



Leadership and the challenge of climate change

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July 20, 2021

Recent events have dramatized the urgent need for prompt and bold action to respond to climate change. Raging rivers in Germany and Belgium, unheard of "heat domes" over large sections of North America, and uncontrolled wildfires and flooding around the globe, have made it absolutely clear that humankind must quickly limit the emission of greenhouse gases and adapt to the increasingly calamitous consequences of climate disruption.

In view of this situation, what is and ought to be the substance of environmental leadership? At the outset, it bears mention that no single environmental leader can take on the challenge of climate change alone. What is needed instead is cooperation among many leaders. Leadership must come from a number of places, including governments, private enterprises, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and concerned individuals.

Later this year, the leaders of nearly all nations will [meet in Glasgow](#) for a critical round of climate negotiations. These leaders must bear in mind that global emissions have increased significantly since the Paris Agreement in 2015. Notwithstanding their many differences, national leaders must agree to far stricter limitations on greenhouse gas emissions than were agreed upon in Paris, to be shared among all nations, with the largest emitting nations having the greatest responsibility for cutbacks.

Some meaningful transfers of resources, from wealthier nations to those less developed, will also be needed to help developing countries avoid the environmentally harmful errors that wealthier nations have made since the dawn of the industrial revolution. These resource transfers must include clean technology for generating energy and operating industries in addition to grants of funds to be used to protect the environment.

Within the United States, much change is also needed. Our nation must once again use its continuing influence abroad to encourage effective climate-related reforms. The U.S. had an active behind-the-scenes role in the arduous negotiations that led to the Paris Agreement. Much more such quiet, determined diplomacy is needed in Glasgow and thereafter. Beyond this, the United States must set a good example for other nations by meeting its own climate responsibilities. Legislation to regulate greenhouse gas emissions in a direct and forthright manner is long overdue. Moreover, mitigating climate change must be a government-wide priority and not the province of EPA and the Department of Interior alone. There is also a great need for federal financial aid to state and local governments to combat climate change.

State and local governments, in turn, have important roles to play in mitigating climate change and adapting to its impacts. Those governments are particularly well-positioned to survey critical local infrastructure, and to take needed steps to raise roads, bridges and critical structures, reinforce dams, protect local drinking water sources, and take other prudent steps to safeguard people and property from climate-related harm.

In tandem with governmental entities, the private sector also has an immense leadership role to play to avert a wholesale climate disaster. Since many industrial facilities emit greenhouse gases, private companies can and should investigate the extent to which those substances are being released from their own facilities. And where greenhouse gas releases are observed, those firms must take prompt steps to switch to carbon-neutral methods of producing products and using energy — even where such switches are not required by law.

Like the governmental and private enterprise sectors, NGOs also have a critical role to play. These organizations must conduct their research carefully, scrupulously avoiding exaggerated and unfounded claims. Such claims tend to undermine public and private sector confidence in the pressing need for climate preservation. NGOs must also continue to catalyze well-founded public concerns, while promoting political and economic changes that will help lessen the climate crisis.

Finally, private individuals can play a valuable role. They can pay close attention to changes that are taking place around them, stay informed of trends and developments respecting global climate, and speak out individually about the need for climate change.

Each of these suggestions will require effort, and a sometimes substantial investment of resources, by many people. Many of them may seem difficult to accomplish. Nonetheless, it is worth recalling that the species to which all humans belong has been labeled “homo sapiens,” Latin words that mean “wise man.” The complex challenges posed by the climate crisis provide a remarkable opportunity for our species to live up to that phrase.

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