

Barriers to Effective Climate Change Adaptation

Introduction

I welcome the opportunity offered by the Productivity Commission to comment on the inquiry.

As I understand it the Commission is examining specific barriers to effective adaptation to unavoidable climate change.

The scope of the inquiry includes examination of the costs and benefits associated with action options including the no action option, market and non market interventions and the role of government.

Context

I am responding for several reasons.

First, because it is clearly an important issue.

Although adaptation has been viewed, by some environmentalists as a poor cousin to mitigation, it is increasingly clear that they need to be treated together. (Giddens)

Second, because given the current state of the discourse on climate change, the role of bodies of independent standing, such as the productivity commission could be of critical importance.

I say this because the lack of a clear bi-partisan position from Government and opposition, as is also the case in the USA and Canada, is itself a significant barrier to both effective take up of adaptation and mitigation by citizens and organisations.

It is possible that the Productivity Commission supported by its strong enabling legislation can cut through to some extent and provide leadership on this crucially important and complicated issue.

Barriers to Adaptation

I think it is useful to consider the barriers people and organisations face in two categories. *Motivation*, that is the impulse to do something effective and *Capacity*, having the means to carry it out.

Motivation

At the threshold, this requires a strong conviction that the climate of the earth is really changing, that the pace and timing will impact on their lives and businesses, that it is possible to do something about it, that human intervention has been demonstrated as the most important causal factor, (Royal Society) that the benefits of action will outweigh the costs and that there may even be other benefits and opportunities from proactive action. If people and groups are convinced about at least some of these things, at least in a general sense, they should be moved to take or accept the need to mitigate the production of the greenhouse gases that are driving the warming.

However adaptation, particularly proactive action (Giddens), which might involve significant effort and expenditure, will be more challenging because it requires information about the **actual impacts** of climate change in order to plan appropriate adaptation strategies.

The issues paper published by the Commission provides a useful list (Issues paper) based on reputable scientific sources, but it is too general for many

purposes. Consider the case of a farmer who accepts the main premises regarding climate change and is thinking about changing his farming practices. Perhaps by diversifying crops or activities to spread his risks. This could involve significant measures and mistakes could be costly both economically and socially, What seems to be agreed by many researchers is that impacts and major weather events could vary over different regions in Australia and until more data is available precise advice is going to be conditional.

Similar issues face property owners in areas that could experience flooding or storm damage and are considering modifications such as raising of floor levels or general strengthening.

Local authorities face similar decisions in respect to modifications to public infrastructure.

What would assist given the likely variation would be area based risk audits and information around possible adaptation options.

Local governments would be a key vehicle but many councils at the moment would lack the necessary expertise and resources.

I would recommend a program of *grants in aid* in the form of support for a dedicated climate change adaptation officer to be placed in the council with the responsibility to prepare impact risk audits in consultation with local communities.

This need not be very expensive and my experience with similar environmental grant programs indicates that rather than mandating it or making it universal for all councils, to commence on an opt in basis. This could be done incrementally with an initial take up on the basis of submission and commitment to some local contribution. This process could be on a trial/demonstration basis for say 3 years and evaluated with a view to ramping up if successful.

To further develop this proposition prior to formulating a recommendation to government the Productivity Commission could try a test audit in say a rural region, coastal and an urban region to develop practical insight into the methodologies that could be employed.

Capacity

Having the motivation to take action to adapt to change without the capacity to do anything is a formula for frustration.

Capacity for many individuals, groups and businesses will then be a serious barrier and a case can be made for some form of government intervention. Somehow a balance needs to be struck between supporting actions that are warranted on strong equity grounds and not undermining the need for personal commitment and action.

Some of the factors that affect capacity to adapt are capital wealth and income, information, age and family and community support networks.

Private renters for instance are totally dependant on a landlord or absentee owner to install solar energy or make other modifications which can reduce energy demand, lowering both energy bills and release of greenhouse gas from power stations.

Recommendation that the Commission consider requesting the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) to investigate options for landlords to take adaptation measures.

Many home owners are in a position to make such decisions if provided with accurate information but elderly home owners and others with limited incomes may need some assistance. Public housing and social housing tenants are a special case in that governments can more easily intervene without causing market distortions and should be urged to do so.

Many appliances now have energy ratings allowing consumers to choose energy saving equipment. Ironically many people on low incomes are least able to take this option. Some welfare agencies such as Good Shepherd Youth and Family Services operate means tested no-interest loan schemes to assist pensioners and others and there is an opportunity to provide small subsidies to encourage use of better-rated appliances.

Recommendation that the Commission liaise with appropriate welfare agencies on the merits and practicality of introducing such schemes

Conclusion

The Commission has been charged with an important task in an environment where basic facts are both lacking and sometimes contested.

Although its main task must be to provide the best advice to the government a supplementary benefit will be the educational value to the public at large.

The Land Conservation Council in Victoria in the past, did great service in the inquiries it conducted, by producing remarkable high standard and comprehensive information papers free of cost to many people from all walks of life.

The possession of such papers in my opinion materially lifted the level of debate during the course of their inquiries.

The Commission has put out one issues paper.

If possible the publication of a follow up paper with more specific content would be of considerable educational value and assist subsequent public submissions and debate.

Yours sincerely
Barry Pullen

References

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4. Hulme, Mike: *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*, Cambridge University Press, 2009
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