

1:00 AM

[MAINE COMPASS: Disparate voices pick up call for new climate change policy](#)

Tom Tietenberg

The evidence is mounting that both the emissions causing climate change and the consequences from the changing climate are not only increasing, but proceeding faster than expected by the 2007 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report.

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In the face of this evidence, the current political stalemate in the United States has become deeply troubling. Despite the apparent current inability of our institutions to break this stalemate, I believe the winds of change are in the air.

My optimism is based not only upon the existence of some substantial common ground that could be exploited by both sides in the debate, but also the recent rise of some important new voices in the debate that could help to bridge the current discourse gap and exploit the possibilities offered by this common ground.

Holding down costs is one common aspiration.

An agreement to hold down costs would have two immediate implications:

* Action is cheaper than inaction.

* Action soon is better than action delayed.

Yale economist William D. Nordhaus, a significant voice not only because of his distinguished career, but also because both sides in the debate cite his work, recently wrote in a New York Review of Books:

"My study is just one of many economic studies showing that economic efficiency would point to the need to reduce CO₂ and other greenhouse gas emissions right now, and not to wait for a half-century."

The International Energy Agency's 2011 World Energy Outlook adds that "Delaying action is a false economy: for every \$1 of investment in cleaner technology that is avoided in the power sector before 2020, an additional \$4.30 would need to be spent after 2020 to compensate for the increased emissions."

Agreement even is being reached about the data that underlie the finding that the planet is growing warmer.

To validate an argument from skeptics that the planet was cooling, not warming, the Berkeley Earth Surface Temperature Study was funded by a foundation sympathetic to the skeptics and was led by an admitted climate skeptic Richard Muller, a Berkeley physicist.

In his summary of the findings, Muller concluded, "We find that the global land mean temperature has increased by $0.911 \pm 0.042^\circ\text{C}$ since the 1950s. Our analysis suggests a degree of global land-surface warming during the anthropogenic era that is consistent with prior work (e.g. NOAA) but on the high end of the existing range of reconstruction."

Some common ground even is being found in the types of policies that might be enacted to mitigate harmful emissions. Former South Carolina Rep. Bob Inglis, a conservative Republican, told a Michigan conference recently that we need to control climate change, but we need to do it with an approach that is cost-effective, that allows the market, not the government, to choose the mitigation strategies and that does not increase the size of government.

His proposed solution involves a "tax swap" where the revenue from a tax on greenhouse gases is used to lower other taxes, such as Social Security or income taxes. Already successfully being used in Europe, this approach funds legitimate government activities by taxing things we want to discourage (such as greenhouse gas emissions) rather than things we want to encourage (such as income).

Morality offers yet another patch of common ground. Professor Katherine Hayhoe, a well-published Texas Tech climate scientist, is also a practicing Christian evangelical.

She has been sharing with local church communities the scientific basis for her conviction that we need to take action on climate change now for moral reasons. Noting that the most dreadful consequences of climate change will hit the most disadvantaged people hardest, she maintains that Christians need to act to protect God's creation.

Hers is not a lonely voice. Indeed the "Climate Change: The Evangelical Call to Action" website, which echoes many of these same points, concludes:

"The need to act now is urgent. Governments, businesses, churches, and individuals all have a role to play in addressing climate change -- starting now."

The importance of these voices that bridge the discourse gap should not be underestimated.

Sociologists tell us that we all tend to trust information coming from our own communities more than information coming from those with whom we disagree. Personally, I find the fact that these conversations are now beginning to take place quite energizing.

Tom Tietenberg of Waterville, the Mitchell Family Professor of Economics, Emeritus at Colby College, has been involved in both domestic and international climate change policy for over two decades.

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