

Climate change is a symptom of economic madness

Canadians rally against proroguing Parliament in Ottawa. (Photo credit: Green Colander)
In a CBC interview about his decision to prorogue Parliament, Prime Minister Stephen Harper said Canadians are primarily focused on the economy. Thus, he dismissed concerns about Canadian complicity with torture in Afghanistan and ignored the fact that Canadians see climate change as a critical issue.

Mr. Harper has often used the economy as an excuse to reject our international obligations as a signatory of the Kyoto protocol and to rebuff serious discussion about the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, develop renewable energy, and create green jobs. In his recent cabinet shuffle, Mr. Harper reaffirmed that the economy is his government's top priority.

Raising the spectre of economic disaster is a convenient way to downplay or ignore other issues, but global ecological degradation has enormous economic implications. Former World Bank chief economist Lord Stern, in his groundbreaking analysis of the economics of climate change, concluded that taking action to keep heat-trapping greenhouse gas emissions below levels that would cause catastrophic climate change could require investment of two to three per cent of annual global GDP. That's a huge amount of money, but such a massive investment would create jobs and move us to a sustainable and healthy energy future. Lord Stern also pointed out that failing to bring down greenhouse gas emissions will destroy the economy, costing more than the First and Second World Wars combined!

How can anyone who claims to be concerned about the economy ignore this?

The challenges we face are far more profound than just economic collapse. They threaten the very existence of civilization. The environmental crisis is not just about greenhouse gas emissions, toxic pollution, disappearing forests, or vanishing species. It's about whether the biosphere can continue to support top predators, and no species is higher up the food chain than we humans.

In a debate in the U.K.'s Guardian newspaper between George Monbiot and Paul Kingsnorth (Aug. 18, 2009), both well-known writers and environmentalists, Mr. Kingsnorth refers to a set of graphs with the same horizontal axis measuring time from 1750 to 2000. The graphs measure "population levels, CO2 concentration in the atmosphere, exploitation of fisheries, destruction of tropical forests, paper consumption, number of motor vehicles, water use, the rate of species extinction and the totality of the human economy's gross domestic product."

What's amazing is that although they measure such disparate factors, the graphs' curves are almost identical: "A line begins on the left of the page, rising gradually as it moves to the right. Then, in the last inch or so - around 1950 - it veers steeply upwards."

We are familiar with these curves, especially for population. Try this: Take a piece of paper and draw a horizontal line representing time, but now ranging from 150,000 years ago (when our species appeared on Earth) to the present. For more than 99 per cent, the curve is virtually flat, rising imperceptibly until finally reaching a billion in the last pencil-width of time around 1830. Then the curve leaps straight up off the page to 6.8 billion now. Nothing can rise so steeply without hitting limits, resulting in rapid collapse.

Mr. Kingsnorth's conclusion? "The root cause of all these trends is the same: a rapacious human economy bringing the world swiftly to the brink of chaos."

He argues that many of us, including "much of the mainstream environmental movement", ignore this reality because we "are still wedded to a vision of the future as an upgraded version of the present. We still believe in 'progress', as lazily defined by western liberalism." Although I lean toward Mr. Monbiot's somewhat more optimistic arguments in the debate, I fear Mr. Kingsnorth makes some undeniable points.

"Climate change is teetering on the point of no return while our leaders bang the drum for more growth," Mr. Kingsnorth argues. "The economic system we rely upon cannot be tamed without collapsing, for it relies upon that growth to function."

We cannot keep fooling ourselves into thinking that simply recycling and composting, replacing light bulbs, and buying hybrid cars will get us out of the jam we're in. These are important, but they're only a start. Our blind and relentless commitment to continued growth is the very heart of the crisis. If Mr. Harper is serious about the economy being our highest priority, he'd better start to address the state of the global ecosphere. Climate change is the place to start.

Source: David Suzuki Science Matters