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The great inaction

Why is climate change so hard to tackle?

A problem of unprecedented scope and intractability, to which current responses are unequal



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IT IS MORE than a quarter of a century since the leaders of the world, gathered in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, committed their countries to avoiding “dangerous anthropogenic interference in the climate system” by signing the UN convention

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have, after huge subsidies, joined nuclear reactors and dams as affordable ways of generating gigawatts of electricity without burning fossil fuels. As our Technology Quarterly this week shows, parts of the energy system not easily electrified—some forms of transport, industrial processes like making steel and cement, heating offices and homes—could also be decarbonised with coming technologies. And policymakers have tools to bring about change, including carbon taxes, regulation, subsidies and, if they choose, command and control.

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Yet when the parties to the convention on climate change meet again in Katowice, Poland, on December 2nd, it will be against a backdrop not just of rising temperatures but also of rising despair. The problem is obvious; the stakes are huge; solutions are within reach. So why is the response inadequate?

One reason is special interests. A formidable lobby exists to warn of the dangers of climate change. But when it counts—as, say, in Washington state's recent ballot initiative on a carbon tax—its antagonists in the fossil-fuel industry smack a chequebook more forcefully on the other side of the scales. On the right that has bred a culture which flatly rejects the evidence.

But the chief reason is that the world has no history of dealing with such a difficult problem, nor the institutions to do so. The harm done by climate change is not visited on the people, or the generations, that have the best chance of acting against it. Those who suffer most harm are and will be predominantly poor and in poor countries. The people called on to pay the costs of reducing that harm are and will be mostly much better off. The *gilets jaunes* angry at increases in French fuel taxes (see [article](#)) and the family which in 20 years will be forced from land in Mexico by drought know nothing of each other. But the protester does know that such taxes are not being raised in America or Russia.

The better off are more able to adapt to climate change than the poor, and thus have less cause to avoid change. And making the poor wealthy enough to adapt involves economic growth that is still mostly powered by fossil fuels. Although no one should be asked to forgo that growth, it has consequences.

What might produce a moment of clarity to break this impasse? One possibility is the sheer impact of climate change. Geophysical features of Earth are already being redrawn. The dry edges of the tropics are heading polewards at about 50km a decade. The line of aridity defining the American West has moved roughly 230km east since 1980. The sea ice in the Arctic is a shadow of its former self. Nobody can know whether the world will one day wake up and cut emissions to zero. Even if it does, the main problem—the stock of greenhouse gases already emitted—will remain. A crash programme to suck carbon dioxide out of the air would take vast resources and years to make a difference.

Another spur might be innovation. The world would have many fewer firms developing electric cars were it not for Elon Musk and Tesla. But without policies to spread innovation, such as a carbon tax or subsidy and regulation, inventiveness alone is insufficient. The technology that matters is the technology being used. And citizens have resisted climate-change policies.

Then there are novel forms of international action. Easier than global agreements are small, like-minded groups: I'll do cement, you do steel and then we can share the fruits. Such a "climate club" approach can shrink the free-rider problem. If big economies are willing to be generous, the number of countries prepared to cut emissions could rise quickly.

Ultimately, though, countries suffering from climate change may resort to unilateral measures to improve their own situation. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change notes that reflecting sunlight back into space before it warms the Earth's surface, perhaps using particles—a form of “solar geoengineering”—is “highly likely” to limit temperature rises. Geoengineering is within the scope of a country like Belgium or Brazil. But its effects are not fully predictable, nor will they be evenly spread; some schemes could harm some places. It is no substitute for mitigation and its planned use by one country could terrify others, spreading instability. Geoengineering is worth studying, but it could leave the world an even more dangerous place.

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