Consultation on setting New Zealand's post-2020 climate change target

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Objectives for the contribution

Do you agree with these objectives for our contribution? Yes

1b. What is most important to you?
That government should begin to take this issue far more seriously. There is increasing evidence that negative feedback mechanisms (such as increased cloud cover as a byproduct of higher atmospheric temperatures causes increased reflectance of solar radiation) which have so far worked in our favour by at least partially mitigating the effects of increasing greehouse gas emmissions are increasingly being replaced by positive feedbacks which will dramatically worsen the impacts (e.g. melting icecaps leads to replacement of expanses of reflective white snow & ice with more and more dark absorbitive ocean). There is a serious risk of runaway temperature rises beyond our worst nightmares - potentially settling in a new equilibrium from which there may be no hope of return.

What would be a fair contribution for New Zealand?

2. What do you think the nature of New Zealand's emissions and economy means for the level of target that we set?
The background booklet is far too pessimistic about the costs of mitigating climate change. We should follow Nicholas Stern's advice that starting immediately with small steps to reduce our carbon footprint will mitigate green house emmissions while having manageably minor impacts on the economy. By delaying and delaying we may find that the necessary actions to reach our targets have become so much larger that they may pose a risk to the economy. If only we had implemented a real 1% per capita reduction in green house emmissions every year for 25 years from 1990 to 2015 we would by now have reduced emmissions by a cumulative 30% with negligible impact on the economy (wheras of course emmissions have meantime increased by even more than this). Because of a quarter century of procrastination we now need to look at rates of reduction more like 2% over the next 25 years to 2040. So be it - more than this may risk stalling the economy but 2% does seem manageable when you consider that this is not about shrinking the economy but about substituting new ways of doing things - e.g more energy efficient buildings and transport, more compact urban form in our cities, etc. It is not good enough to set some vague goal for mid century (10 elections or more away) - whatever goal we set must have incremental (annual?) targets along the way with regular reports to parliament and the people.
As to agricultural emmissions such as methane it is obvious on a number of fronts that we should cap the national dairy herd about where it is. As Mike Joy has well demonstrated - our farmers could actually make more income with smaller herds requiring less inputs (less fertilisers, less irrigation - both of which require energy). So the methane argument is not all about clever science which may one day reduce emmissions per animal - but rather about curbing growth in the number of bovine emmitters.

How will our contribution affect New Zealanders?

3. What level of cost is appropriate for New Zealand to reduce it's greenhouse gas emissions? For example, what

would be a reasonable reduction in annual household consumption?
Government should (but unfortunately shows no inclination to) work together with other parties to work towards a nation-wide consensus on mitigating climate change - to deliberately de-politicise the issue so that we can have consistent policies through the decades ahead with broad (if not completely unanimous) public support. Only once that is in place can we have a serious national conversation about issues like reducing household consumption which will be a key ingredient to achieving a significant cut in emmissions. Consistent with my suggestion above we could have a long term goal of achieving a 2 % cut in emmissions each year - about half from improved efficiency and the other half (1%) through reduced consumption. But this has to be done by consent - hence my strong argument for a national consensus as an essential first step.

4. Of the opportunities for New Zealand to reduce its emissions (as outlined on page 15 of the discussion document), which do you think are the most likely to occur, or be most important for New Zealand?
Urban transport is an obvious one - improved public transport could move 85% reliance on cars to say 70% within say 20 years and 50% by mid century. Electric cars will make a contribution to domestic emmissions reduction but they are expensive and the energy cost of maufacturing them on the other side of the planet does need to be factored in. Further work on making buildings more energy efficient (especially retrofitting of existing houses by insulation and double glazing) would also help - and could be seen as a trade-off with people living in more comfortable houses in return for modest reductions in consumption.

Summary

5. How should New Zealand take into account the future uncertainties of technologies and costs when setting its target?
I think that we should not make any assumptions about future technologies which may or may not eventuate. For example hydrogen fuel cells have been much hyped but would require an expensive new distribution network throughout the country to be a practical substitute for petrol/diesel driven vehicles. My suggestion is that we will be struggling to achieve the sort of climate change goals we need to set so rather than easing off the pressure now in hope of some miraculous technological fix in the future, we need to set present goals based on proven technology. If various new technologies arise in future that assist with our climate change goals then that would be a welcome bonus that will hopefully make life more comfortable in future but there is no way we should be making important policy decisions now on the basis of predictions that may not pan out, or ingenious science fiction propositions that may or may not be realised as a reality at some uncertain future time.

Other comments

6. Is there any further information you wish the Government to consider? Please explain.
One principle I would like our government to consider is what might be called "reciprocal recognition" of the steps taken by other governments. Many governments are selfishly but understandably concerned about being "punished" by their voters if they adopt climate change measures that are perceived as damaging their domestic employment, inflation, interest rates, etc., particularly if they are cast (whether by their political opponents or big business) as having moved ahead of other nations/economies. The argument is that it would be foolish for "our" government to move ahead of others but this has then become an excuse for inaction until there is unanimity - but the only thing that all (or even most) governments will agree on is likely to be so watered down and compromised as to be ineffectual. So my plea is for our government to argue for the principle that all governments (regardless of their own level of commitment) should recognise the efforts of those who are prepared to make deeper cuts in emmissions. There are some (quite a few) governments who are prepared to unilaterally move earlier than others but fear that they may be caught out by some future international agreement (when things are looking even more desperate) requiring all nations to take action from a common starting year which would potentially be very unfair to those countries that had acted early and made a significant cut to their emmissions while others did much less.

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