ECONOMY AND ECOLOGY 13.05.2021

Biden's America is no climate leader

The US administration doesn't recognise America's true responsibility in the climate crisis. Hence, it can't lead the cause for global climate justice

European political elites waited for the winds of pollical change to blow across US coasts. It did, Joe Biden won and that let loose bated breath across Europe, bringing to public whispers from diplomatic corridors. 'We have all been following the electoral process very closely', said European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. A loose translation of that understatement is, 'we are much relieved to see the back of Donald Trump'. Europe's interest is to see its ambassadors enter the White House to talk about climate change now with presumed US leadership resumed.

But the presumptive, self-declared leader is yet to lead. Joe Biden's 'Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad', signed back in January, is a promissory note that demonstrates potential for global climate leadership in general. Should Biden build those aims and objectives into American law, that may as well end the table tennis match between Republicans and Democrats that US politics makes of climate change.

But leadership requires courage that enables action well beyond expectations. Re-joining the Paris Agreement does not exemplify leadership necessary for urgent climate actions that reduce ongoing greenhouse gas pollution. That's normal procedure. Organising a climate talk shop to announce over-due emission reduction targets, which provided a platform for others to say what they have said many times before is in keeping with a 20-year talking tradition. And installing a climate envoy does not reflect the sort of tangible action urgently needed to reduce global temperatures to 1.5°C. But if this shines light on fading hope, US vice president Kamala Harissa says, 'the president is just getting started'. We will know that he is knee-deep in tacking global climate change problems when the scale of global climate justice is balanced. That requires leadership yet unseen.

The US administration does not assume responsibility

The quantitative value of Kamala Harris telling the so-called 'Leaders Summit on Climate' that 'we must recognize the importance of justice in the work that we do' measures about the same to results from global (in)actions on climate change. 'The world is still heading for a temperature rise in excess of 3°C this century', concludes the UN's latest Emissions Gap Report. Global climate justice is nestled deeply within a host of climate change problems needing global leadership. But key signs from the Biden administration and much earlier from its climate envoy suggest the US is not so keen on global climate justice.

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A leader assumes responsibility and paves a path for others to follow. But Washington's key message isn't one of leadership. A leader does not argue, as did Mr Biden while opening the summit, that 'the truth is America represents less than 50 per cent of the world's emissions'. A leader should see no value noting, 'even the United States, for all of our industrial strength, is responsible for only 13 per cent of global emissions,' as did Mr Kerry at his appointment. Never mind the baffling gap between 13 and 50, such statements from an undisputed historic leading polluter are short of leadership values.

Climate change today results from greenhouse gas emissions from past decades. Cumulative greenhouse gas emissions between 1850 and 1990 within the US were 246 billion tonnes, representing 30.7 per cent of global CO2 emissions. This alone suffices to demonstrate US responsibility on global climate justice from which it cannot be absolved, even with Mr Kerry now claiming that 'almost 90 per cent of all of the planet's global emissions come from outside of US borders'. Such ill-advised arguments may only serve perhaps to spawn mocking tweets such as, 'for all the oil we sold, Nigeria is responsible for only less than a percent of global emissions'. Hardly can one imagine value for a leading polluter to squabble as such when as early as 9 years from now, Earth's temperatures will likely reach the crucial 1.5°C, if warming trends continue and politicians chose squabbling over substantive actions.

The truth of the fight for climate justice

Coming back to Mr Biden's 'truth', the really relevant 'truth' related to

global climate justice is this: the wealth of America and industrialised countries were built at the expense of people now suffering the most from climate change impacts. Skipping dodgy numbers, Kamala Harris unwittingly puts it as such, 'the communities hardest hit by climate change are the same communities harmed by wealth and gender inequality, toxic air pollution and so much more. This truth holds around the world.' Surely, but *that* truth holds more firmly on lives in Atakpamé than Los Angeles. Here's what it looks like in Atakpamé.

If you fly to Togo, skip past Lomé and head north, you may just arrive in Atakpamé when school breaks off and see groups of children hopping and skipping along dusty paths on their way home. They seem unaware of several dried streams along their paths. But you may notice no life-form around them. Smartly dressed in uniforms, some slinging school bags branded with logos of western NGOs, you may also see these band of innocents dashing fast past skeleton cows, with skin stretched and neatly draped on their bones, as they graze on caked Earth. Amidst the children's chatter, you may pause to hazard a guess on which among the herd will soon buckle and die. These children, and their parents, who helplessly and hopelessly watch life drain from their cattle deserve justice for an environmental crime they did not commit.

Should you crave a change of scenery, a drive along the coast towards Avepozo will do. And here, the phrase 'sea level rise' may take on personal meaning, as you look but will not find the land on which a fishing village here once sat. And that's because its being bathed beneath the Atlantic Ocean. Survival for those who lived on it meant packing up and leaving the morning after water from the ocean came crashing into their homes while they slept. For you, survival might mean ringing your insurance to file claim on your house and leisure boat, a similar kind of which they used to fish and feed. Surely, as you leave, you would agree that the arm of justice must grip firmer on the 3,000 people who once called Avepozo home, and the millions now living along the coast from Cape Town in South Africa to St. Louis in Senegal?

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Their homes are being washed away as politicians speak of truth that 'holds around the world.' For these many millions, perishing climate change impacts, such as droughts and storms, are not future problems measured on confidence intervals. Such are realities now in the lives of Mozambicans, Zimbabweans and Malawians, who clambered up trees to protect their lives while torrents from Cyclone Idai washed away their homes.

Europe's miscalculation on American leadership

The problem with the European miscalculation in expecting American leadership on global climate change is that American interests end at fostering democracy and don't extend to leading the cause for global climate justice. Climate negotiators were stricken with anxiety during negotiations on the Paris Agreement. Then US State Secretary Kerry's response to a justiciable demand by developing countries on the US position on loss and damage was: 'We're not against [loss and damage]. We're in favor of framing it in a way that doesn't create a legal remedy because Congress will never buy into an agreement that has something like that...The impact of it would be to kill the deal'. Another name for that 'legal remedy' is global climate justice.

In Germany, the Federal Constitutional Court – the highest court – recently ruled the Climate Change Act is, 'incompatible with fundamental rights' partly because it 'violate the freedoms of the complainants, some of whom are still very young.' This must hold true also for the young children I saw in Atakpamé, full of life and energy even as death abounds. They deserve justice for climate change ruins to their lives.

Welcoming Biden, von der Leyen reminds us that Europe and the US have built 'an unprecedented transatlantic partnership' based 'common history and shared values of democracy, freedom, human rights'. Perhaps soon before a cow buckles and dies somewhere, a leader arises from this 'partnership' to give practical meaning to the fact that justice is fundamental to the functioning of democracy. And so long as democracy prevails in the corners of African villages, so too should global climate justice hold firm in lives there. Their unanswered cries for climate justice isn't yet another wail for charity. It's a request – nay a demand – for those responsible for climate catastrophes to, as they say in America, 'fess up' and balance the scale of global climate justice once and for all.