

U.S. Climate Policy: Toward a Sensible Center

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Excerpt: Eileen Claussen, President, Pew Center on Global Climate Change

MS. CLAUSSEN: Well, thank you very much, and on behalf of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, I'm also pleased to welcome you to this important conference. It's not often that I get to open a talk with a quotation from William Butler Yeats, so please indulge me.

In his classic poem, "The Second Coming," he wrote: "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

We're here today and tomorrow to talk about climate change, and on this issue we must not only build the center, we must make certain that the center can hold. The "sensible center" of the title of this conference will be the place from which solutions to the problem of climate change will emerge, and I'm delighted that we were able to assemble such a distinguished group of people to help begin paint a picture of what that sensible center will look like and what solutions it might yield.

So allow me to make a few brief remarks, and I'm going to encourage all our other presenters to be brief as well so that mere anarchy is not loosed upon our very full conference agenda.

The casual observer might conclude that the only significant development on climate change in the United States in recent years was the release last month of "The Day After Tomorrow." For those of you who haven't seen it, the movie is somewhat entertaining, but as you might imagine, it lends little insight into the real causes and consequences of climate change or its potential cures.

Still, the movie's release managed to draw an enormous amount of media attention to these very issues. Why? Not because of all the Hollywood hype, I think. The real reason is that the movie, however preposterous, speaks to an issue that increasingly is on the minds of ordinary Americans. Indeed, a new poll by the University of Maryland that we'll have available here tomorrow shows that three in four Americans believe global warming is a real problem that requires action, and a surprising number support strong action now, even if there are significant costs.

There is, in fact, a burgeoning debate across the United States and, believe it or not, right here in Washington over how best to address the very real issues in climate change. We're still a long way from agreeing on answers to that question, but there is a growing recognition that answers are urgently needed. And I think the sensible center is beginning to emerge.

The next day and a half will establish the broad contours of this sensible center. We'll hear from an impressive array of leaders--smart experienced individuals who are looking at this issue from a broad range of perspectives. We will hear that, despite the many scientific uncertainties, there is solid consensus within the U.S. scientific community that climate change is real and that we must address it.

We will hear of the growing recognition that tackling climate change will help address another urgent concern, namely, the security of our nation's energy supply. We will hear the emerging view within the economic establishment that addressing climate change is economically justified and, with the right policies, is well within our economic means.

We will hear that we need to make significant investments in new technologies if we are to seriously address climate change. We'll hear from business leaders about the steps

they are taking on their own to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to prepare our country and our economy for a low-carbon future.

We will hear from states that are launching climate change programs because they know that reducing emissions is not only good for the climate, but also will help secure their economic and their energy futures. We'll hear from congressional leaders from both sides of the aisle who believe it is time for an ambitious and comprehensive approach at the federal level. And we will hear about the challenges of trying to construct a sensible center internationally.

Together, I believe these varying perspectives will help us to illuminate some common ground. Each, I believe, helps point the way toward a sensible center. We're not there yet. It will take time. But I for one am convinced that we will get there. And when we do, when this sensible center is firmly established, what is it likely to produce? What are the actions, the solutions it should generate?

Well, I don't want to preempt--well, maybe I do--any of our speakers or any of the vigorous discussion that I'm sure will be prompted by their remarks. But while I have the podium--and I haven't forgotten my promise to be brief--allow me to identify five principles that I believe should guide our way forward from the sensible center.

The first is that we need a two-pronged approach to climate change. We need to think both in terms of adaptation and mitigation. On the adaptation side, we need to recognize that the Earth is already warming and that it will continue to warm even if we undertake ambitious measures to limit that warming. We need only to look at what we're learning from the Arctic region, the canary in the coal mine of climate change, to recognize this.

We need to think seriously in this country and throughout the world about how to prepare for the impacts of climate change rather than simply reacting to changes as they occur. This means making climate-conscious decisions now about everything, from water management and transportation to health care. Whether we like it or not, it is time to make adaptation a priority.

But in acknowledging the importance of adaptation, we cannot neglect mitigation. Indeed, to the extent that we fail to pursue strategies to limit the scope and severity of climate change, we will likely find it hard and more expensive to adapt. Climate change may well be underway, but there is a great deal we can and must do to minimize its impacts.

That brings me to the second principle, and that is the power of technology as a cornerstone of an effective climate strategy. Meeting the challenge of climate change demands nothing short of a new Industrial Revolution. We need the means to replace our entrenched high-carbon energy system, and that is going to require investment in new technology on a scale never before seen. This is not about investing in one or two promising technologies; rather, we need to start work right now to encourage the development of a wide-ranging technology portfolio that can deliver real reductions in greenhouse gas emissions while still powering our economy. This portfolio may well include energy technologies, hydrogen and carbon sequestration, renewable fuels, coal-bed methane, biofuels, and more.

While there is some support now for breakthrough technology, it is woefully inadequate. Most of the investment remains attached to carbon-intensive energy technologies and, clearly, this has to change. If we're serious about finding climate-friendly energy technology solutions--and we had better be serious--we need to significantly ramp up both public and private investment.

This brings me to the third principle: the power and necessity of strong public policies. Just as we need a broad range of technology solutions, an effective climate strategy will require us to mobilize an array of policy solutions as well. We need policies to both push and pull new technologies into the marketplace. We need stronger tax incentives, efficiency standards, and renewable energy mandates. We need smart market-based approaches that give the private sector the flexibility and the incentives to ferret out the most cost-effective solutions. We need a clear signal that our greenhouse gas emissions cannot continue to grow. We need to set and enforce goals for bringing our emissions down.

When do we need to have these policies in place? The answer is: As soon as possible, which brings me to the fourth principle. Woody Allen famously said that 80 percent of success is showing up. We need climate solutions to show up now. In waiting to act, we risk imposing unconscionable burdens and impossible tasks on future generations.

The fifth and final problem is that we need more than a domestic policy on climate change. We also need a global framework for action that moves beyond the Kyoto Protocol. Climate change is a global problem that demands global action. The challenge before us is to engage all nations that are major sources of greenhouse gas emissions in this work, including the United States and the major developing countries. And to do that, we need a long-term international effort that mobilizes the resources and technology needed to spur global progress.

The key to the success of any international effort in the future will be an acknowledgment that climate change is not only an environmental issue but one of economics and development. This framework must also be guided by a clear sense of fairness. No country should feel that it is being asked to bear an unfair burden in this global effort. And, finally, it must incorporate a great deal of flexibility. There must be room for every country's commitments to reflect its unique circumstances and abilities.

So there you have it--five principles that I see emerging from the sensible center. We need a two-pronged approach, including adaptation and mitigation. We need an array of technologies and an array of policies as well. We need to start right now, and we need a flexible global framework that delivers results.

I know that these principles and the issues they raise will receive ample attention from our presenters over the next day and a half, so I'm going to conclude my remarks and let the show go on. I appreciate your participation in this conference, and along with all of you, I look forward to hearing from our distinguished guests. And I'm going to turn the podium over now to David Sandalow, who is an environmental scholar and co-director of the Environment and Energy Program at the Brookings Institute.

[Applause.]