved for those developing countries which lack our affluence and opportunity.

3 Cost

It is a disgrace that the discussion document was released containing the obvious distortions of cost that it did. Staff at the public meeting were unable to defend the absence of information about the cost of inaction or the benefits of action. The Minister didn’t even try. It has subsequently been revealed that Treasury had some suitable numbers but they were not included. What further evidence could the public need of the lack of Government good faith in the whole consultation process?

This is not a situation where we are in a position to say “I’ll do the right thing until I’ve spent too much”. We will do the right thing and we will continue to do the right thing. The alternative is the demise of civilization. The implication from the document is that the Government would be happy to see the end of civilization as long as it didn’t affect their growth figures in the next quarter.

4 Opportunities

The text on page 15 and referred to in this question lacks any sort of coherence or vision. As the public meetings have shown, there is no shortage of ideas from the public on steps that should be taken (should have been taken long ago) to reverse the trajectory of our emissions. Here are a few of my personal favourites:

1. Amend the RMA to require consideration of the effects of proposals on climate change.
2. Replace the ETS with a “fee and tariff” system with a high and predictably rising cost on carbon.
3. Mandate the green star standard for all new residential and commercial buildings.
4. Increase the funding and political standing of the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Authority.
5. Accelerate the move to 100% renewable electricity by building those projects which are currently consented.
6. Plan for the closure of all NZ coal mining operations as each one reaches the end of its current consent.
7. Close the plants which are generating electricity from fossil fuels as the renewable options come on stream.
8. Immediately stop all onshore and offshore oil and gas exploration.
9. Halt the sale of prospecting / exploration rights for fossil fuels.
10. Transfer funding from the Roads of National Significance programme to urban active and public transport.
11. Prohibit further expansion in the dairy industry.
12. Require statutory organisations (e.g. schools, hospitals, council facilities) to convert their energy supplies to renewables such as electricity and wood waste.
13. Set up an Independent Climate Commission such as exists in the United Kingdom. This makes the issue of climate change less politicised by having an authoritative independent voice in the debate.
14. Create a New Zealand Climate Change Act (such as already exists in the United Kingdom) that puts national emissions targets in domestic law and requires every government to produce credible plans and follow them. This will show other countries that we are serious.
15. Create a cross-party climate working group to create stable climate policy that will not change every time there is a change in government. Climate change is a problem that will take more than a three year term to fix and will affect everyone for their entire lives. Creating solid climate policy will also allow businesses to make long-term decisions and therefore attract investment in low-carbon industries and innovation to New Zealand.

5 Future

There is no lack technologies or of ingenuity to solve the problems that we face. Currently there is an abject lack of leadership. When leaders are prepared to lead on genuine issues, technologies and social change will happen swiftly and spontaneously. Currently or Government is obstructing the progress we all need to embrace a more optimistic future.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit. I can only trust that the Government will realise the scale of its’ current failures on this issue and respond with a total change of emphasis, approach and paradigm.

In the same vein I trust that the process of reviewing submissions is fair & transparent. It has looked so far as if the Government has no genuine interest in the contributions of the public. I hope that we are about to see a total change in the government’s understanding of the concept of participatory democracy. I hope that all submissions will be made public, so that we can all learn what has influenced the final decision.

John Adams. Christchurch NZ June 2015