

Climate justice: The real story

Ahead of COP26 next month, much blame – and pressure – has fallen on Asian giants China and India for adding to global greenhouse gas emissions. But the hard truth is Western countries such as the United States and Canada are not doing enough. Here’s why.

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For *The Straits Times*

Canadians are among the nicest people on planet Earth as those who have had the good fortune to have Canadian friends can attest. Indeed, one running joke about Canadians is that the first words that come out from their mouths are often “I’m so sorry...”

Against this backdrop, it was truly shocking to hear a Canadian politician say on BBC Radio that Canada’s actions on climate change would not make a real difference since the country contributed only 1.5 per cent of current global emissions. She added that it was all up to China and India, the largest new emitters, to save the world from climate change.

Superficially, this claim by a Canadian politician seems reasonable. Indeed, it is highly likely that many Singaporeans will buy into this hugely unfair and unjust Western perspective on climate change.

This is why it is important for Singaporeans to understand the real story of climate change, especially in the build-up to the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (or COP26) in Glasgow, Scotland on Nov 1.

To paraphrase Singapore’s founding father Lee Kuan Yew, there are three “hard truths” that its people should know.

The first hard truth is that climate change is not happening just because of the new “flows” of greenhouse gases from newly developing countries like China and India. Climate change is also a result of the “stock” of greenhouse gas emissions put up by the Western industrialised countries, including Canada, since the Western Industrial Revolution began two centuries ago.

BBC commentators regularly refer to China as the world’s “largest emitter” of greenhouse gas emissions. This is true only if “flows” are measured. But if the “stocks” are added to the picture, the largest emitter in cumulative terms is the US. Here is the data for the “stocks” of carbon dioxide emissions: the contribution of the US is 25 per cent, the European Union 22 per cent, China 13 per cent and India 3 per cent. For the record, Canada’s historical contribution is 2 per cent.

DIFFERENTIATED RESPONSIBILITIES

To be fair, in all the early negotiations on how to cope with climate change, the Western

countries acknowledged their historical contributions and accepted that they had to contribute more to fight climate change. This is why the UN agreed on the concept of “common but differentiated responsibilities” during the first Earth Summit held in Brazil’s Rio de Janeiro in 1992, with developed countries (then known as Annex I countries) doing more and developing countries (non-Annex I countries) doing less.

The Kyoto Protocol, which was adopted in 1997, rested on these key pillars: legally binding commitments by the wealthy Annex I countries to collectively reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and a set of mechanisms including clean development, emissions trading and joint implementation to help countries efficiently reduce emissions.

If the Kyoto Protocol had been faithfully implemented by all the parties since its adoption, we would have seen 24 years of effective actions taken against climate change. Unfortunately, the Bush administration (from 2001-2009) decided to walk away from the Kyoto Protocol.

Traditionally, it would have been

the responsibility of the host country (in this case, Japan) to fight for and defend the Kyoto Protocol. But the then Japanese government, in a sad act of cowardice, failed to defend the protocol. It instead sought to weaken the agreement. Many precious years were lost in the fight against climate change.

Since the world’s largest historical emitter of greenhouse gases had walked away from its Kyoto Protocol obligations, it would have been reasonable for new emitters, especially China and India, to also walk away from international agreements on climate change.

CARBON DIOXIDE EMISSIONS

The second hard truth they could have used to justify their refusal to join any international agreement is that on a per capita basis, China and India still contribute far less to carbon dioxide emissions.

The respective figures for the major countries and regions are: the US (15.5 tonnes), Germany (9.4 tonnes), China (7.4 tonnes), India (1.9 tonnes), Australia (17.1 tonnes), Canada (18.6 tonnes). For the record, only European countries have made significant progress in reducing their per capita emissions, averaging 6.4 tonnes.

It was an extraordinary act of responsibility for China and India to return to the global negotiating table on climate change and accept a whole new agreement on climate change after the Bush administration had walked away from the Kyoto Protocol.

The result was the famous Paris

Agreement of December 2015, at COP21. Unlike the Kyoto Protocol, where countries like China and India did not take on any obligations, the Paris Agreement called on all countries, both developed and developing, to make contributions.

Specifically, the Western developed countries agreed to make deeper cuts in emissions. But this also required the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities to be diluted.

Instead of the legally binding commitments for wealthy countries in the Kyoto Protocol, countries were allowed to set their own targets. All that was required was domestic political will. It was hoped that this would dissuade countries like the US from withdrawing from painstakingly negotiated agreements again.

The whole world breathed a huge sigh of relief when the Paris Agreement was reached. This sigh of relief did not last long. After the Trump administration came into office in January 2017, it walked away from the Paris Agreement. Four more years were lost in the battle against climate change.

When the Trump administration refused to respect its commitments under the Paris Agreement, many feared that China and India, as well as other developing countries like Brazil or Indonesia, would be given the opportunity to follow suit. Doing so would certainly have killed the Paris Agreement.

Instead, once again, in another massive act of responsibility, China and India, and the rest of the world, respected their commitments. This left the door

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open for the US to return when Mr Joe Biden became President.

What is truly remarkable here is that China has not just met its commitments, it has also enhanced them. When President Xi Jinping announced that China would become carbon neutral by 2060, a well-known scholar, Professor Adam Tooze of Columbia University, said that President Xi may have saved the planet with these new contributions.

Prof Tooze wrote that “China’s leader may have redefined the future prospects for humanity... As the impact of his remarks sank in, climate modellers crunched the numbers and concluded that, if fully implemented, China’s new commitment will by itself lower the projected temperature increase by 0.2-0.3 deg C. It is the largest favourable shock that their models have ever produced”.

All this brings us back to the claim by the Canadian politician that it is up to China and India to do more. Canada, whose per capita income is US\$46,327 (S\$62,425) in 2019, has not reduced its per capita emissions of carbon dioxide by much. At the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, its emissions per capita was 20.5 tonnes. By the Paris Agreement in 2015, Canada’s number was 19 tonnes. China and India, whose per capita income in 2019 is much lower at US\$10,217 and US\$2,101 respectively, also have much lower per capita emissions at 7.4 and 1.9 tonnes.

A lot of Canada’s emissions is due to the hugely damaging tar sands fracking project in its state of Alberta. As the distinguished environmentalist and writer Bill McKibben points out, the Alberta tar sands “would produce about a hundred and twelve billion tonnes of carbon dioxide, which is 28 per cent of the world’s total remaining carbon budget if we want to have a 50 per cent chance (not a guarantee – a 50 per cent chance) of meeting the climate goals we set in Paris”.

He adds: “Lay aside for the moment the devastation caused by mining the sludgy tar sands for oil. There’s no way that a country with less than 1 per cent of the world’s population can lay claim to more than a quarter of the atmosphere.”

Canadian leaders have spoken passionately about the danger of climate change. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has said: “Canada is a committed partner in the global fight against climate change, and together we will build a cleaner and more prosperous future for all.”

So this is the final hard truth: Will rich countries abandon environmentally irresponsible projects like tar sands to save planet Earth?

The answer to this question will determine the future of planet Earth.

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A 2014 photo of the Suncor tar sands processing plant near the Athabasca River in Canada’s Alberta state. The distinguished environmentalist Bill McKibben points out that the Alberta tar sands “would produce about a hundred and twelve billion tonnes of carbon dioxide, which is 28 per cent of the world’s total remaining carbon budget if we want to have a 50 per cent chance (not a guarantee – a 50 per cent chance) of meeting the climate goals we set in Paris”. PHOTO: REUTERS