

HELPING CANADA COPE

Yes, we saw the climate changing, but what were we to do?

Well, let's predict the consequences and prepare to deal with them

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Anyone can opt out of efforts to ameliorate the causes of climate change, but *no one* can opt out of dealing with its effects.

The evidence of climate change is all around us: melting of glaciers and Arctic ice, destruction of pine forests, dramatic floods worldwide. Five questions have been debated: Is the climate changing? What are the causes? How can they be controlled? What are the consequences? How can we cope with them?

There is fairly general agreement that the climate is changing in major ways. There is a consensus among scientists that human activity is a major cause. There is agreement that cutting greenhouse-gas emissions will reduce the most important cause. These questions of how to understand and deal with the causes have almost eclipsed discussions of the economic and social consequences and how best to cope with them.

This is regrettable since, from a Canadian point of view, dealing with the consequences is more important than removing causes. Because Canada is responsible for a small proportion of total greenhouse-gas emissions (2 per cent to 3 per cent), stopping our emissions totally would have only a small effect on the climate. But Canadians will have to live with the inevitable consequences of climate change no matter who causes it - and it is time to acknowledge that those consequences will be serious.

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The prime reason for reducing Canadian greenhouse-gas emissions is that we cannot expect the developing nations, such as China and India, to take emission reductions seriously if the developed nations do not. "Why," they ask, "should we do what you who are much richer than us are unwilling to do?" A secondary reason is that every bit of reduction helps, no matter how small it is on a global basis.

But if we were only concerned with our own welfare, and if what we did had no influence on others, we would spend more time and money on predicting and controlling the consequences of climate change than on reducing our small contribution to its causes. Although few Canadians would advocate such a selfish approach, it is legitimate to worry that too little Canadian effort will go to dealing with the inevitable effects.

The public and governments need to be alerted now to the need to prepare to cope. Learning about the effects and the high cost of dealing with them will help us prepare before it is too late and, incidentally, should increase the sense of urgency about dealing with causes.

What needs to be done?

First, we need good scientific estimates of the physical and biological consequences of climate change. Some are with us now, and some are foreseeable with only a little thought; but, unless we do much more study, too many will come as surprises. We need better estimates of such things as: How much and how fast will the sea level rise? What kind of superstorms and storm surges can we expect? What kinds of flooding will occur? What kinds of new or altered plant, animal and human diseases can we expect? How will the margins of cultivation of crops alter?

Second, we need to anticipate the economic and social consequences of these physical and biological changes. Shifts in the geographical growing ranges for various crops, for example, will cause major gains and losses for various areas, as well as alterations in forest cover. Serious depletion of fish stocks will affect not only the fishing industry but also those who service it directly and indirectly. Sea level rise and storm surges will seriously threaten many low-lying populated areas, such as the Delta area of Greater Vancouver. Insurance companies may fail to provide the protection we expect because their finances are wrecked when what used to be highly unlikely events become common.

Third, we need to assess the available policies for coping. How, for instance, should we respond to the pine beetle's growing infestation and destruction of western forests? What are appropriate policies to deal with the increasing frequency of severe storms, which, over the past five years, have cost insurance companies in Ontario alone millions of dollars? And what are the best ways to deal with the impact on food and

water supplies as precipitation patterns and heat waves cause major changes such as what is happening to the Great Lakes, now at their lowest level in 50 years?

More generally, we need to know much more than we now do because of the human tendency to deal with issues only after they become obvious and then deal with them piecemeal rather than systemically. With something as pervasive as climate change, this tendency may result in responses that are unproductive or even dangerously misguided.

Although there are still some dissenters from the majority scientific opinion that human activity is the major cause of climate change, there is little serious dissent from the understanding that such change is happening all around us and that the consequences will be dramatic, often catastrophic. So there is an urgent need to predict the consequences more fully and to prepare now to deal with them. Otherwise, we may have to confess to our grandchildren: "Yes, we saw it coming, but we prepared too little and too late."

Richard Lipsey is a founder of ACT, an SFU-led research initiative to examine and communicate public policy options for adaptation to climate change.

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