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Submission on Climate Change Contribution Consultation

I ask you to adopt a minimum target of a 40% reduction in net emissions below 1990 levels by 2030 – the minimum contribution required to keep us under 2 degrees global warming.

The Government consultation document treats action on climate change as a cost, whereas failure to take action is actually the cost. Treasury found that if New Zealand continues on its current trajectory of increasing emissions, the cost to taxpayers of even a modest 5% reduction target will be up to \$52 billion. The more we lower our emissions the more we will reduce this cost.

Climate change is a threat to our economy and the things it most depends on, like tourism and farming. Our agricultural nation depends on a stable climate. Our farmers will suffer increased droughts and damaging storms and profits will suffer.

Responding to climate change is worth our while. The New Climate Economy Report released in 2014 by a team of internationally renowned economists, led by Lord Nicholas Stern, found that countries can improve their economic performance while cutting emissions. The Chair of the Bank of America, the head of the OECD, the World Bank, the Vice Chair of Deutsche Bank, and many others, endorsed this finding.

I request that you stop downplaying our responsibility for climate change saying New Zealand is too small to make a difference. It's not in our national character to sit on the fence and watch others get the job done.

It's time for us to do the right thing again. We were the first to give women the vote. We stood behind our Pacific neighbours in rejecting nuclear testing. Now's our chance to create a climate plan that New Zealanders can be proud to stand behind, and that starts with a target of reducing emissions by at least 40% by 2030.

Other Comments:

Sometimes we really, really need our government to step up for the collective long term benefit of the country – something which is not synchronised with the populist expediency of the three year electoral cycle.

Something in fact that will find a place in recorded history in the future. Something more significant than Julius Vogel's public works programme of the 1870s, extending votes to women in the 1890s, the inauguration of welfare in the 1930s and the nuclear free policies of the 1980s.

Such a subject crying out for attention is climate change. No more the elephant in the room but a real and rampaging threat, if not directly to us, then clearly to our children, grand children and generations yet unborn.

Are we individually and collectively to stand by, ignoring the extreme weather events which are already occurring with increasing frequency, the rising sea levels (undeniably around 20 centimeters in a century, and forecast at an ever increasing rate as Antarctic ice melts), the acidification of the oceans (from absorbed CO2) and the loss of environment, habitat and biodiversity, and say to future generations that we could have

helped but did nothing.

It is possible some people may be contemplating their modest sections becoming beachfront as sea levels rise (and just how do planners countenance buildings at Onetangi just a few metres from present high tide levels) but the reality is that future economic losses will be enormous.

Already Pacific island people are being driven from their islands while new super storms create havoc with infrastructure, destroying property and taking lives. The whole American city of Miami is built on a gravel plain and indefensible from rising sea levels – water will simply percolate under any seawalls or dykes and bubble up in the streets. The ancient city of Venice already floods and coastal erosion is threatening many seaside communities world wide, including in New Zealand, while the storm that hit Auckland in 2011, flooding shops, homes and roads, was reportedly far worse than a similar 1930s event because of higher sea levels. On current predictions nearly a fifth of the land area of Bangladesh will be inundated by 2050 and 18 million people will be displaced. There will be a tsunami of climate change refugees.

For now the only impact of the coming maelstrom for most of us is the elevation of insurance premiums, maybe the rejection of insurance in some areas, and perhaps the slightly guilty feeling filling the SUV or accepting plastic bags from the supermarket. But who gives careful thought to our wanton throw away society where the packaging is often arguably worth more than the contents – think drink bottles – where perfectly good bikes end up in the Waiheke inorganic collection with only flat tyres (true!) and where economic parameters are set at more of this and more of that and more of everything else. What we must do is move towards a richer society which consumes less.

Yet we have a government which pins its faith on motorways and more oil. It palms us off with platitudes and justifies extreme agriculture with talk about feeding the world as if that is the excuse for destroying it. It will only move when others do and it has no plan B – a policy, one fears, significantly influenced by industrial interest lobbying and the wish not to alienate powerful friends, not to mention the farming sector which is anxious about where the future may go. This petrol-head philosophy puts cars ahead of public transport; bulk export commodities ahead of technological innovation and heads in the sand over climate change.

It is left to a few far seeing individuals to explore green technologies – think solar hot water heating, almost universal in Turkey and already common in some European countries with less available sunshine, or photovoltaic panels to feed back into the grid which is positively encouraged in some overseas jurisdictions. New Zealand, already blessed with its 80 percent hydro and other sustainable power generation, could be a world leader in these evolving technologies. Yet beyond home insulation and a bit of agriculture research there seems little government encouragement to go beyond a world of fossil fuels. And in that respect the current sharp fall in the price of oil, while welcome relief for household budgets, is bad news for the climate. Yes, a slowing down in global growth may provide more time for the climate but governments terrified of losing competitive advantage will resist the profound changes needed if our planet is to remain habitable. And with cheaper oil in the short term consumption increases and people build yet more motor vehicle travel into their lives.

Yet how should petrol ever be cheaper than milk in this country?

That actually doing something meaningful about climate change is an urgent problem is clearly stated in the latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and significantly Barack Obama and Chinese leader Xi Jinping appear to be heeding UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon's call for action and perhaps, just maybe, some high power involvement will spur attention from our own government. Will it be left to the dictatorial but strategically long term thinking leaders of China to save the world?

So what can we, as individuals, do? First, and most obvious, is to talk about it. Discuss it with friends so that the anxieties can become mainstream rather than fringe or “weirdly greenie” thinking. You will not be alone; even the CEO of Mighty River Power, Fraser Whineray, has recently written saying that the real elephant in the room is fossil transport fuels where renewable electricity is a fraction of the cost and where every electric vehicle on the road would provide a reduction of about two tons of carbon per year and “would hugely assist the balance of payments and demonstrate our leadership internationally”.

Vote for parties that take climate change seriously (but with the next election nearly three years away that is not soon enough to influence our Government's stance at the critical, almost last chance, climate treaty talks in Paris next year). But we can lobby our Members of Parliament, making clear our concerns on the many fronts of possible action.

And individually we can think carefully and vet our own actions in terms particularly of transport fuels,

including air travel, purchasing locally and with as little packaging as possible, growing stuff and using the sun.

Certain it is that tackling this issue in any serious way will indeed mean changes for everyone, excepting of course the handful of committed people who already embrace a more minimalist lifestyle.

But think of the alternative: Passing an escalating problem to our children and grandchildren with every possibility that by then altering our beautiful earth for ever will be inevitable. Their problem – or ours?

David Waters



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