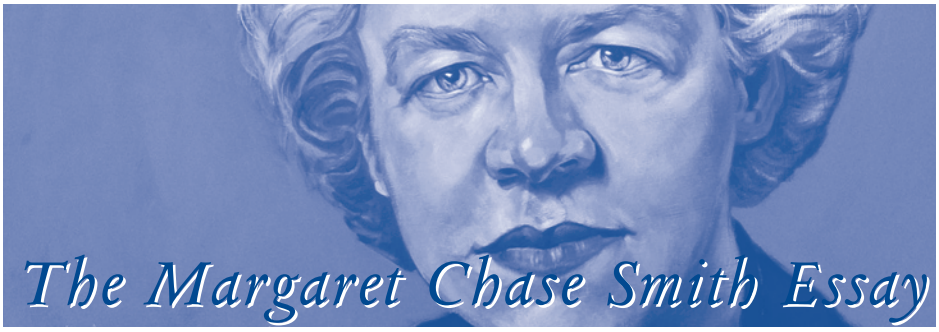
Maine Policy Review

Volume 17
Issue 2 *Climate Change and Energy*

2008

Challenging Climate Change

Olympia J. Snowe
U.S. Senate



Challenging Climate Change

by U.S. Senator Olympia J. Snowe

America is confronting the pressing and pervasive threat of global climate change. This is not a Democratic or a Republican issue; not a liberal or a conservative issue. This is a *human* issue … a *planetary* issue … a *moral* issue. It is a matter and a question of *stewardship*, of responsibility not only to ourselves and the world in which we live, but *most critically* to a future we will never see but are obliged to protect.

I have long held a vision of politics and public life as positive and constructive endeavors, and believe in reaching out to bridge consensus to facilitate progress in the legislative system. But increasingly, and regrettably, energy and climate change solutions, which must be considered in tandem, have taken a back seat to sound bytes, when it is the merits of an argument that should determine the course of these issues in our government.

Some skeptics in this debate simply refuse to grasp that environmental protection is not merely compatible with economic growth, but can also create economic opportunities. If there were ever a need for economic opportunities it is now as our nation—and the global economy—heads forward on an uncharted path into this still-young 21st century.

Indeed, it has been my concern about climate change on a global scale and the lack of serious action in Washington that led me to accept an invitation in 2004 to be the co-chair of the International Climate Change Taskforce with the Right Honorable Stephen Byers, MP, of the United Kingdom, along with taskforce member Professor John Holdren, now President Obama's nominee for director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy, and Taskforce Scientific Advisor Dr. Rajendra Pachauri of India, chair, United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Our goal was to develop recommendations to engage all countries, developed and developing, to forge an international consensus for action on climate change. Most notably, this included the U.S., China, and India, which are not bound to reduce greenhouse gas emissions under the international treaty, the Kyoto Protocol.

Subsequently, our non-partisan taskforce published a series of recommendations in January 2005, "Meeting the Climate Challenge" (www.snowe.senate.gov/iccreport.pdf). And right at the top of our list, based on scientific consensus, was the necessity of preventing the average global temperature from rising more than two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) over the course of this century. This possibility correlates with an atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide (CO_2) molecules of 450 parts per million. We are currently at 385 parts per million.

Unquestionably, we reached a historic threshold in the global-warming debate with the unveiling of the United Nations'

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) "2007 Summary for Policymakers." It is notable that, because of its work, the IPCC shared the 2008 Nobel Peace Prize. The IPCC's declaration that *human activity* is "unequivocally" the main driver behind global warming was a watershed moment for both science and public policy. It is a serious determination from the most respected collection of climate change scientists—more than 2,500 scientific peer reviewers, 800 contributing authors, and 450 lead authors from more than 130 countries—coalescing unanimously around the seminal conclusion that directly links the actions of humankind to global warming. The IPCC (2007: 5) report states, "Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice, and rising global average sea level."

Additionally, for the first time since its initial assessment in 1990, the IPCC concluded there is at least a 90 percent chance that human activities through the burning of fossil fuels are the major cause of global warming. If we were told—in any sphere—that we had at least a 90 percent chance of averting a disaster through changes we ourselves could make, wouldn't we take action? Is the IPCC finding not a compelling reason to take the subsequent logical steps when climate change is occurring even beyond the projections that were outlined just decades ago?

