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The Strong Scottish Moral Leadership On Climate Change Compared To The Absence Of Any Acknowledged Ethical Duty In The US Debate.

By DONALD A BROWN on August 31, 2009 12:11 PM| 4 Comments

A. Introduction.

This post examines the strong moral and ethical leadership of a number of Scottish Parliamentarians on climate change, leadership that is particularly striking when compared to how the US climate change debate is unfolding.

In a prior post, I discussed attending a meeting of the Scottish Parliament on behalf of the United States State Department to give a talk on climate change policies where I heard an argument made by a Scottish Parliamentarian in support of a tough climate change bill that was being debated. That post was "The Crucial Missing Element in Media Coverage of the US Climate Change Debate: the Ethical Duty to Reduce GHG Emissions, http://climateethics.org/?p=138/

The argument made by the Parliamentarian was that Scotland had a moral duty to the rest of the world to adopt the pending legislation despite the fact that it could impose significant costs on the Scottish economy.

This is an argument neither being made by American politicians on pending federal cap and trade legislation nor even faintly whispered about in US media coverage of the unfolding US climate change debate. Instead, opposition to climate change legislation stresses job loss while supporters often make appeals to economic rejuvenation from a new green economy. That the United States has duties and responsibilities to the rest of the world to reduce GHG emissions is not part of the US debate. As we will see, this absence of any acknowledgment of US obligations is striking when compared to how Scottish Parliamentarians approached the debate that preceded the recent passage of a very tough new Scottish climate change law in late June.

Although there are no ethical problems with seeking solutions to meet our ethical duties at lowest possible cost, as we explained in several previous posts, increased costs to the American economy alone, assuming for the sake of argument this would be the long-term effect of federal climate change legislation, is not an ethically acceptable justification for the United States refusing to reduce domestic greenhouse gas emissions to the US fair share of safe global emissions. See, http://climateethics.org/?p=138/ , http://climateethics.org/?p=206, and http://climateethics.org /?p=36. The United States has not just economic interests in climate change, it has duties and responsibilities.

B. Comparing the Scottish and US Climate Change Debates.

The climate change debate in the US shows no sign of acknowledging that US climate change policy should be guided by duties to the rest of the world. On August 8th, the New York Times reported that climate change legislation in the United States Senate was being opposed by 10 moderate democrats because it threatens to add to the cost of goods like steel, cement, paper and aluminum. (Broder 2009)

With the exception of waning arguments against climate-change law on scientific grounds, opposition to climate-change laws and policies in the United States is almost always based on claims that climate-change programs are not in the national, state or local economic interest. In other words, the US debate seems to assume that whether or not to pass climate change legislation should turn on calculating the effects of US climate change legislation on US economic interests alone.

For instance, U.S. Congressmen Tim Holden, D-Pa. (17th district), recently explained his opposition to federal cap-and-trade legislation because it would increase transportation, energy and business costs while reducing manufacturing jobs. (Holden 2009) Again and again, US politicians opposing climate-change legislation justify their opposition by pointing to increased costs to their constituents caused by the legislation.

By comparison in Scotland, when strong climate change legislation was being considered by the

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Scottish Parliament this past summer, several politicians strongly argued for support of the legislation on moral grounds. Several UK Parliamentarians had also made similar moral arguments when climate change legislation was under consideration in London.

Strong moral arguments made by UK Parliamentarians included:

Ed Miliband, UK Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change said on July 15, that:
“climate change is the moral issue of our time.”

Secretary Milliband went on to say about the pending legislation:
“Above all, it rises to the moral challenge of climate change."

In an earlier June speech, Secretary Miliband said that the legislation was important because it was in response to the
“fundamental moral question about whether we care about the legacy we leave to future generations: about whether we think it is fair or just to take advantage of the planet’s resources as if there were no tomorrow. The question we must pose is whether we break the bond of the human race over our time on this planet: that the earth is held in trust by each generation for the next. This is an issue of equality, of fairness, of morality and we should say it."

In October, Joan Ruddock, UK Minister for Climate Change, said that:
"Developed countries have a moral responsibility to lead the way because climate change has been largely caused by historic emissions from industrialized countries."

Several Scottish Parliamentarians made very strong ethical arguments for pending climate change legislation including the following:

The Right Honorable Jack Mcconnell, Member of Scottish Parliament and First Minister for Scotland, said:
"I am clear that environmental injustice is at its most shocking when you consider the situation of the developing world. The entire African continent is responsible for a mere 3% of the world's carbon emissions - yet it pays the same price in terms of climate change as the rest of the world - but with less capacity to protect its citizens from the impact of this climate change. At this scale, the greatest environmental injustices are between the developed and the developing world. There is injustice internationally which those of us who believe in a fairer distribution of power, wealth and opportunity cannot and will not accept. Ultimately we are all interdependent, we share the same planet and the actions of one will matter to others. But consumption, greenhouse gases and waste have all increased - mainly because of the behavior of those from rich countries. And of course the result of this affects those in the countries with the least resources."

Stewart Stevenson, Member of Scottish Parliament and Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change, said:
"The bill is not an economic bill, although it will have economic effects. It is not legislation to gather dust on the shelves of hundreds of lawyers; it is a moral step we take that will be important for the world. ... part of what we are doing is making a moral case on behalf of nations that will be more adversely affected by climate change than Scotland will be, such as those in sub-Saharan Africa, in particular. There is a moral as well as a practical imperative to what we are doing."

