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## Reality check on climate change

### Shift to low-carbon world may be more radical than Stern suggests

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When it comes to climate change, can we really have our cake and eat it too?

Nicholas Stern's report on the economics of climate change suggests we can.

If we do the right things now, he says, we can dramatically reduce our carbon output while enjoying continued economic growth.

Don't bank on it, say William Rees and Thomas Homer-Dixon.

Rees, a University of British Columbia professor best known for inventing "ecological footprint analysis," says people in developed nations such as Canada need to dramatically reduce their levels of consumption.

And Homer-Dixon, a University of Toronto political scientist and author of the bestselling book, *The Upside of Down*, says it's time we recognize the planet can't sustain infinite economic growth.

Of the two scholars, Rees, a self-described ecological economist, is more emphatic about the imperative to rein in our insatiable lust for more.

The human economy, he maintains, is just a subsystem of Earth's finite ecosphere. "The more the economy grows, the less ecosphere there is for the other 10 million species on the planet.

"That's why fisheries are collapsing. That's why deserts are advancing. That's why tropical forests are disappearing. What we're literally doing is consuming the planet from the inside out."

Climate change is merely a symptom of this larger problem of over-consumption, argues Rees -- and not even necessarily the most important one, at that.

"There are many symptoms of humans out there having exceeded the carrying capacity of the planet," he says. For example, the rate of biodiversity loss is now at least a thousand-fold higher than in pre-industrial times.

To restore the proper ecological balance, Rees says the wealthy developed world must massively reduce its consumption, by as much as 80 or 90 per cent in some areas.

Cuts of that magnitude are required to allow economic growth in developing nations, most of which are still mired in poverty, he says. For that to happen without destroying the planet, "we need to have a global economy that reduces consumption and growth where it's not needed -- namely in the First-World countries."

Homer-Dixon, whose new book examines five "tectonic stresses," including climate stress, that threaten global order, uses more measured language. But his message is similar.

"If we were just talking about the Canadian or American economies on their own," he says, "we might be able to make the transition without a decrease in standard of living."

But since the changes involve the global economy, “it may be we’re looking at a contraction in real income in rich parts of the world.”

We live in a bimodal world, he observes, with 1.2 billion rich people with average incomes of \$32,000 per year, about four billion poor people with average incomes around \$1,500 a year, and not a lot in between.

“That’s not a prescription of a community that’s going to pull through these stresses without a lot of instability,” he says. In a world split between rich and poor, “the tendency may well be to fight rather than to co-operate.”

Homer-Dixon says the impact on our everyday lives of the shift to a low-carbon world will be far more radical than most of us realize. “I can’t imagine a single thing we do that won’t be changed. It’s not just a matter of efficiency. Some things will just not be done any more.”

We’ll likely travel far less, spend more time video-conferencing and working electronically with one another, and live in cities that are much denser than today, he says. “Our suburban lifestyle now is not one we can sustain in a world of high energy costs and high carbon costs.”

The transition is likely to be difficult and extended over many decades, he says. “We have to rebuild our societies from the ground up.”

He suspects that Nicholas Stern knows all this, but concluded that people would balk if he started talking about caps to growth or economic decline. “But that’s the elephant in the room.”

Though dealing with climate change will impose heavy costs, that doesn’t mean our quality of life has to suffer, he says. “We’re way past the threshold at which the correlation between wealth and happiness breaks down,” says Homer-Dixon. “If, in the end, we have to have one car in each family, or we walk more than we drive sometimes, or we don’t take as many long-distance trips, I’m not sure that’s going to make us less happy.”

Rees goes a step further, pointing out that there’s a “huge moral and ethical dilemma here that we’re not willing to confront.” The 20 per cent of the world’s people who live in rich countries contribute 80 per cent of all greenhouse gas emissions. Canadians, for instance, generate greenhouse gases at four times the global average.

“We therefore have a moral responsibility for the damage costs that this is going to impose on relatively poor people elsewhere in the world,” Rees says.

If we don’t sharply reduce our carbon emissions, “we are consciously making a decision to continue to do damage, to commit violence on other people in order to conserve a lifestyle that is unconscionably over-consumptive.

“If we make that kind of choice,” he says, “we have no legs to stand on in the court of justice.”