What also should give us serious pause is the report from the U.S. Climate Change Science Program Office of May 29, 2008, "Scientific Assessment of the Effects of Global Change on the United States." It warned of the effects of climate change through direct impacts from increased intensity of extreme weather events, contending that increasing global temperatures, rising sea levels, and changing weather patterns will pose significant challenges to the nation's roads, airports, railways, transit systems, and ports—networks vital not only to the entire U.S. economy but to our quality of life.

Margaret Chase Smith's adherence to her conscience during her watershed moment in 1950 reiterated that conscience is a critical guiding post in public discourse. Similarly, I strongly believe science must continue to direct policy instead of policy directing science.

As a leader on this consequential matter, I can state from firsthand experience that we have the capacity to make the changes that science dictates must be made to sustain us well into the future. Laws that I helped champion in the Congress demonstrate that change is not only possible, but has already come to pass. One such law has increased fuel economy standards in the vehicles we drive. Senator Dianne Feinstein of California and I fought for increases our nation had not made in 30 years, even though the technology was available to do so. The law will save at least 11 million barrels of oil per day in 2020 and save consumers $25 billion in that year alone. Global warming pollution reductions will be almost 200 million metric tons per year, equivalent to approximately three percent of all U.S. emissions in 2005.

In 2005, I authored tax incentives for builders to construct and retrofit commercial buildings that are significantly more energy efficient than standard buildings. The law gives critical tax credits for energy-efficient upgrades for existing homes, such as hot water boilers, energy-efficient windows and doors, and extends a tax credit for the construction of energy-efficient new homes of up to $2,000. We must not saddle future generations with the inefficiency of buildings constructed today, and I believe it is imperative that these energy-efficiency tax incentives be expanded.

In aggregate, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) states this market transformation will create more than 370,000 new jobs to install and certify energy-efficiency measures in our communities—jobs that can't be outsourced—and will save consumers and businesses money on their utility bills. NRDC estimates that annual CO_2 emissions are reduced by 48 million metric tons of carbon equivalent after 10 years or 2.5 percent of total U.S. annual greenhouse gas emissions. I truly hope my Maine constituents are taking this opportunity made available to them through these tax credits, saving money, saving energy, and lessening their carbon footprint.

Although these are significant steps forward to reducing CO_2 emissions, it is clear that other bold steps are required now. One absolutely essential step in the ongoing debate is to recognize a price for carbon. To move forward, Congress must place a market-based carbon cap-and-trade system in place for a pricing framework that ensures that low-carbon technologies will actually be developed and disseminated on a large enough scale to make the change from the Industrial Revolution to the next energy revolution that will sustain our economy and foster high-paying jobs right here at home.

To that end, I was immensely pleased to hear of then President-elect Obama's statement to the Governor's Conference in California on November 18, 2008, where he said, "My presidency will mark a new chapter in America's leadership on climate

change that will strengthen our security and create millions of new jobs in the process. That will start with a federal cap and trade system."

A carbon system should be approached today modeled after the sulfur dioxide cap-and-trade program for acid rain, which established a minimum cap of emissions based upon a scientific underpinning of how to bring dying forests and lakes back to life. Once a trading system was in place, it gave power plants the incentive to receive allowances if they met the cap and sell them to another plant that did not meet the target. Cleaning up the environment turned into a profit mechanism for those who cut their pollution.

Emissions were cut 30 percent more than the law required; electricity prices did not increase for consumers as predicted by opponents; warnings of $6 billion in cost for the acid rain program turned out to be closer to $1.5 billion; and the overall U.S. economy grew by 5.4 percent. All of the predicted bogeymen were just that—scare tactics. When the acid rain law is fully carried out in 2010, estimates show annual health and environmental benefits of $100 million. Numerous deaths, hospitalizations, and visits to emergency rooms due to respiratory illnesses will have been prevented. Our lakes will be more fishable, and health and visibility in our national forests and parks will increase, all vital to the important Northeast tourist industry.

We should apply this same cap-and-trade program to capture the nation's carbon from our economy, while understanding that it will be vastly more complicated. The European Union used the U.S. acid rain program as its model in setting up the world's first carbon cap-and-trade program, the EU Emissions Trading System. Despite the numerous sovereign countries involved and the lack of extensive experience with carbon emissions trading, the new system appears to be performing well.

