

University of Washington Focus the Nation
The Politics and Ethics of Finding Solutions Panel
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Summarized by Kate Stoll

Moderator Andrew Light—Professor of Philosophy and the Evans School
KC Golden—Policy Director for Climate Solutions
Stephen Gardiner—Professor of Philosophy
Ed Miles—School of Marine Affairs and JISAO
Michael Robinson-Dorn—Dean UW Law School, Berman Environmental Law School

Introduction

Moderator Andrew Light briefly introduced the panelists, and then displayed a Google map of all the Focus the Nation events across the country, demonstrating that Focus the Nation is the largest teach-in in US history.

Next KC Golden took the stage and told the audience that we are at a tipping point in the climate change movement and the fire of the movement is found in its student leaders. We need to take climate change out of the “environmental problem” box and put it in the “rising to the opportunity” box. In order to find common ground, we need to work across ideological boundaries. For example, the word “climate” has become polarized and partisan. The word “solutions”, however, is unifying. We can re-frame this issue as national security, energy independence, and economic opportunity. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “I have a dream.” He did not say “I have a nightmare, or I have an issue or a problem”. We should “be part of the dream.” Golden reminded the audience of current legislation including the Climate Action and Green Jobs bill, but we must learn from previous lessons. The California Proposition 87, which proposed taxing oil extraction to pay for green energy, originally polled at 70% support, but the oil companies invested \$100 million into a campaign claiming that Prop 87 supporters are “eco-elitists” trying to hurt the poor and working people. Climate solutions invested \$40 million to support the proposition, but in the end it lost by 10 points. Green policy can be progressive and economically just. Cap and trade *can* be fair to the poor.

Stephen Gardiner continued the conversation by giving the philosopher’s perspective on climate change solutions. “Philosophers care about WHY we should do something.” WHAT we should do is set up by UN framework or the Convention on Climate Change, which the US agreed to in 1994. What do ethics have to do with climate change? Science provides information, but value judgments are outside of science’s realm—which is where philosophy and ethics come in. The basic questions of climate policy are 1) where do you set a global ceiling? and 2) how do we distribute emissions under a global ceiling? Under question one, three topics need to be addressed: 1) the needs of the current people; 2) our obligations to future people; and 3) our obligations to plants and animals and nature. We need to find a balance between these three obligations. Under question two addressing emission distribution, three more topics need to be addressed: 1) historical responsibility; 2) global poverty and inequality; and 3) the role of energy consumption in human lives. Developed countries must take the lead for four reasons: 1) we caused it, 2) we’re rich, 3) we said we would help back in 1994, and 4) if we don’t help, no one else will. We must act now.

Ed Miles began with the sobering fact that climate change is on a very long timescale. CO₂ can stay around for 50 to 200 years. Understanding this should affect the design of international regimes. However, there is a long latency of effect of any policy to regulate emissions. “Climate change is the ultimate collective action problem.” The US is the biggest hurdle to solutions. Coal is another large problem because coal is *very* plentiful and cheap. Even as oil is getting expensive, coal will remain plentiful and cheap, therefore it *will* be used. The price of coal must be sequestration, but this will likely take two decades to implement. The first major flaw of proposed solutions is the *global* scale conference style. We should focus on big greenhouse gas emitters, not the entire world. The second major flaw in current solution plans is that they ignore the little time we have to respond. Those who will be hardest hit by global warming are the same as those who suffer now. *Reversal*, not stabilization should be the goal. We, the creators of the climate problem, are obligated to drive the CO₂ levels back to where we found it, i.e. to pre-industrial levels.

Michael Robinson-Dorn explored the relationship between law and ethics. Law is implicit. Legal imperative follows from the ethical and political imperative. Law is what we turn to police our own conduct. Is there a legal obligation to take action now? Is there a legal obligation to wait? Pushing for change involves litigation and legislation. We need incentives to get to a post-CO₂ world. The recent *Massachusetts vs. EPA* ruling merely found that the EPA has the *authority* to regulate GHG, but it did not find that the EPA has the *obligation* to regulate GHG. Ultimately, a *law* will settle the CO₂ cap. However, just because you pass a law, doesn't mean it will be enforced. For example, look at the Clean Water Act—we still have water pollution (although there have been vast improvements). Just because we set a CO₂ cap at 450 ppm does not mean it will happen. Traditionally, environmental problems are rarely framed as human rights problems. What are the legal and ethical implications of climate change? For example, the black American population distribution correlates with poverty levels, and in addition, several areas with large black populations are at high risk for climate change impacts including the coastal southern states and the eastern seaboard. Choices we make have ethical consequences, such as sequestration, but where do we sequester? The answer will be influenced by private property rights. We can't just pass a law and expect a solution.

Question session:

Q: California vs. EPA failed, so what can we do?

Miles asked the audience to remember that the EPA is guided by the White House; therefore an administrative change is required to tackle these issues.

Q: Population is the crux of the energy and climate change crises—what are the ethics of population control?

Gardiner pointed out that in developed countries, population is actually declining, because of wealth. The irony is that our wealth was gained because of fossil fuels. In third world countries population is increasing, but their emissions are low. So we can't pawn the climate change problem on third world countries just because they have a lot of people.

Miles: Scientists have predicted the population stabilization level to be 9 to 11 billion people.

Population, emissions, and land use are the three major problems leading to climate change.

Unfortunately, these three problems are synergistic.

Q: Has climate change created a new ethical paradigm? Gardiner and Light responded that climate change is an issue of our obligation to future generations. Everyone is in consensus that we must act.

Climate change will magnify existing problems. Solutions are not charity, rather they are our direct responsibility because we are causing the problem. Golden said that social movements succeed if they have an irresistible core moral truth such as intergenerational equity. For example, in WWII our country mobilized to a solution because we all felt a community moral action, therefore everyone was willing to play his or her part. Community moral action gives incentive for individual action. This community feeling has deteriorated over the last 20 or 30 years. Miles continued by saying that the US must lead, but the whole world must cooperate. Robinson-Dorn agreed that the US is in the best position to get the world moving, and Gardiner chimed in that the US has the money to make a difference.

Q. How can we know about the impending disaster that is global warming and the small time frame in which we have to make a drastic change and not be pessimistic or feel defeated?

Golden agreed that there is a cognitive dissonance to the climate change problem—that is, the seriousness of the problem in contrast to the lack of action. But we must not be defeated by pessimism. Rather we must put one foot in front of another and take action. For collective mobilization, we require real leaders. We don't yet have an event like Pearl Harbor around which a leader can take the opportunity to galvanize the country. Leadership must take place on a very non-average day. Light ended by telling the audience to get involved in this election! This is likely the most important election of our lifetime. Do not let the global warming issue get lost. The next president needs to act on climate change as quickly as the Australian president did, making climate change solutions the first issue to address once in office.