

## 'ENVIRONMENTALISM' CAN NEVER ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE<sup>1</sup>

David Roberts©

The shape of modern US environmentalism isn't fit to tackle the scale and scope of climate change. In my opening statement at a debate the other night, I had 60 seconds to reach a half-drunk, half-interested crowd. In those circumstances, you realize pretty quickly that you have to cut straight to the core of things. I hadn't really thought it out in advance, but I realized just before I went on stage that the first thing I wanted to say is simple: I'm not an environmentalist and these aren't environmental challenges.

There's been a lot of talk lately about what went wrong on the climate bill, but it's always struck me that the original wrong turn was the introduction of climate change to American politics as an "environmental issue." It is the mother of all framing errors -- the one from which all others flow.

Environmentalism has a well-defined socio-economic niche in American life. There are distinct cultural markers; familiar tropes and debates; particular groups designated to lobby for change and economic interests accustomed to fighting it; conventional methods of litigation, regulation, and legislation. Environmental issues take a very specific shape.

The thing is, that shape doesn't fit climate change. Climate change -- or rather, the larger problem of which climate change is a symptom -- isn't like the issues that American environmentalism evolved to address. The solutions that American environmental politics are capable of producing are not commensurate with the scale and scope of the challenge climate change represents. A clear understanding of that challenge renders comically absurd the notion that it can or should be the province of a niche progressive interest group. It's just too big for that.

Humanity has passed, or will soon pass, what we understand to be the safe boundary conditions of a number of global biophysical systems. Our trajectory amounts to an extraordinary, even existential roll of the dice. Can we survive in conditions that humanity has literally never faced? Can we bring our species in line with the long-term sustainable carrying capacity of the earth before earth does it for us? Can we make the shift while still growing in learning, prosperity, and freedom? The stakes could not be higher. If we meet the challenge of sustainability -- and it's a big if -- it will be a tidal shift in human history on par with the agriculture, industrialization, or democracy itself.

"Environmentalism" is simply not equipped to transform the basis of human culture. It grew up to address a specific, bounded set of issues. For 50 years, American environmental politics has been about restraining the amount of damage industries can do. Environmental campaigners have developed a set of strategies for that purpose, designed to overcome the resistance of industries and politicians to such restraints. And they've been successful in a number of areas. So when climate change entered American politics via environmentalism, that is the model into which it was slotted. Environmental campaigners set about restraining the amount of greenhouse gases industry can emit, and industry set about resisting. Greens and industry

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<sup>1</sup> David Roberts, Grist, part of the Guardian Environment Network, [guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk), Wednesday 11 August 2010

fought ferociously, but in the wake of the victories of the '70s, the public largely watched with indifference, barring a few episodes where support swung one way or another (usually as much due to economic circumstances as anything).

To be clear, I'm in no way blaming environmentalists or the environmental movement for the fact that climate change is seen as an environmental issue. They were the ones who recognized the danger first and have put their blood and sweat into addressing it, to their immense credit. But the fact remains that the entry of the problem into American politics via environmentalism has set it on a certain cultural and political trajectory that is both inadequate and extremely difficult to escape.

Addressing the climate challenge will crucially involve restraining industry emissions (the vaunted "cap"). But that is only one of myriad strategies and changes that will be necessary. The environmental advocacy community has tried, of late, to reshape itself to the contours of the problem before it. It has tried to act with a more singular focus, in a more unified way, and to bring other interest groups (military, religious, etc.) into the fold. It has tried to reorient around a more forward-thinking, positive agenda ("clean energy"). Contrary to a lot of the sniping you hear these days, the efforts of those involved have been heroic.

But it's an impossible task. There is no siloed progressive interest group that can engineer the wholesale reindustrialization of the United States. Period. No amount of clever framing or thoughtful policy proposals can overcome the basic limitations of interest group politics. Many green leaders are now saying that what's missing is a climate movement. That's obviously true in some sense; this will be the work of generations. But the question is whether "the environmental movement" can catalyze a big enough movement to be effective on this problem.

What needs to happen is for concern over earth's biophysical limitations to transcend the environmental movement -- and movement politics, as handed down from the '60s, generally. It needs to take its place alongside the economy and national security as a priority concern of American elites across ideological and organizational lines. It needs to become a shared concern of every American citizen regardless of ideological orientation or level of political engagement. That is the only way we can ever hope to bring about the urgent necessary changes.