Climate Change and Crisis: In Dialogue with Simon Dalby

— Jen Wyre

Jen Wrye[1] (JW): Since the economic collapse, spending on environmental programs has decreased around the globe. Can you comment on the similarities and differences in such reductions between Canada and the U.S. or Eurozone?

Simon Dalby[2] (SD): In general environmental programs may have suffered but clearly European states remain much more concerned about environmental matters than at least the federal governments in both the U.S., given Republican agendas, and Canada, given the Conservatives' agenda. However, that said, other jurisdictions do have a very varied response. California's climate change agenda is completely different from Washington's even if austerity is the order of the day there. If you count in such things as Obama's green jobs initiatives then things look rather different in the U.S.. Europeans, and even Ontario in the Canadian federation, are working on initiatives that, while not traditional environmental regulations, are nonetheless important in terms of the larger climate change issue in particular.

JW: How ideologically driven are cuts to environmental spending, Canada's abandonment of Kyoto commitments, etc.? Are the circumstances

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a reflection of the Conservative government mainly or do you see these tendencies as part of broader transnational and neoliberal restructuring?

SD: The Canadian Conservative government is particularly clear that its agenda is ideologically driven. Yes, there is a certain structural dimension in the Canadian political economy as resource extraction is a key part of the national economy. Canada is also home, through both the Toronto and Vancouver stock exchanges, to many of the largest international mining companies. Some of these companies are more concerned about their environmental records than the Conservatives apparently are, and indeed if environmental standards are abandoned in Canada, exporting may actually get more complicated given international standards on many things such things as food safety standards.

Abandoning Kyoto is clearly ideologically driven, but in line with the anti-multilateralism of the Conservatives, expressed in foreign minister John Baird's formulations of enlightened sovereignty quite as much as its anti-environmental agenda. In the so called stimulus package the Federal government could have chosen to push hard on renewable energies, sensible public transit initiatives in Canadian cities and other projects, and fund these by removing subsidies to the petroleum sector, but they ignored these opportunities to shift investment to build green projects. Instead Canada is portrayed as an energy superpower given its Tar Sands, although how much of this oil will make its way to international markets remains unclear given the difficulties with various pipeline projects.

JW: Can you highlight some of the environmental consequences to austerity we might expect in Canada? For example, which communities might be impacted most?

SD: If austerity is about reducing environmental reviews of numerous proposed mines, pipeline and other resource extraction "developments" then clearly communities close to such developments obviously are most likely to have to deal directly with the disruption of developments and subsequent habitat disruption and pollution issues. In terms of forgone green building initiatives and modernization of infrastructure then the effects are likely to be widespread. The big unknown in the next few years is of course how much of the reduction of Federal activity will be taken up by the provinces. That depends on provincial politics in complicated ways. But clearly the gutting of Federal environmental science programs and environmental reviews isn't about austerity; that at least

is clearly an ideologically driven agenda to silence the production of information that might challenge the priority of promoting the resource extraction sector as the key to Canadian prosperity.

JW: There seem to be conflict between an austerity agenda that diminishes environmental spending on one hand, and the need, as the frequency and scale of environmental catastrophes increases, to prioritize the environment politically on the other. What types of responses might we anticipate to these events if state spending is retracting?

SD: Gradually it is dawning on policy makers in municipalities and provinces that the Federal government can't be relied on to help in ways that it used to. Pretending that companies and contractors can step in to deal with floods or oil spills in the absence of resources and coordination from the Federal government is a very dangerous way to conduct public policy. The neoliberal ideology that markets can provide and that government should have no role in many aspects of public life leads to the reduction of facilities and capabilities in ways that may imperil people in coming years. Can municipalities and provinces agree to pool resources to compensate for the withdrawal of Federal support? That remains to be seen, but as all the predictions of climate change make clear, extreme events are becoming more frequent.

But some of the most important things that need to be done to prepare for what is coming are simple practical matters of sensible land use planning and building resilient emergency systems and infrastructure. If short-term market priorities continue to be the priority the prognosis isn't good, especially if self-regulation in the construction sector leads to shoddy construction and bad planning decisions. Marketizing risk in terms of catastrophe bonds, and relying on insurance for many things is logical if markets and adaptation are the policy priority. This leaves those without financial resources especially vulnerable when government programs are withdrawn.

JW: The United Nations anticipates that austerity will reduce environmental spending by up to $50 billion in the foreseeable future. What do you think this will mean for global human security, particularly in the global south?

SD: This issue has to be handled very carefully given that some of the projects, such as community forestry projects funded by various

international development schemes, are dubious both in terms of their environmental and local community impacts. Forestry plantations that are claimed to be carbon sinks are not always helpful to local communities and indeed one might argue that canceling some of these might actually be beneficial in many parts of the South. If the cuts affect urban infrastructure, flood prevention measures and such things then the security of many poor people are further imperiled.

JW: How do you think ideas about a 'depressed' economy and austerity affect people's opinions about environmental problems? Does austerity shift public attention from environmental degradation and sustainability? For example, do we stop thinking in terms of reducing our dependency on non-renewable resources, curbing resource use, or funding green initiatives and more in terms of maintaining our current lifestyle as is?

SD: Constraints often have perverse consequences for the environment; reduced economic activity frequently reduces pollution and resource use. It may also prevent modernization projects that use cleaner technologies, meaning that old polluting technologies are used longer than might otherwise be the case. Traditionally hard times have meant environmental matters slip down the list of political priorities; environment being seen as a matter of a luxury for affluent times. But the relationships are never that simple; and efficiency responses often reduce resource consumption and hence pollution.

JW: Which strategies might you expect to be most successful in resisting cuts to environmental investments?

SD: In the Canadian context electing Tom Mulcair as Prime Minister might seem to be the most obvious strategy! But clearly some of the ecological modernization arguments are important. Efficiency matters in things like heating bills and electricity consumption for schools, hospitals and numerous parts of the public sector. Conservation in such matters helps in dealing with controlling costs in all aspects of economic activity. What seems to be happening across the globe is that numerous institutions are starting to think much more carefully about their fuel use in terms of travel budgets and the running costs of factories, housing and numerous other things. Here in fact neo-liberal mantras about efficiency do make environmental sense. But austerity will no doubt affect new innovative investments that might be cleaner alternatives to existing systems.

The key to all this remains the ability of the political left to articulate a clear vision of a more just future that is also one that uses less resources than the production systems of the past. In times of austerity unions are often politically boxed into fighting to protect existing jobs, even in "dirty" industries rather than trying to articulate a larger agenda of green jobs and public investments. This is what many green parties have tried to promote, but often ended up too close to the market ideologies of neo-liberalism, and too focused on the narrow technicalities of environment to produce a convincing alternative narrative that can challenge the ideologies of neoliberalism combined by the re-articulation of citizenship in terms of consumption and "life-style". Challenging this discourse of "entitlement" remains a key ideological task for those who think that a more just and less destructive mode of political economy is both necessary and possible.