



The 2008 Transition Towns Conference in Cirencester

PHOTOGRAPH: MIKE GRENVILLE

THE CLIMATE PROSPERITY MOVEMENT • HAZEL HENDERSON

POSITIVE TIPPING POINT

The Copenhagen climate conference could host the 'positive tipping point':
a critical mass of global citizens and their rising eco-awareness.

The Climate Prosperity Movement is worldwide and goes by many names: the Green New Deal, the Green Economy Initiative, Transition Towns, One Planet, Green Jobs, Green for All, Be The Change, the Post-carbon Society, the Phoenix Economy, Breaking the Climate Deadlock – sustainable societies, as well as the hundreds of thousands of groups in over a hundred countries, calling for new forms of sustainable livelihoods.

All this new activism is the healthy, positive response to the dying fossilised paradigm of 'economism' and its deadly addiction to economic growth measured in money, no matter what the social

and environmental costs. The disparate social protest movements of the past thirty years began coming together via the internet and at World Social Forums. Today, they are coalescing over the ever-accumulating threats to life on Earth. The United Nations joined with civil society in calling the financial and climate crises an opportunity to transition to fairer, cleaner, more sustainable forms of human development.

Ever since the UN's climate agreements in 1997 in Kyoto, the evidence from the scientific community of this threat to our collective survival has grown stronger and more ominous. The biggest per capita polluter, the US, played an

obstructive role, imposing its own version of the economism paradigm: market fundamentalism. While refusing to sign the Kyoto protocols, the US forced its 'market-based' approaches onto successive UN climate conferences.

The idea of capping carbon emissions was sensible enough, using government targets and regulating continuous reductions. But instead of backing the enforcement of carbon caps and shifting tax burdens from incomes and payrolls onto carbon and other pollution and waste, the US market fundamentalists demanded that 'allowances' to continue emitting carbon be given to polluters. These 'rights' they demanded could also

be traded on commodity exchanges, along with other derivatives – like the credit default swaps that caused such havoc in financial markets. Widespread objections forced governments to agree to auction pollution allowances, but fossil-fuel lobbies kept their give-aways.

Thus bankers, stockmarket traders and commodity brokers saw carbon as a new trillion-dollar ‘asset class’ and a profit opportunity. The results have

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been disastrous. Powerful industrial groups lobbied governments for more free allowances and offsets (paying for dubious ‘green’ projects overseas in exchange for continuing to pollute). They sold their permits, often reaping windfall profits. The ‘cap and trade’ emissions schemes in Europe created proliferating bureaucracies with caps on emissions easily lifted by lobbyists. Worse, all these regulation-driven carbon markets failed to reduce carbon emissions, which are still steadily rising. The Copenhagen conference in December 2009 is seen by all the parties as a tipping point.

The failures of ‘cap and trade’ proved a costly diversion. The debate was forced into the narrow calculus of costs in money terms and its focus on GDP growth ‘losses’. Critiques of GDP-measured growth are finally gaining traction, with alternatives from the New Economics Foundation and the Calvert Group making headway at the European Parliament’s Beyond GDP Conference in 2007. Yet the costs of controlling carbon emissions in the obsolete fossil-fuelled sectors still trump the uncounted savings, benefits and avoided costs of investing in a global transition to the green post-carbon economy, based on energy efficiency and wind, solar, ocean and geothermal sources.

However, the greener, sustainable sectors are growing worldwide, and the grassroots movements for sustainability, from Transition Towns to the new wellbeing and quality-of-life indicators to replace GNP, are burgeoning too. The

Obama administration in the US and the General Assembly of the United Nations have acknowledged this shift to the ‘sustainable sectors’. The rigid G-7 and G-20 summits have given ground to the G-192 as all the member countries of the UN came together in New York in June 2009 and declared their support for the new just, green, sustainable global economy. All saw the meltdown of the global financial casino as a chance to

finally put economism in its place and downsize finance to its limited role facilitating real production.

The television spectacle of the US and other central banks printing money helped raise awareness that money is not real wealth but just a clever invention to track and keep score of transactions and use of natural resources. This new understanding – that money is simply one form of information – helped people realise that there is enough money to invest in our common future. The real constraint is not money, but time to act: a ten-year window to install a post-carbon, localised economy to replace the collapsed global casino. Last to get the message of the new Climate Prosperity Movement are, of course, the coal, oil, gas and nuclear energy companies – who are still fighting desperate rearguard actions.


Joining the Climate Prosperity Movement are the ranks of socially responsible investors, pension funds, charitable endowments and ‘green’ bankers as well as unions and NGOs. The many alternative, decentralised trading exchanges, such as craigslist, Freecycle, Prosper and Zopa, that facilitate sharing, recycling, charitable donating and peer-to-peer lending, as well as local currencies, are flourishing. This information-based trading has illustrated that we are not dependent on Wall Street, the City or other financial centres.

The last piece of the puzzle to achieve climate prosperity within the ten-year window are Climate Prosperity Bonds. Socially responsible investors are now

joining forces with the Green Economy Initiative, government agencies and twenty UN departments in a new global effort to fund Climate Prosperity Bonds, aiming to invest US\$10 trillion over the next ten years and to double installed renewable energy and efficiency savings each year. This is less than the US\$14 trillion spent in the US on Wall Street and other bail-outs, and is less than 10% of the US\$120 trillion of assets in pension funds for beneficiaries’ future security.

Today, climate change is a threat to all of humanity’s future security. What better plan is there than to invest these pension assets now in securing the future in a safe, sustainable, green economy? Climate Prosperity Bonds with government guarantees and ‘laddered maturities’ are geared to the fast-track payouts from energy efficiency and the expanded efficiencies-of-scale in wind, geothermal and solar. Such bonds will undoubtedly be attractive to pension-fund asset managers.

The Climate Group’s ‘Breaking the Climate Deadlock’ plan calls for US\$1 trillion to achieve a 70% reduction in emissions by 2020 – largely through energy efficiency. During this ten-year rollout of the new low-carbon economy, coal and oil, as well as nuclear, will become even more costly and less competitive. The faulty logic of economism which sees the problem as a shortage of money is exposed by the Climate Prosperity Movement, which understands that the real constraint is time, not money. After wasting decades, we must act now.

The Climate Prosperity Movement, together with many groups leading in widening awareness, planetary citizenship and perennial wisdom from Indigenous peoples and all faith traditions, is succeeding in changing the paradigm. We are transitioning from the dismal economism of money-based scarcity and fear to a vision of abundance through sharing, caring, volunteerism and community revitalisation, all built on using the energy freely available from the sun, wind and oceans. Copenhagen could indeed host the ‘positive tipping point’: a worldwide critical mass of global citizens and their rising eco-aware culture in the emerging, information-rich Solar Age. 

Hazel Henderson authored *The Politics of the Solar Age and Ethical Markets* as well as the *Calvert-Henderson Quality of Life Indicators*. See www.calvert-henderson.com