

Generating public support for radical emissions reductions through a radical reframing of climate risks

This presentation argues it will not be possible to build meaningful engagement with a radical emissions reduction programme without greater public involvement in deliberations on acceptable levels of climate risk. Policy documents construct climate change as a phenomenon with a single global dangerous limit of two degrees centigrade of warming above the pre-industrial average. With the chances of keeping warming within two degrees now rapidly receding, a debate is beginning about what, if anything, should replace the two degree dangerous limit idea. Though organisations such as the IPCC, UNFCCC and EU have long argued that defining an acceptable level of climate risk is a value choice to be deliberated on openly and democratically, no such public deliberation has taken place. Instead discussion of the two degree limit has been marginalised within the public sphere and, where the topic is mentioned, it is described falsely as a limit identified as dangerous by climate scientists. There are substantive reasons why the climate risk debate should be inclusive – opportunities for building positive public engagement will be strengthened if people are allowed to deliberate on the primary and central questions asked by climate change, namely a) how should we live, given the enormity of the risks being generated by current social and economic patterns of activity and b) what level of harm is an acceptable price to pay for the reproduction of those activities? My talk will begin by presenting the arguments for greater public deliberation on acceptable levels of climate risk, before drawing on the theories of narrative rationality and narrative policy analysis to demonstrate that involvement in such debates does not require scientific expertise. I then finish with the suggestion that a re-purposed version of the DECC MY2050 calculator offers a potential mechanism for opening up the debate about acceptable climate risk to a much larger number of citizens than have hitherto engaged with this issue.

A decision making process which presents itself as based on expert knowledge necessarily blocks participation for the average citizen. However, determining an acceptable level of climate risk is best understood as a post-normal science, led by a process of normative reasoning supported by scientific knowledge. The insights which emerge from this reasoning can be expressed through the kind of narrative rationality that most humans employ on a continual basis as social actors. The scenarios which emerge from a process of normative reasoning with citizens can, through narrative policy analysis, be compared to policy narratives to reveal the role of politics and power in framing the realm of the possible in climate policy. Deliberating on climate risk through narratives is not a divergence from current processes for defining acceptable levels of climate risk - within the climate science and policy community the two degree idea is widely recognised as a fiction. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with operating on the basis of fiction; what is important that fictions are recognised as such. This then opens the door to broad public participation in deliberation on climate risk, because everyone has a story they can tell about the future they want. It is anticipated that a broader awareness of the uncertainties surrounding definitions of dangerous climate change would strengthen public engagement because research shows that without an understanding of uncertainty in climate projections the public cannot properly understand climate risk. Advocates of the two degree limit defend presenting the two degree dangerous limit as a non-negotiable certainty partly on the basis that it provides an easily communicable symbol for complex and uncertain determinations about future climate impacts. This message provides a simple rationale for publics being asked to make sacrifices in the name of a safe climate. Given how little public scrutiny the subject receives, this justification must be questioned, especially in light of recent evidence suggesting a very low awareness amongst the public of what governments have declared to be the dangerous limit to climate change. Engaging publics in narrative policy analysis of climate risk policy would initially require an iterative and intensive series of deliberative workshops under the guidance of skilled facilitators; an expensive and time consuming process which could not be made available to everyone. The task then becomes

one of taken the insights generated in an exploratory series of workshops to scale up the deliberative process to allow broad engagement on a question which implicates all citizens of the world. The DECC MY2050 Pathways software highlights a potential means for reaching a wide audience. The MY2050 Pathways allows users to choose from a mix of technologies in order to meet pre-determined and unexamined ends, namely the emission targets deemed necessary to avoid dangerous climate change of two degrees centigrade. Taking the basic methodologies informing that interface, and applying them to the foundational question of why two degrees would offer users the opportunity for a deeper engagement with the issues than the objectives of the current MY2050 calculator. The variables could be lifestyle choices (relating to mobility, food, consumption and habitation), the outcomes would be the temperature increase that would result from everyone sharing the chosen lifestyle, and the expected biophysical impacts projected to arise from that amount of warming. The impacts would be expressed for the region local to the user, making the issue of climate harm seem less distant both temporally and geographically, and more rooted in the user's immediate environment.

It is hoped such a process would result in greater awareness of the difficulties in defining two degrees as the point at which dangerous climate change begins, and the enormous social changes needed even to have a 50% chance of avoiding such impacts. This awareness could build greater trust in the climate policy deliberation process, allow for more openness in communications about climate policy, and a greater willingness to accept a more fluid and urgent climate policy framework, given our incomplete knowledge of future climate impacts.