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## More authoritarian politics is not the solution to climate change

*The climate conference in Stockholm. Today UN climate report is presented. The challenges facing humanity are great. But it is important that climate change is not being used to scare us into expert rule or authoritarian political systems, the write researchers Björn-Ola Linnér and Roger Pielke Jr.*

**O**n Thursday the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change presented the first of four assessments, this one taking stock of the physical science of the climate system. The report's reception and promotion highlight challenges that arise when expertise meets politics.

The temptation to use the conclusions to forward different political agendas will be abundant. And rightly so, the initial idea behind the IPCC report was to provide an assessment of science that could be used by policy-makers. This is clearly not a problem when politicians, activists or lobbyists use the report in an open debate on how to address climate change. We should expect advocates to pick and choose among the report's findings to find those bits that fit best with their agenda. That is how interests operate in democracies.

We see however for us a worrying tendency among some scientists to use climate and other environmental science reports to advocate for more authoritarian political systems and a call for an emergency order by emphasising the worst case scenarios of these reports as a "trump card" in political debates.

Yvo de Boer, the former secretary general of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, argued almost a year ago that "the next IPCC will scare the wits out of everyone. I am confident that those scientific findings will create a new political momentum." The problem with fear-motivated decision-making is that it has not worked so well in environmental policy-making. We can just see how much the climate scare has changed societies so far: very little, if at all. The global greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise and carbon-free energy still has the same proportion in the energy mix as when the whole climate debate started in earnest twenty years ago.

Not only are appeals to fear ineffective, but they can also be dangerous for democracy and the role of experts within it. Frustrated scientists who argue that they alone have the right political solution to the climate crisis start advocating for expert control.

A recent example - one of several we could provide - is the Global Challenges Foundation who argued in an Op Ed in Dagens Nyheter that risk of a significant temperature increase requires "effective global decision-making bodies". In their mission statement, they argue that "we are unable to manage the environmental crisis in the current political system". They go on to identify that a core problem is that politicians have to worry about re-election, media solely focused on probable and short-term damages and a lulled public. Instead the organisation wants to create a new political order with a legally binding efficient, rational and equitable global legal system, which in line with their reasoning, would not worry about up-coming re-elections. But re-elections are precisely the essence of a democracy where the public can decide with a regular reoccurrence how we want society to be governed.

It is evident from the organisation's presentations that the experts believe that the public does not know their own good. Political systems based upon such an assumption are necessarily authoritarian. We believe the solution is not to argue for taking political power from the public, and putting the power in the hands of experts. First, which experts should make the call? Scientists are hardly in consensus on social and economic politics. Is it the one advocating restricted economic growth or the one advocating accelerated economic growth focused on innovation?

Second, history gives us many examples where experts argue they have the right cure to a pending catastrophe, where we today may be relieved they were not in decision-making power. Take for instance Sweden's famous food scientist Georg Borgström who argued that sterilization after the third child would be as natural as getting a vaccination or Garrett Hardin's call for a life boat ethics where it was better to let millions die than the whole humanity perish. The track record of experts demanding political authority is not so good.

Rather than tackling ineffective climate policies by restricting democratic systems, we believe we should open up debate to other solutions. There are

many alternative pathways to accelerating energy innovation and climate adaptation that would pose credible alternatives to those tried so far.

These include, for example, the rapidly growing interest in nationally appropriate mitigation actions, integrating mitigation efforts and national development goals and thus facilitating public and political support; investment in low carbon energy innovation, which would need to be at least doubled in order to stimulate alternatives; and carbon taxes, which would likely be more effective than emissions trading in many countries. If we look beyond the state, there are a variety of initiatives, such as cities collaborating on climate action, business and civil society partners on voluntary environmental standards and an enormous number of other initiatives that can be stimulated, and which together can bear fruit. Ideally, upcoming IPCC reports on mitigation alternatives will illustrate just how many expert opinions there are for the voters to consider.

Scientists and other experts must become more attuned to the different roles that they play in broader society, especially what it means to be facilitators of democracy, not usurpers of it. In practice this means recognizing that the main function of expert advisory bodies is not to tell the public what should be done, but rather what could be done. Experts who claim to speak for "science" and who campaign too aggressively place at risk their own credibility and that of science more broadly in public debates. Ultimately, a commitment to democratic governance means accepting that power rests with the people, and not the experts.

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