

FIRST DISPATCH FROM THE CLIMATE CHANGE FRONT: NO PROGRESS¹

Craig McInnes[©]

The BBC television series MI-5 carries on the British literary tradition of fictional accounts of a morally ambiguous spy-versus-spy world where good guys have to do bad things in the service of a greater good. The plot for one episode recently shown on PBS television revolved around a radical environmental group that had got wind of a secret government planning document called Aftermath that laid out a strategy for Britain to prosper in a post-global-warming world.

The document was based on the prediction that all efforts to curb global warming are doomed to failure because governments are incapable of acting against their own short-term economic interests. Like all good fiction, this episode is grounded in a reality that viewers can recognize. The episode originally aired in 2006, but based on the latest report on greenhouse-gas emissions in British Columbia, the notion that we are incapable of effective action on global warming is just as relevant today.

B.C. has been a leader in the fight against global warming in Canada. Premier Gordon Campbell pushed through a carbon tax that continues to increase each year and the legislature set a series of goals for reducing emissions, the first of which we will hit in 2012. That goal, set in legislation passed in 2008, commits B.C. to reduce greenhouse gas levels from 2007 levels by six per cent by 2012, by 18 per cent by 2016.

Earlier this month, the government released the annual inventory report for 2008, the first report that covers part of the post-2007 goal period.² So how are we doing? Not so well.

Rather than starting down the road toward reducing emissions, we increased our output by one per cent compared to 2007, the benchmark year. That could be a statistical blip. The greenhouse inventory report cautions against making too much of changes from year to year. But taking a longer view doesn't help. Between 2005 and 2008, emissions increased by 4.6 per cent, with the most significant increase coming from energy production.

Energy, primarily natural gas, has been the bright spot in the provincial economy over the past few years. And the government has made it clear that where the development of natural gas resources conflicts with its goals for fighting climate change, short term economic considerations will come first.

The press release accompanying the emissions report looked on what someone in public affairs must have considered to be the bright side of the latest numbers. Since 1990, the per capita production of greenhouse gases has declined from 16.9 tonnes per person to 15.7 in 2008. On the face of it, that's progress of the kind we need to address climate change. What it really does is illustrate the magnitude of the challenge we face in trying to reduce emissions in a world where the population is continuing to grow. In B.C., while we reduced per capita emissions by

¹ Vancouver Sun, September 22, 2010

² (http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/cas/mitigation/ghg_inventory/index.html)

seven per cent, the population increased by 33 per cent, from 3.3 million in 1990 to 4.4 million in 2008.

According to the science of climate change, what matters is not per capita production, but total production. So the value of reducing our personal carbon footprints is offset by the proliferation of feet, especially in industrialized countries like Canada where even with some recent reductions, we are energy hogs compared to most of the world.

It's possible that when the reports come in for 2009 and 2010, greenhouse gas emissions will have declined because of the recession. But that respite will only be temporary. As long as current trends continue, once the economy bounces back, the upward climb will resume.

In which case, preparing for a post-warming world may become a growth industry.