

Climate for Change-Non-State Actors and the Global Politics of the Greenhouse

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REVIEWS

Climate for Change – Non-state Actors and the Global Politics of the Greenhouse

By Peter Newell

Cambridge University Press
Cambridge, England, and New York, NY
2000, 222 p., US\$65.00 hardcover

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Climate for Change explains the forces that shape the climate-warming debate. The book focusses on how non-state actors, specifically the mass media, scientists, fossil fuel lobbies, and environmental groups, affect the agenda on climate change and the political response to this issue. Newell is critical of what he terms “state-based regime theory,” which explains global climate politics mainly in terms of interactions among states. Instead, he argues that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the media have strongly influenced the positions of states and the public on global climate change issues. Let’s look at the key non-state actors that are the focus of this book.

The media have predetermined the climate-change agenda and shaped public opinion by focussing on the scientific uncertainty surrounding the issue, the economic costs implicit in political action, and the use of technological solutions in lieu of structural reform. They have politicized the issue and created a popular expectation that some sort of policy response is required.

Scientists involved in Working Group 1 (WG1) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change were influential in structuring the early stages of the

climate-change debate in the 1980s and 1990s. They contributed to the principles embodied in the text of the Framework Convention on Climate Change. Perhaps the clearest indication of the influence of WG1 has been its ability to advance an agenda centered on the need for greater scientific research. One can argue that this agenda is self-serving and plays into the hands of governments reticent to take action. The work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change can be expected to help shape future policy debates, because policy makers will inevitably depend on scientists to define and legitimize possible responses to the issue.

Fossil fuel lobbies are able to press on politicians their preferred policy choices because of the privileged role they play in the creation of economic growth and energy production. They strongly influence policy formulation because their power is implicitly understood by politicians, because their influence extends beyond environmental issues, and because policy makers are aware of the obstacles that the lobbies can place in the path of legislation that threatens their interests.

Environmental NGOs are responsible for putting global climate issues on the political agenda and mobilizing public opinion behind favoured courses of action. They are particularly effective in influencing states that are predisposed to take action due to their vulnerability to climate change, for example small Pacific island nations. The influence of environmental groups campaigning on climate change is greatest at the agenda-setting stage, but continues through the international negotiating period to the implementation stage when non-compliance can be exposed and public pressure brought to bear on governments.

So, what’s my opinion of this book? First of all, don’t run out and buy it unless you’re a climate change junkie. The book is “tough sledding” – I found that I

routinely had to re-read sentences two or three times, and I can’t tell you how many times I dozed off in mid-chapter. The writing is pedantic, written by an academic for like-minded academics. It is laden with acronyms (one of my pet peeves) and footnotes that disrupt the flow of thought. I have to believe that only another political scientist can fully understand such writing. Let me give you an example: “Nevertheless, LDCs’ acceptance of CDM in the Kyoto Protocol amounts to a “volte-face,” according to Grubb *et al.* (1999), given that many of the objections to JI apply to CDM.” (p. 19). Or how about: “This book may be able to lend some conceptual and empirical weight to the renewed interest in transnational relations in the late 1990s by showing how non-state actors can structure the environment in which states operate, and can themselves use the interconnections between domestic and international politics (of which they are a part) to advance their agendas” (p. 161; translation: “this book shows how NGOs influence international politics”).

The complex language and excessive use of jargon and acronyms have, I’m afraid, parallels in earth science and, for that matter, in all specialist disciplines. Political scientists (or earth scientists, physicians, or chemists) have erected barriers that make them inaccessible to outsiders. To be fair, I’m sure a political scientist would react differently to *Climate for Change* than I have. However, I was not asked to review this book for political scientists.

Having levelled this criticism, I hasten to add that Newell makes many excellent points about the political scene surrounding global change, only a few of which I have outlined in this review. The problem, however, is that probably few people are listening – presentation may not be everything, but it’s often the most important thing!