

'The Clock Is Running Out On Us'

On 13 October 2008 I met with Robert Sussman, an advisor on energy and climate change issues for Barack Obama in order to discuss US developments in this field and Senator Obama's and McCain's positions. The following is a transcript of the interview.

Roderick Kefferpütz

Good seeing you again, Bob. First question: How would you describe the current US position in the international climate change negotiations?

Well, we are clearly waiting for a new President and waiting to see what he wants to do. I think there are already strong signs that if Barack Obama becomes President he will want to engage and demonstrate leadership in the international negotiations. He will also support strong cap and trade legislation here in the US, which calls for deep reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. So if he carries that commitment forward into the international negotiations I would think that it would have a very positive impact and could perhaps stimulate some progress.

When could he do that?

That is difficult to say. First of all because he has not been elected yet and secondly because he is going to face some overwhelming challenges when he is in power because the priority will be the economy and the meltdown of the financial system. So having to sift through all those priorities and deciding on what will be number one and what will come second is hard to say. I would hope that the national security environmental people will be very focused on the international negotiations, as they are the ones who understand that the clock is running out on us. We have a meeting in Poland in December and a very important meeting coming up in Copenhagen in 2009. Therefore, there

is a need to plug in as soon as possible, but who will make those decisions is very hard to say.

Do you think there is a real danger that the financial crisis might undermine action on climate change?

Well, everybody is saying that. I don't know in my own mind how it will play out in the end. I hope that people may look at the financial crisis and will say to themselves that if we don't do something on climate change and instead sit on our hands the way we sat on our hands over the financial situation we will find ourselves facing a climate emergency in, say, 20 or 30 years from now just like we are facing a financial emergency now. But whether the politicians will see it that way or whether the primary economic concerns will crowd out everything else, I don't know. There are some pretty good reasons for staying on track in reducing climate change including the need for action now in order to avert catastrophe later and the fact that doing something later will be more expensive than acting now. But the world is certainly very different than it was a couple of weeks ago. So how climate change will fare in these new conditions will be very interesting.

To what extent do Obama and McCain differ on climate change? Are there differences?

There are differences. I think they are closer to each other than either is to George Bush which is good news. Both are committed to a mandatory

cap and trade programme. Obama is looking for reductions of 80% by 2050 and McCain I think is looking for reductions of 60-65%. Obama has been more explicit on certain elements of the cap and trade programme such as the auctioning of allowances, which he strongly supports. McCain is somewhat non-committal on that issue.

But the biggest difference between McCain and Obama relates to their complementary energy policies. This is very important in addition to a cap and trade programme. And there Obama has very comprehensive and forward-looking proposals that emphasise renewables, energy efficiency, advanced energy technologies and tax incentives. McCain's plan, on the other hand, is very thin on details and McCain himself has a long record of not being supportive of renewable energies and not being particularly supportive of vehicle fuel efficiencies. In addition, throughout the course of his campaign he has emphasised offshore drilling as a kind of panacea for all energy concerns and this suggests a kind of fixation on fossil fuels which doesn't really fit very well with efforts to address climate change and reducing emissions.

But the Democrats also went for offshore drilling in the end, proposing that revenues go into renewable energies, did they not?

Well, they somewhat reluctantly agreed to consider offshore drilling provided it was part of a comprehensive package which was supportive of efficiency, renewables, vehicle technologies, etc. I would see that as more of an effort to find a political compromise than a real push for drilling in itself.

What about nuclear?

McCain is very bullish on nuclear. I think Obama is more cautious. There

are several issues with nuclear and the big issue is the cost of nuclear power plants and the financial assistance that will be necessary for constructing such plants which will be a fundamental necessity. McCain has called for 45 new nuclear power plants but has not really talked about what the costs will be or where the money will come from. He also hasn't talked about how he would intend to deal with nuclear waste. He has some proposals for reprocessing nuclear waste which are not very realistic. Now Obama on the other hand is not adamantly opposed to nuclear. But he is just more cautious about it.

What do you think will come out of the Poznan conference in Poland? Do you think there will anything come out of it?

I don't know. I really don't know. I think a lot of it depends on whether the EU goes ahead with its energy and climate change package. If the EU does not go ahead with this then I think that Poznan will be very disappointing. Also, it will be difficult to see how the USA will engage because it is just too soon after the election. But if we can get a strong work plan for the next 12 months preceding Copenhagen that would be good result.

I know you have little time left so let me just ask how coal figures into the equation in the US.

Coal is very important over here. And coal is going to have to play a role going forward. I don't think anybody in the US would seriously consider ruling out the use of coal so carbon capture and sequestration is very important.

Interview conducted by Roderick Kefferpütz

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