Member of the Scottish Parliament, Shirley Anne Somerville said:
"Climate change is not only an environmental issue; it raises an important moral question that cuts to the heart of every political decision that we make. Should we blindly continue to support unsustainable lifestyles, regardless of their impact on the poorest people on our planet, or should we take action to create a more just and fair society, recognizing our global responsibilities? The bill signals the strong intention of the Scottish Government—and, more important, that of the Scottish Parliament—to ensure that we take the latter path".

Member of Scottish Parliament, Sarah Boyack said:
"There is a mood around the world that we want to do more. We have debated the impact on developing countries if we fail, given that even minimal rises in sea level or increases in temperature could make parts of the world simply uninhabitable. Although we produce a relatively small part of the emissions in our world, the debates that we have had on the bill have demonstrated our desire for Scotland to play its full part not just in reducing our emissions but in participating in the wider global debate."

John Swinney, Member of Scottish Parliament and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth in the Scottish Government, said:
"The Climate Change Bill is a call to action—a motivation for all of us to make a difference. That aspiration lies at the heart of the energy and commitment behind the establishment of this Parliament and enabling it to make a contribution not only to the lives of people in this country, but to the lives of those who live in other countries. Many people in developing countries are likely to be the worst affected by the impact of climate change. Those of us who live in the developed world will also see changes in our weather patterns, with Scotland predicted to experience wetter winters and warmer temperatures throughout the year, which has implications for all of us. That puts the onus and responsibility on us all to act. ... there is an obligation on all of us in the developed world to make a contribution to assisting with and encouraging the steps that can be taken in those [developing] countries to adapt to the new climatic conditions. There is also a responsibility on us to act to ensure that we in no way extend or exacerbate the difficulties that those countries face."

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Member of Scottish Parliament Patricia Ferguson said:
"Given that poor communities and poor countries will, as the cabinet secretary rightly identifies, suffer most from climate change, and given that the average carbon footprint in the west is about 9.4 tonnes of emissions, compared with less than 0.1 tonnes in Malawi, does the cabinet secretary agree that we should be assisting the developing world with mitigation and adaptation measures?"

In late June, Scotland passed the landmark climate change law that was being debated during my March visit, a law that requires a 42% cut in greenhouse gas emissions by 2020, rising to 80% by 2050. (BBC, 2009) On the day the law passed, John Swinney Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth in the Scottish Government told the Parliamentarians that passing the world-leading legislation was justified because the climate change affects all the people on of our planet and the Scots had a duty to make the commitments in the law. (TWFY 2009)

The US Congress is striving to pass legislation that would for the first time create binding greenhouse gas emissions reductions 12 years after most of the rest of the developed world bound themselves to reduce emissions in the Kyoto Protocol. Yet, there is not the faintest murmur in the US climate-change debate or in the media's coverage of the unfolding US legislative fight about duties and responsibilities that the United States has to the rest of the world to reduce the threat of climate change. This is so even though the legislation that has passed the House would require 17% reductions by 2020, a commitment that is only 40% of the new Scottish law.

That the Scottish commitment is strikingly more ambitious than the US proposed legislation is clear given that Scotland has already reduced its climate change causing emissions by 16% compared to 1990 levels while the US performance amounts to a 17% increase in emissions during the same period. (Devine and Bristow, 2009)(USEPA, 2009). If you measure GHG emissions on a per capita basis, the Scots' emissions are already only about a half of the US emissions. (10.69 tons CO2e per capita for Scotland, 19. 78 tons CO2e per capita for the US) (FOES 2009, UCS 2009) For these reasons, the 42% Scottish reduction target by 2020 compared to the US House's proposed legislation of 17% reduction by 2020 must be seen as a desire to become a global leader motivated by Scotland's acknowledged duty to reduce its emissions to its fair share of safe global emissions.

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4 COMMENTS

Peter Adriance | August 31, 2009 12:45 PM | Reply

Don - Once again, an excellent piece following up on your earlier post on Scotland's moral stance. This action by Scotland's legislators should be highlighted by the media, called to the attention of our congressional leaders, and emphasized by activists in their arguments for action. Today's Washington Post front page "Environmentalists Slow to Adjust in Climate Debate" describes the sorry state of the climate debate here in the U.S. and the massive effort by industry and fossil fuel interests to maintain the status quo (see http://tinyurl.com /kvk8pj).

Thanks for your continued efforts to shine a light on the importance of basing decisions on

ethical principles. Despite what the critics say, such an approach is the only long term solution to our economic, social and environmental well-being.

Donald Brown | September 1, 2009 11:38 PM | Reply

Peter; Thank you for your comments and the reference to the Washington Post issue. I obviously agree with your judgment about the sorry state of the US climate debate.

Tommy Poloski | September 2, 2009 11:43 PM | Reply

Scotland leaders will do everything in its way for a climate change regarding their natural environment and the economy as well. In comparison to debates between Scotland and US on climate change, the Scottish will do everything in its way to maintain their strong economy rather than US way of change.

This is a good information for us. Thank you very much Donald!

Donald Brown | September 5, 2009 5:41 PM | Reply

To say that Scotland seems to have been motivated by moral and ethical considerations is not to say that Scotland's commitments meet even current ethical obligations. The purpose of this post was not to leave the impression that Scotland did everything that it needed to at this moment in history consistent with its ethical obligations but to make the point that at least some Scottish politicians appear to have been motivated by acknowledged duties and interests, not simply economic considerations. This point is made to contrast the Scottish debate with the absence of any sense of duty or obligation in the United States debate. If a developed country were to meet its current ethical obligations it would, at minimum, explain how it is committing to be on an emissions reduction trajectory that would make its emissions consistent with its fair share of safe global emissions. Donald A. Brown, Assistant Professor, Environmental Ethics, Science, and Law, Penn State University.

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