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Earth in crisis: environmental policy in an international context
The Policy Makers

Andrew Blowers
At this point in the programme let's take the discussion a bit further. We've been hearing what science and scientists bring to policy making and how the influence of science has increased. But what about those who have to frame and implement that policy? What constraints are they under? What difficulties do they face when trying to bring about the changes that will be necessary to solve climate change and safeguard the planet? We'll be hearing in a moment from journalist and environmental consultant Fred Pearce, but first here's Patrick Harvie, co-convenor of the Scottish Green party and a member of the Scottish Parliament.

Patrick Harvie
We have to think about not just what's scientifically correct, but also what's politically possible, what's economically feasible, there's a whole host of different hoops that we've got to get our policies to jump through before they look like they're gonna work. It's not just about the science. Obviously the science has to lead, and I think that's a fundamentally new concept in politics, to have scientific constraints to determine the direction of policy. Whereas previously everybody's worked within economic constraints, the money's got to add up, now however, a whole host of other scientific constraints have to be there in terms of carbon emissions, a whole host of other sustainability factors. So the political parties are filtering that through economic, political and practical considerations. One recent experience that the Climate Change Committee had was we got the Tyndall Centre to come up and run a workshop looking at the computer based emissions modelling tool that they, that they've got. You're sat there with a screen in front of you, it looks like a dashboard and you're, you're controlling every little factor in the economy from where you get your energy from to transport needs, economic growth; a whole host of different factors. Now it's a difficult enough challenge to try and get the numbers to add up, to get your 80 percent cut in emissions by 2050. But if you then have to start thinking about each of the changes you've made. What's politically possible? What will voters vote for? What will businesses tell you they can deliver? What will the public sector tell you it can deliver? And who's gonna pay for it all? So you can look at those dials and levers on the computer system and see how much of a challenge it is even at a technical level, theoretically, to reach your 80 percent cut. Then you've got a whole host of other problems. Whether that's about the money, whether it's about the political acceptability of different changes and whether it's about maintaining the kind of consensus across the parties. So yeah, short answer, it's not easy.

Fred Pearce
I think politics are politicians are pretty feeble these days. If we go back to the middle of the 20th Century, politicians did believe in their ability to take charge of events and transform events, that's partly I guess because they'd been engaged in world wars, they knew that politicians could determine how the planet progressed. I think the modern generation of politicians are much more constrained. They're much more feeble; they're much more fearful of lobby groups; they're much more fearful of electorates. Probably we have to turn that round. But right now more power probably exists in the hands of consumers and large corporations and maybe those are going to be the driving forces that will demand that governments start taking real action on climate change.

Andrew Blowers
But if, if we look at this whole question about the future then the politician is at the mercy, in a sense, of the information that they have got. Now that information largely comes from science and the science very often, is either not a consensus or has a whole degree of uncertainties. In other words, the room for doubt and the room for procrastination is immense. Don't you see that a serious problem in terms of this idea of political willpower, sorting things out for the future?

Fred Pearce
Politicians are used to operating in policy arenas where there is a great deal of uncertainty. They take decisions about legal systems and how many people we lock up and what sentencing policies should be and how much to invest in health services, based on pretty uncertain data. They make decisions about economic policy based on pretty uncertain projections from economists and a climate in which economists are constantly disagreeing with each other. Politicians, if they want to, are well used to navigating their way through quite large areas of uncertainty. So I think it's a pretty poor excuse if they say that because the scientists don't agree about every detail about how climate change is going to play out, and that's really where the areas of argument, substantive arguments are, that that is an excuse for not doing things.

Andrew Blowers
Yes. But they would say and I think with some purchase, that they simply cannot wreck parts of an economy in the short run in order to achieve a long term benefit. They can only move forward if there is a support and the consent for them to move forward. Now that consent can partly come from leadership, but to some extent they are pretty dependent, it seems to me, on societal forces that aren't simply driven entirely by politics.

Fred Pearce
That's true, but there is, at an individual level, there is a lot of concern among the electorate and among consumers about climate change. And there are many more people who will very happily go along with the consensus which says we've got to do something about climate change. Similarly, in the business community, there are losers but there are also winners from the kind of policy options that we're talking about. So yes, of course, there are always conflicting lobby groups; there are some people who are for things and some people who are against things. But I think it's ridiculous to ask them to balance some of these options and take a long term view.

Patrick Harvie
It's not always appropriate to think that we can be completely free of risk. Particularly as we look at climate change there are big questions marks still about how serious this will become; about how much the feedback systems will start to kick in and when and about how much progress we can make in the right direction between now and 2050. So we're never going to find that we've licked this one and that we've got all the boxes ticked and the climate is now an area of political or scientific certainty. We're gonna have to live with a certain amount of doubt, a certain number of question marks and be willing to, yes, make every effort to make progress in the right direction, but not think that, that because there's some area of uncertainty that's an inherent failure. The scientists are telling us what science can tell us, which is very often about doubt and risk and uncertainty. The politicians have to make a judgement call and the voters do as well.

Brian Wynne
Very often of course distributed forms of response like energy efficiency measures distributed right throughout the economy require a lot of investment of diverse kinds and a lot of resources to people to act then in a sensible way. So you suggest that to politicians and you often find that they will respond with assumptions and claims that actually the public is not gonna vote for that. The public is wanting a convenient life, it doesn't want to change its gas-guzzling transport, etc, etc. And all of those I think are questionable assumptions. So in that case, a politician who actually owned up and said "right, we're gonna have to actually do something drastic and it's gonna cost, but we're gonna make sure that that cost is as fairly spread as it possibly could be and we're gonna give people other resources to deal with it," - I think they might find that actually the vote consequences wouldn't be quite so appalling as they would claim them to be.

Simon Retallack
There's a problem in how climate change is communicated to members of the public...

Andrew Blowers
Simon Retallack is an Associate Director of the Institute Of Public Policy Research and heads their Climate Change team.

Simon Retallack
If ultimately we're interested in solving the climate problem we need the public on board - either to provide permission to policy makers to do the right thing, adopt the right policies and, hopefully, change their own behaviour so they reduce their own contribution. But if we describe the problem as being so terrifying, global, almost biblical in nature, the reaction we are seeing from the public is that they switch off. They cannot relate to it, they don't see it as a problem that they can possibly make a difference to. On the one hand they read stories that tell them about this terrifying global problem and on the other they're told to turn their thermostats down or switch off lights. And again, there's that unconvincing mismatch in the scale of the problem and the effort that's apparently supposed to solve it and they don't buy it.

Andrew Watkinson
I think this issue of communication is an important one. One of the problems with the newspaper coverage of this issue is that it's essentially all doom and gloom from the point of view of climate warming and these extremes, the public find it very difficult to comprehend. "What can we do about this?"" It's beyond my individual control". And so we're aware, as scientists, that coming out with very alarmist statements has a major effect on the public and on policy makers. It almost disempowers them. And so to a certain extent that's one of the reasons why I think it's much better to concentrate: what are the most likely increases in temperature that we're going to see rather than the extremes.