In light of inaction at the federal level, several of the states have joined together for cap-and-trade efforts. I am proud of our state of Maine, which has again led the way on environmental issues and has mandated a limit on greenhouse gas emissions. As a partner in the 10-state Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, or RGGI, Maine is involved in creation of a cap-and-trade system to limit CO_2 emissions from power plants. This is a critical step forward for Maine and the country, as there are now at least 23 states that have joined one of three regional partnerships that will require either greenhouse gas or CO_2 emissions reductions. This not only demonstrates that reductions in carbon emissions are possible, but provides a model for federal action.

Yet, while half of the states have moved out on the vanguard as their citizens have demanded, the U.S. Congress has dallied, hiding behind the red herring of arguments of scientific uncertainty, rather than considering the truth that peer-reviewed science has revealed. At the same time, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and others are considering cap-and-trade systems as well that could mesh with an international agreement among numerous countries of the world to reduce global emissions. Indeed, the International Climate Change Taskforce specifically recommended that all developed countries introduce national mandatory cap-and-trade systems for carbon emissions and construct these systems for future integration into a single global market.

On the international stage, in Poznan, Poland, in December 2008, the world community passed the midpoint in attempting to negotiate a new global treaty to replace the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which expires in 2012. The 2007 IPCC report has catalyzed global discussions and decisions and helped to form the basis for international policy.

As President Obama assumes office and begins to shape a new U.S. negotiating policy, enthusiasm and actions for moving forward on several key issues will infuse new vigor into negotiations around the world for the next United Nations Framework Convention in Copenhagen, Denmark, in December 2009. Much work is to be done before then through at least four meetings during the year that, it is hoped, will get negotiators within striking distance for an effective and binding treaty. At the very least, by next December there should be the basic architecture in place for strong intermediary principles that place all countries within striking distance of a range of targets and support for mitigation actions for developing countries.

And there is no doubt in my mind that the U.S. must work with the international community to forge a climate change agreement that leads to a consensus among the world's major economies —those responsible for at least 80 percent of global emissions. At the same time, it is critical we ensure that it is equitable to our economy, to U.S. businesses, and to U.S. jobs. This undertaking should occur in tandem with efforts in the Senate and House of Representatives to pass cap-and-trade legislation. While neither body may be able to move fast enough to have actually accomplished this by the end of 2009, I am certain that, working with the new president, there will be a strong show of intent on the part of both bodies to demonstrate to the world we are serious as we address one of the most dire issues facing us this century.

The climate change debate is *no longer* a question of science; it is now a question of our *political will* to provide *solutions* to the problem. We are racing against the clock, and cannot forget there is a long lag time in climatic systems. The pollution from Henry Ford's first automobile is still in the atmosphere, and what we put into the atmosphere today will remain there for at least 100 years. It continues to accrue as we continue to add the rising costs of inaction onto the future credit cards of our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

Reducing our CO_2 emissions means reducing our use of *all* oil. And when we spend nearly $500 billion purchasing imported oil, helping to finance the ambitions of radical leaders, do we really want to say we're unable to summon the innovative, "can-do" spirit on which this country was built to break our dependence on fossil fuels and oil from abroad?

Instead of forging solutions, we have been idly sitting at a huge crossroads not willing to make the decisive decisions that climate change and a failed U.S. energy policy require. The time for bold action is long past due, and we are now forced to accelerate our sustainable policies to make up for decades of squandered chances.

REFERENCES

IPCC. 2007. "Summary for Policymakers." Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, ed. S. Solomon, D. Qin, M. Manning, Z. Chen, M. Marquis, K.B. Averyt, M.Tignor and H.L. Miller. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York.

Senator Olympia J. Snowe was first elected to the U.S. Congress in 1978, and in 2006, she was reelected to her third term in the Senate. She is a longtime leader on climate change, dating back to her tenure as a member of the House of Representatives. More recently, Sen. Snowe co-sponsored the Lieberman and McCain Climate Stewardship Act, introduced in every Congress since 2003, which includes the central tenet of cap-and-trade and use of free markets to reduce carbon emissions. From 2004 to 2006, she served as co-chair of the International Climate Change Taskforce and in 2007, she was a central author, with Sen. Dianne Feinstein, of the Ten-in-Ten Fuel Economy Act—the first legislative increase of fuel economy standards for vehicles since 1975.