

## Podcast #37<sup>1</sup>

### Living in the Future Tense: Climate Change Summit, Part 3

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Welcome to Forums for a Future.

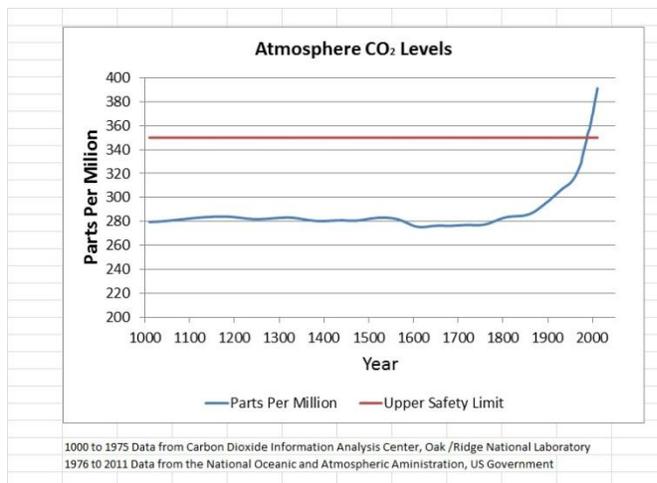
The subject of the current series of podcasts is “Living in the Future Tense.” The series is based on the proposition that the choices we make today will have irreversible consequences within our own lifetime. Thus, for those of us now living, in this the Post-Modern Era, our new reality is that we are living in the future tense: “Today is Tomorrow.”

In the previous era – the Modern Era – people lived in the “Present Tense.” They believed they could have whatever they wanted, now. They lived as if there was no tomorrow.

The defining feature of “living our life in the future tense” is that we are currently *taking to the limit* every aspect of our economic, political and social existence.

The clearest example is the rapid, exponential, growth in world population over the past 100 years which has exceeded the capacity of the planet to replace the energy used and to absorb the waste produced. But, there are many other indications that we are living in exponential times for which population growth can serve as a metaphor for the more general concept of “*taking it to the limit, one more time.*”

The political, economic and social reality of “meeting the limits” will be the *defining moments* of the Post-Modern Era. The time span is the 50-year interval encompassing the life span of the majority of people who are alive today. We must now start “Living in the Future Tense:” for today is our tomorrow.



Today’s podcast, #37, is the third and final part of a three part series on the world summit negotiations to combat climate change. Greenhouse gas emissions are one of the many specific issues *we are taking to the limit, yet one more time.* For the past 1000 years the level of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere has remained relatively constant at 280 ppm, but starting with the industrial revolution been increasing at an accelerating rate to 390 ppm, well above the upper safety limit of 350 ppm.

In December 2009 the UN held a Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen to attempt to set world policy standards for greenhouse gas emissions. The United States and China were the principle players as the two top green-house-gas-producing countries. The summit ended without a

comprehensive agreement. At the Summit in Cancun in 2010 the nations focused on refining the technical details of the goals established at Copenhagen and re-affirmed their pledges to lower emissions, but postponed any major decisions in how this was to be accomplished.

Part 1 in this series, Podcast 35 explained why the proposals of both the US and China at Copenhagen and Cancun were self-serving and why neither could expect the other to agree with them. Part 2 in the series, Podcast 36, provided a rationale for an alternative world standard that is equally fair to both countries. And today, Part 3 in the series, Podcast 37, will explain why neither the US or China have been able, politically, to reach an agreement and it will provide the means for achieving mutual cooperation.

### Part 3: The High Stakes Negotiations of Climate Change

The additional concepts of national Ecological Footprints, biocapacity and overshoot introduced in Part 2 complicate the negotiations by presenting difficult internal political considerations for both nations. For the US, “paying backwards.” to undo past damage, will reduce the average standard of living and require an internal re-negotiation of the distribution of wealth and income. In China, “paying forward” will compromise the effort to reduce the growing wealth and income disparities between rural and urban areas. Each national government holds political power by protecting such sovereign national interests against the claims of other nations. This is the reason both countries made the self-serving proposals described in Part 1.

There will not be any solution to the climate crisis until the reality of this negotiating context is acknowledged and is addressed by creating mechanisms that make cooperation between the competing nations politically feasible. There are three sets of players: The Developed, the Developing and the Least Developed Nations. The United States is proxy for the Developed nations and China for the Developing nations. Each of these two sets contains a small number of pivotal nations who have the capacity to work together bilaterally to achieve a united front.<sup>3</sup> Treating the United States and China as proxies for their respective groups, places a special responsibility on these two countries for world leadership. It is also an acknowledgement of the unrealistic expectation that a United Nations summit of 190 nations can reach a consensus.

However, creating an equivalent proxy position for the Least Developed Nations is a more difficult task due to their desperate needs and their forced dependency on Developed Countries, the IMF and World Bank. Many of these Least Developed countries may need support from world-wide environmental NGOs simply because they are not in any position to drive a hard bargain.<sup>4</sup>

There are two sets of competing self-interests to be resolved. The first is the claims of the Least Developed countries against the others. These are largely the “creditor” nations who are the victims of loss of their biocapacity due to overshoot by the others. The second is the competing interests of the Developed countries to protect their wealth and the Developing countries to protect their growth.

