

Climate change and public opinion: (Not yet) marching as to war, *The Economist*, 5 November 2009

Even as politicians and protesters gear up for a fateful climate-change meeting in Denmark, some of their fellow citizens have little stomach for a fight

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IF THE forthcoming United Nations meeting in Copenhagen truly is a precious chance to save the planet from rising seas and advancing deserts, then one might expect voters all over the world to be egging on their leaders to make bold decisions.

That is the impression created by a wave of eye-catching demonstrations—such as the globally co-ordinated protest on October 24th that called, ambitiously, for carbon concentration in the atmosphere to be kept at 350 parts per million (see above). But awkwardly, there are clear signs in several democracies of sentiment moving in the other direction.

Perhaps the most astonishing evidence of a rise in climate-change scepticism was revealed by a poll published last month by the Pew Research Centre, based in Washington, DC. In the United States the share of citizens who thought there was solid evidence of rising global temperatures had plunged to 57% from 71% in April 2008. The share blaming rising temperatures on human activities had fallen over that time from 47% to 36%.

An uptick in scepticism was evident across a wide spectrum, but it was extra-sharp among Republicans, including those near the political centre. A majority of all Republicans (57%) saw no hard evidence of global warming, and among moderate and liberal Republicans, believers in

the phenomenon had tumbled, as a share, from 69% to 41%. Only two groups have been getting more worried about the global climate: liberal Democrats, and voters aged under 30.

What the poll suggests is that, for Americans, climate change is becoming more divisive: one of those touchstone issues, like abortion and the death penalty, in which the opposing camps see one another as not just mistaken, but bad. That is exactly the opposite of what would be needed if, now or in future, an administration wanted to rally the nation behind the idea of sacrifices for the sake of posterity.

For some green-minded Americans, the picture is not quite so gloomy. As Carl Pope, director of the Sierra Club, a conservation group, points out, many Americans want to burn less fossil fuel for reasons other than climate change, including to clean up the air and cut the country's dependence on energy imports. The recession has taken people's minds off climate change, but surely not for good.

In Europe, where sentiment is generally greener than it is in America, the economic downturn has also displaced warming on people's worry list. A poll published in July by the European Commission showed that early in 2009, the number of European Union residents who saw climate change as the world's gravest problem had dropped to 50% from 62% in spring 2008. But that was partly because the numbers citing global recession as the main worry had surged from 24% to 52%.

A more fundamental shift towards scepticism seems to be occurring in Australia, despite the Labor government's efforts to push the country in a green direction. A poll in July by the Lowy Institute showed the numbers willing to shoulder "significant costs" to tackle global warming had fallen to 48%, down from 60% last year and 68% in 2006. In both America and Australia the public seems to be growing more doubtful even as policymakers feel more certain of the need for action.

Some research recently given to the British government suggests that voters are sending a subtle combination of signals on the issue of climate change. At opposing ends of the spectrum, there are committed greens, perhaps a fifth of the population, and people who are either sceptical or feel too poor to care. In the middle, about half the electorate seems to agree that climate change is a problem, but only partly accepts the need for drastic measures.

Within that middle ground, feelings are mixed. On one hand, some people are turned off by talk of doom. In the words of Ashok Sinha, co-ordinator of a demonstration in London which a cluster of NGOs will stage on December 5th, there are some citizens who react to dire predictions by "battening down the hatches or going into retreat." On the other hand, research suggests that people react well to a positive message, one that portrays a happy low-carbon future of electric cars, well-planned towns and affordable transport. They also like the idea that citizens as well as politicians have a choice between eco-disaster and a greener, better world.

Britons apparently want their government to make clear plans, with a timetable, to tackle climate change, and they relish the idea of playing a part themselves. But they fear two extremes: top-down measures, and policies that put all the onus on citizens to make sacrifices by say, flying less. Everybody fears free-riders, either countries or conspicuous consumers.

Taken together, these impulses suggest a public that would make sacrifices if they believed that something like a war of national survival was looming—but they have yet to be convinced, and they want to be certain that the burden is being shared.

As well as studying opinion polls, today's politicians might ponder some recent history. In 1977 President Jimmy Carter clumsily launched a new energy policy. After telling Americans he wanted "to have an unpleasant talk" with them, he called his drive to save energy "the moral

equivalent of war". Many listeners were unmoved; perhaps his mistake was not to spell out clearly what would constitute victory, and why it was worth having.