



**Tom
Burke**
Political
comment

President Obama makes canny carbon move

■ By addressing the issue of “carbon pollution”, the US president is cleverly enabling climate action. But there is still little chance of leadership on international policy.

In March, I pointed out that although US president Barack Obama had sent a strong political message on climate change, he had said nothing on policy (ENDS Report 457, p8). He has now. In the past, the president’s soaring political oratory raised spirits only for the policy that followed to disappoint. His long and thoughtful speech on 25 June launching his climate action plan does not disappoint.

Not that the politics were left out – sometimes subtly, occasionally with brutal clarity. Thirty times during the speech the president referred to carbon pollution. CO₂ emissions get barely a mention. This is no accidental shift of language. The American people are unsure about climate change and worry that reducing emissions will harm the economy. But they know they are against pollution.

Pollution is personal. The climate is remote. Expect to hear less about carbon emissions and more about carbon pollution from now on. The president is clearly setting out to cast those opposing his climate policy as being in favour of pollution. To make sure his Republican opponents get the message that he is now up for a fight on climate change, he also sawed hard on the tensions between the moderates and fundamentalists within the Republican Party.

Throughout the speech he praised Republicans who had acted to protect the climate. The Clean Air Act, which is central to his

plan, was signed into law by one Republican president (Nixon) and strengthened by another (Bush I). It was Bush I who took the US into the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Senator John McCain introduced climate legislation into the Senate during Obama's first term. Three quarters of US wind energy is produced in Republican districts.

Obama's climate action plan sets out 15 specific measures in three sections dealing with: cutting carbon pollution; understanding and preparing for the impacts of a changing climate; and leading international efforts to tackle climate change.

None of these measures require Congressional approval thus steering around the principal obstacle to effective climate action in the US. They amount to a comprehensive mobilisation of the vast resources of the federal machinery of government.

The first section has, inevitably, attracted the most attention. Obama has instructed the Environmental Protection Agency to set emission performance standards for new and existing power plants under the Clean Air Act. Since power plants are the largest single source of carbon pollution in the US, this measure effectively sets a partial cap on carbon emissions. The other measures will boost energy efficiency and accelerate the deployment of renewables and will follow up the successful tightening of fuel economy standards for cars by including heavy duty vehicles.

The second set of measures has attracted far less attention. The five measures in this section instruct every federal agency to assess the impacts of a changing climate on the American people and to help them prepare to deal with these impacts.

This is simply common sense at one level and given recent experience of extreme weather, likely to be popular with voters. But there are potentially some far reaching, but as yet unrecognised, political consequences from this part of the plan.

The research needed for federal agencies to fulfil this mandate will create a detailed and publicly available inventory of all the communities and businesses that will lose out as the climate changes. This will change the balance in the public debate on climate policy.

This is currently dominated by the voice of the fossil fuels companies and their customers – the climate makers. We hear little from all those firms that will be damaged by a changing climate – the climate takers. Last year in the US there were 25 extreme weather events costing more than \$1bn. The losses from these events amounted to \$188bn with another \$136bn needed from taxpayers for recovery.

The weakest part of the plan deals with international climate policy. Obama has rightly been criticised for an international climate policy that was in substance no different from that of his predecessor. The words were warmer but there was no sign that the US was yet willing to play a responsible, let alone leading, role in the global effort. There is nothing in the speech to suggest this will change.

There is a new Washington consensus emerging. It is shared by government officials, academics and many of the environmental NGOs. It takes the view that the UNFCCC process is fatally flawed. Its efforts to date have failed. The aim of limiting the eventual rise in global temperatures to 2°C is unrealistic and should be quietly abandoned. The search for a global agreement on targets and timetables is futile. Governments should define the contributions they are willing to make to the global effort and then exert peer pressure on each other to do more.

Impatience with the slow pace of progress on such an urgent but difficult issue as climate change is understandable. Giving up on the effort is unforgivable. What the Washington consensus is

“Impatience with the slow pace of progress on such an urgent but difficult issue as climate change is understandable. Giving up on the effort is unforgivable”

arguing is that the approach the world has adopted in the 25 years since the UNFCCC was signed has failed and that we should try an alternative. The difficult question so far unanswered by supporters of the consensus is how this alternative overcomes the real political problems that have obstructed the current approach.

After the debacle in Copenhagen, the fossil fuel industries and their customers rapidly concluded that politicians lacked the will to really tackle climate change. They planned their investment strategies accordingly. They were right about the politicians.

Unless the 2015 UN Conference of the Parties in Paris arrives at an agreement that convinces business that politicians will act decisively, they will continue their current strategies. Dangerous climate change will then become unavoidable. It is difficult to see how any agreement that does not include targets and timetables will be persuasive. ■

Tom Burke is founding director of E3G and a visiting professor at Imperial and University Colleges, London. He also advises Rio Tinto