



Climate change expert sees 'brighter, smarter' future for planet

BY MARGARET MUNRO, POSTMEDIA NEWS APRIL 2, 2014



Tom Pedersen, executive director of the Pacific Institute for Climate Solutions at the University of Victoria in B.C., plugs in his electric car in Victoria on Tuesday.

Photograph by: Matt Kelley, Postmedia News

VANCOUVER — Tom Pedersen sounds almost upbeat about climate change, putting a positive spin on the decidedly gloomy subject.

"You must never lose hope," says Pedersen, executive director of the Pacific Institute for Climate Solutions at the University of Victoria in B.C., who foresees a "brighter, smarter" future for the planet.

There is no question the world is facing enormous threats as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a United Nations group, made clear once again this week.

<http://www.ipcc.ch/>

"If the world doesn't do anything about mitigating the emissions of greenhouse gases and the extent of climate change continues to increase, then the very social stability of human systems could be at stake," Rajendra Pachauri, chairman of the IPCC, said as the report was released.

Pedersen, unlike some of his colleagues, is confident society will come to its senses.

He does concede it's a challenge as climate change is not so much a scientific problem as a social one.

Scientists have done their job – laying out the evidence in a series of IPCC reports that governments around the world including Canada have signed off on – but society has yet to heed the message.

Global carbon emissions are up almost 60 per cent over the level in 1990 when the IPCC issued its first dire warnings. And global emissions are on track to exceed levels that could displace millions of people in coming decades as ice melts, oceans rise, and droughts and heat waves worsen.

"The issue is not a lack of scientific evidence, the issue is the unwillingness of people and governments to act," says oceanographer Ken Denman, a former federal scientist now at the University of Victoria who was a lead author on previous IPCC reports.

"It seems to defy logic," Denman said in an interview Tuesday.

"But a lot of addictions defy logic," he says, suggesting that is the root of the problem. "Our society is completely addicted to cheap power."

The insidious nature of climate change doesn't help.

The emissions — and their impact — are not obvious when you hop on a plane to Hawaii, buy a gas guzzling truck, or poorly insulate a house.

Such seemingly harmless activities — "especially what we have gotten used to in the wealthy West," says Pedersen — do collectively harm the planet. But the damage is hard to see because it is so incremental.

Apathy and what Pedersen calls "deflection" also come into play with people thinking that what they might do to reduce emissions will be too insignificant to make a difference.

And skeptics have done a masterful job of branding carbon taxes and greenhouse gas reductions as an unnecessary, misguided imposition.

Case in point — former Liberal leader Stephane Dion's carbon tax that helped him lose the 2008 election.

Rather than calling it a carbon tax, Pedersen says Dion should have turned the message around and said he was going to lower income taxes — by putting a tax on pollution.

Pedersen's group at the University of Victoria is working to refocus the climate debate. He sees reducing greenhouse gas emissions as an "opportunity to make the world better and to generate a new economic wealth."

"There is a new Industrial Revolution underway," he says, noting how the solar energy and other clean forms of energy are becoming more and more competitive.

He says Canada is courting not only environmental but economic problems by investing and focusing so heavily in fossil fuels such as Alberta's oilsands and B.C.'s natural gas, which B.C. Premier Christy Clark is committed to selling to Asian markets.

"Ironically we have made ourselves very vulnerable both economically and environmentally over the longer term," says Pedersen, who expects the world to turn off fossil fuels as it becomes less expensive to tap into solar and other clean forms of energy.

"We are missing a tremendous opportunity because we are putting so many eggs in one basket (fossil fuels)," he says.

He says the challenge is to get people to understand the gravity of the threat — with the IPCC reports playing an important role in laying out the scientific evidence — and recognize the "immense

opportunity" to do things in a better way.

He'd also like Canadians to recognize they can help.

The Harper government is routinely criticized for not doing enough to reduce carbon emissions, but it is Canadian voters who have the real power.

"You don't see people marching the streets here in Canada saying put a carbon tax in place," says Pedersen. "But in fact the public should be asking for that."

"We should be putting a price on pollution," he says. "We should not be able to use the atmosphere as an open dumping ground for pollution without a cost."

And if you put that cost in place, you fundamentally change the way society operates, he says, noting how such a tax would favour cleaner, more efficient forms of energy.

Denman says time is fast running out, with 10 to 15 years left to rein in global carbon emissions to avert the worst impacts.

He implores people to think about the kind of world being left to their children and grandchildren. "And what can we do to ensure that they have the kind of life you think they deserve," he says.

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A person sunbathes at South Street Seaport, an area of lower Manhattan that was severely flooded during Hurricane Sandy on March 31, 2014 in New York City. A new report released Monday by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a United Nations group that summarizes climate science, gave a dire picture of the earth's slow warming due to greenhouse gases and other human based behaviors. The report warned that countries and cities located along the coastline face a particular danger as the oceans continue to rise resulting in large scale flooding and erosion. (Photo by Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

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