

Why Canada must step up to the climate-change plate

By David Runnalls, IISD President & CEO

The conclusion of the Review is essentially optimistic. There is still time to avoid the worst impacts of climate change, if we act now and act internationally

—Sir Nicholas Stern, author of the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change

While pessimistic stories about the dire consequences of climate change may grab the headlines, they do little to help Canadians understand the more complex issues. Recent reports about the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change focused so much on future economic disaster that they virtually ignored the practical, achievable and ultimately affordable recommendations. They also missed much of Sir Nicholas's crucial point: The sooner we act — governments, industry and the consumer — the less costly it will be for all.

Known for his pragmatism rather than alarmist speculation, Sir Nicholas, the World Bank's former chief economist, takes the purely logical argument that not taking action on climate change will be a lost economic opportunity of global proportions. By removing the emotional "save our planet" approach and focusing on the substantial financial cost of doing nothing, Sir Nicholas appeals to those who have yet to be swayed. And by focusing on the economic benefits of investing in carbon sinks, emissions trading and renewable resources, he offers Canada an opportunity to lead the way.

From a Canadian perspective, though, is it not the case that a transition away from fossil fuels would represent a threat to Canada's economic future, given that so much of our economy is dependent on coal, oil and gas resources? Well, no. Canada does have major oil and gas projects on the go. The Mackenzie Valley Pipeline is likely to go ahead, we will continue to develop the tar sands on a major scale, and coal will very much be part of the power solution in provinces such as Saskatchewan and Alberta. *(continued next page)*



“We can develop the technologies for redirecting carbon emissions from the air into the ground...”



David Runnalls, IISD President

But that does not mean we cannot do something about the carbon emitted from these projects and, by doing so, ensure our role as a global leader in carbon solutions, not problems. We can develop the technologies for redirecting carbon emissions from the air into the ground (known

as carbon capture and storage). What makes this so interesting from a Canadian perspective is that we have an opportunity to be a world leader in these technologies. Carbon capture and storage will be a critical key to the global climate-change puzzle, particularly in the economies of major developing countries, such as India and China, that continue to rely on coal for development.

And if we act now, it should help us to take advantage of the commercial opportunities that would come our way if we were among the first out of the gate in developing these technologies. Just look at Denmark or Germany and the virtual monopoly they hold over wind energy technologies as a result of their foresight a generation ago.

The Stern report also does an enormous service by emphasizing that energy development is not the only crucial element to reducing greenhouse-gas emissions. Deforestation contributes more to global emissions than the entire world transportation sector, and most of the deforestation takes place in developing countries. Clearly, any effective response to climate change must include one that motivates the poor to maintain, not tear down, their forests.

Another critical factor that got lost in the media reports of dire economic costs is who bears the brunt of those impacts. If there is one lesson we learned as a result of hurricane Katrina, it is that the poorest will be the most immediately affected by climate change. It is a cruel irony. Vulnerable people living in the most impoverished regions of the world are always the most severely affected. Yet, their barely life-sustaining activities contribute little to the greenhouse-gas emissions causing the significant shift in weather patterns, drought, floods and crop failure.

That fault very much lies with the richest countries, particularly in North America, where we are two to three times more carbon intensive than the average European and in the order of six to 10 times more than most in the developing world. And who is feeling its effects in North America? The poor in New Orleans, the Inuit and Dene in the Arctic. We in the developed world owe it to the rest of the globe — it was our societies, after all, that took full advantage of cheap coal to industrialize, and developing countries have every right to do so as well. But if the average Indian or Chinese person were to be as carbon intensive as the average North American, it would stretch the globe's atmosphere to the breaking point. It's time for Canada to step up to the plate and be a leader in clean energy systems and sustainable forestry and agriculture, in deed as well as in word.

David Runnalls is president and CEO of the Winnipeg-based International Institute for Sustainable Development.

For more information contact:

The International Institute for Sustainable Development

Tel: +1 (204) 958-7700

www.iisd.org