

The Politics of Climate

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In last week's Commentary, I wrote about the urgent need for collective mobilization to minimize the worst, most catastrophic effects of climate disruption in the coming years. This week's post is about the political factors that are currently blocking such a mobilization.

Anthropogenic climate change cannot be addressed through individual efforts. Buying a hybrid or electric vehicle won't cut it. (Such cars may reduce pollution from the tailpipe, but the energy they run on — whether gasoline or electricity — is still produced with fossil fuels...) Eating organic, locally-grown food, as opposed to cheaper and lower quality agri-business products, won't be enough to stop global warming. Spending less time staring at screens — TV, computer, tablet, smart phone — won't save us either.

Those and other personal lifestyle changes are well worth considering as individual measures, of course. They can contribute to our sanity, maturity, and a more accurate responsibility in our accounting for the real costs of how we live in modern society (as opposed to current economics, which keep retail prices artificially low by denying or off-loading invisible costs to the collective). One way or another, we end up paying, but living well as individuals shouldn't have to mean destroying the environment and ourselves.

I daresay that considering changes to our personal lifestyles is now a primary level of spiritual work on oneself. But our doing so as individuals — even in massive numbers — won't stop hothouse earth from doing us in. It may make us feel better about ourselves, and that's meaningful, but it won't reverse climate change. (Nothing we do will reverse the negative impacts, but we may be able to ameliorate the most severe impacts and adapt to a new world.)

This is a crisis for humanity that requires a collective effort to address, and that will mean active involvement by the institutions and apparatus of government. Only government can command, organize, and deploy the necessary resources — legal, financial, and human. Business (meaning major, for-profit corporations), simply won't choose to do so on any meaningful scale.

At this point, our politics is not up to that task. A ground-roots movement of public concern will be necessary to force our leaders and policy-makers to act in a responsible and serious manner. Until then, it's status quo business-as-usual.

The table below gives a simple but effective analysis of our current political paralysis contrasted against the real emergency we're facing. This table comes from the work of David Spratt and Philip Sutton on their Australian web site "Climate Code Red," which has a wealth of information about what needs to happen for humanity to achieve effective mobilization. Here's a link to that site:

<http://www.climatecodedred.org/>

Recognizing and understanding these bullet-points can help to focus our efforts to galvanize the elites in leadership toward action that matters (as opposed to mere propaganda or narrative spin control).

Normal political-paralysis mode	Emergency mode
Crises are constrained within business-as-usual mode.	Society engages productively with crises, but not in panic mode.
Spin, denial, and 'politics as usual' are employed.	The situation is assessed with brutal honesty.
No urgent threat is perceived.	Immediate, or looming, threat to life, health, property, or environment is perceived.
Problem is not yet serious.	High probability of escalation beyond control if immediate action is not taken.
Time of response is not important.	Speed of response is crucial.
The crisis is one of many issues.	The crisis is of the highest priority.
A labor market is in place.	Emergency project teams are developed, and labor planning is instituted.
Budgetary 'restraint' is shown.	All available /necessary resources are devoted to the emergency and, if necessary, governments borrow heavily.
Community and markets function as usual.	Non-essential functions and consumption may be curtailed or rationed.

A slow rate of change occurs because of systemic inertia.

Rapid transition and scaling up occurs.

Market needs dominate response choices and thinking.

Planning, fostering innovation and research take place.

Targets and goals are determined by political tradeoffs.

Critical targets and goals are not compromised.

There is a culture of compromise.

Failure is not an option.

There is a lack of national leadership, and politics is adversarial and incremental.

Bipartisanship and effective leadership are the norm.