The two need to be considered separately. A world solution requires the resolution of both, neither alone is sufficient. Consider first the competing interests of the Least Developed versus Developing and Developed Nations.

The Least Developed nations are currently too poor, too sick and too politically unstable to provide domestic physical and psychological security. They are, however, the holders of the remaining bio-capacity “capital” that must be managed to bring world consumption and supply into balance. Thus, they are in a position to demand from the Developing and Developed nations the means to fully participate in a globalized world. For the Least Developed countries, the only issue is the percent of the world GDP that the Developed and Developing countries must share to both insure their participation in a global economic community, and that their inclusion only minimally creates an environmental impact. They deserve this assistance to combat the effects of global warming as the proper reparations for the expropriation of their excess bio-capacity.

At the previous Climate Summits, the two principal proxy players – the US and China – did agree in principle on the essential commitment for aid to the Least Developed, although without any mechanism for delivery or strategy for how it would fit into a comprehensive treaty. This initial agreement in principle for a UN administer Green Climate Fund opens the way for addressing the unfinished business of Copenhagen and Cancun of moving to an equally fair world standard based on the per capita alternative described in Part2 that takes into account Ecological Footprint, bio-capacity and overshoot.

The starting point is the acknowledgement that our national governments are involved in international high stakes negotiations that demand politically difficult if not impossible cooperative choices. Fortunately, due to the fact that the two proxy countries are in complementary positions with respect to what must be done – China to redirect growth and the US excess – each has the capacity to take internal sovereign actions which will have the effect that the other must voluntarily accept the per capita solution as the best way to protect their own self-interest.

First, the production of consumer goods can no longer be at the expense of a sustainable environment. The quality of life is a production cost. Specifically, this means US, and the other Developed nations would unilaterally impose an

import duty equal to the deferred environmental costs of imported consumer goods if China itself does not redirect an equivalent proportion of its GDP toward internal green investments and world-wide sharing of its green technology. These are internal decisions that could not be made by the Chinese government without the instrumental contingency of having the US add to the price of China's products the unaccounted for environmental impact costs, and redirect them to the Green Climate Fund of the United Nations; but, only if China does not do so itself.

Second, the deficit financing of US overshoot excess can no longer be at the expense of a sustainable environment. Specifically, the reduction of excess means China and other developing nations with a trade surplus would unilaterally impose a proportional cut-off of financial support for the annual US trade deficit and cumulative debit if the US does not reduce its large Ecological Footprint by redirecting an equivalent proportion of its national excess toward payments to the Green Climate Fund, and through greater sharing of its advanced technologies. These are internal decisions that could not be made by the US government without the instrumental contingency of China forcing emergency financial austerity measures on us, if we did not ourselves re-invent a new sustainable "American Way of Life."

There is no doubt this is a formidable, perhaps impossible, task. However, the first step is to talk about the issues in plain, truthful language, beginning with the American people. These are the issues and the choices we face, either as rational problem-solving now or as a harsh reality later. If democracy is to work it requires straight talk by responsible people, including, above all else, elected government officials. Surely, we can risk this public trust if we believe in our own civic process; we have nothing more to lose, and everything to gain. The time is now.

The perspective required to negotiate a self-imposed set of equivalent constraints is (1) to increasingly see ourselves not just as citizens of a nation but also as citizens of the world, (2) to increasingly trust the power of balance over winning the balance of power, and (3) to increasingly relinquish the knowledge required for food, health and security to the public domain as human progress, rather than as a commodity for financial gain.<sup>5</sup>

If there is to be any doubt, think on these three principles.

We do not want the final reframe to read we are *taking it (climate change) to the limit, one last time*.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on an audio and video podcast by Professor Renner entitled "**Forums for a Future**". Text, audio and video copies of the material may be accessed from his website at [www.kerenner.com](http://www.kerenner.com). The direct link for subscribing to the video series from iTunes is:

<http://phobos.apple.com/WebObjects/MZStore.woa/wa/viewPodcast?id=289289719>

<sup>2</sup> Professor Renner may be reached at [erenner@cas.usf.edu](mailto:erenner@cas.usf.edu). The podcast series is also available through the University of South Florida at:

[https://learn.usf.edu/webapps/lobj-podcast-bb\\_bb60/feed/IDH3400.004S11/podcast.xml](https://learn.usf.edu/webapps/lobj-podcast-bb_bb60/feed/IDH3400.004S11/podcast.xml)

<sup>3</sup> The Developed nations can be defined as the G-8 or simply the US and EU as the two largest economies among the Developed Nations. The Developing nations are represented by the combination of China, India, Brazil and South Africa. For a discussion of the essential political coalitions see Fast Forward by Antholis and Talbott.

<sup>4</sup> Naomi Klein. "The Courage to Say No," The Nation, Jan. 4, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> These three principles are the basis for the civic discussions that are the conceptual foundation for the **Forums for a Future** podcast series.