Dealing with climate change: A European centre–right perspective

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Abstract
The fight against climate change is sometimes inaccurately perceived as a topic which inherently belongs to those on the left of the political spectrum. This article maps out the most important aspects of climate change and its prevention from a centre–right perspective, and ventures to show that a both sensible and successful approach to this problem is entirely consistent with centre–right tenets and values. It starts by discussing the principle of stewardship and how to address this issue on the individual level. It then argues that the involvement of local and regional actors is of great importance when it comes to the implementation of internationally set climate goals or specific commitments. The article proceeds with a brief overview of how the private sector and emerging technologies can play their part in the fight against climate change. Lastly, it makes the case for the reinforced engagement of the EU through coordinated investment, an improved emissions trading scheme and global leadership.

Keywords
Climate change, Centre–right, Emissions trading scheme, Energy, Local governance

Introduction
Climate change remains one of the main challenges facing the global community. Scientific evidence of the impact of human activity on the planet’s climate system is unequivocal, and the twenty-first century has provided a series of grim examples. The year 2016 was the third in a row to set a new record for global average surface temperatures (NASA 2017). Instances of shrinking ice sheets, sea level rises and extreme weather anomalies are not isolated events and remind us that the topic of climate change
will continue to be pressingly relevant in the decades to come. Traditionally, the political discourse on climate change in Europe has been dominated by left-leaning political organisations or single-issue parties/organisations. These efforts have played a role in shaping the debate on climate change, no doubt, but it would be a fallacy to consider that this topic is not being seriously addressed by the centre–right formations within the EU.

This article endeavours to approach the topic from various viewpoints, ranging from the individual response to the supranational one, in order to provide a concise narrative which is consistent with centre–right1 tenets and values. It contends that some of the recent developments in the sphere of environmental protection within the EU are largely consistent with these principles, and thus they should be framed and communicated accordingly. The only way to successfully address this global challenge is through a continuous European-led international effort which involves multiple levels of governance and provides specific incentives and balanced policies.

**Centre–right worldview and values**

The aim of preventing environmental degradation remains a classic collective action problem in which a multitude of agents could all benefit from a specific action but the associated costs may lead to a lack of incentive for rational agents to contribute (Olson 1965, 2). The response of Europe’s centre–right to the problem of environmental degradation relies on human motivations and solutions, and these are rooted in the core values of the European People’s Party (EPP). Part of the current generations’ responsibility is to pass on to their successors ‘better opportunities . . . by defending freedom and democracy, ensuring solid public finances and preserving a healthy environment’ (EPP 2012, 2).

Based on these ideas, the motivation to protect the environment lies in the conservative and Christian Democratic principle of ‘stewardship’, which is quintessential to the conservative mindset (Moraru 2017). As society is ‘a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born’ (Burke 1951, 93), the principle of stewardship can be extended to the preservation of the natural environment, as we have a duty not to squander our inheritance.

The principle of stewardship offers the main motivation for every individual to engage in environmental protection. According to conservative tradition, the most important thing which individuals can do is settle down, make a home and pass it on to their children. As a consequence of the overriding affection towards the ‘home’, which is understood to include the environment, individuals engage at the local and national levels in associations formed to protect their environmental inheritance. This represents a localised, highly personal motivator which has much more power than the impersonal mission of saving the planet (Moraru 2017).

Climate-related risks should be acknowledged sensibly and without yielding to climate catastrophism or climate grief (Cass 2017), which could lead to emotional numbing and individual detachment from this important issue. A centre–right approach to this
problem also clearly distances itself from the specific line of reasoning which questions whether individuals should cut down their carbon footprint by not having children (Basshuysen 2018) or whether it is immoral to bring up children in a potentially devastated future world (Bry 2016).

**Importance of the local and regional levels**

The overall narrative on tackling climate change is usually politically communicated by citing emissions targets and specific pledges which are set by global intergovernmental agreements. The importance of such international goal-setting and the political pressure to achieve synergies in the fight against climate change are beyond doubt. However, when it comes to implementation, the agreements produce mixed results. The success of the Kyoto Protocol (in effect since 2005), for example, remains highly disputed, given both its exemption of developing countries from having to reduce their carbon footprint and its unrealistic target-setting, which has proved to be over-optimistic. The lack of major progress through international treaties on these issues is due, among other factors, to the top-down nature of the commitments, which are negotiated by high-level governmental representatives but ultimately have to be implemented on the local level. That this top-down approach has achieved lacklustre results is related to the fact that existing multinational institutions such as the UN are simply ill-designed for dealing with global environmental problems and producing responses to them (Dirix et al. 2013, 366).

More than half of the world’s population is centred in or around cities, and current projections estimate that this figure may reach 68% by 2050 due to migratory trends and the overall growth of the global population (UN DESA 2018). As such, cities and megalopolises contribute directly to more than 70% of carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions (Leahy 2018). The traditional top-down approach of high-level commitments—which are problematic to implement, as the history of the Kyoto Protocol shows—may not be the optimal strategy for tackling such a global challenge (Grunbaum 2015). Based on subsidiarity—that is, the concept according to which a central authority should perform ‘only those tasks which cannot be performed at a more local level’ (Oxford Dictionaries 2018)—decentralisation is a key principle of the centre–right paradigm and should be fully applied in this case. Regional authorities, local councils, municipalities and local non-state actors should be fully involved in target-setting and the actual implementation of climate-change policies. Certain estimates project that regional and local authorities will be responsible for implementing more than 70% of climate-change reduction measures and up to 90% of climate-change adaptation measures (Committee of the Regions 2017). This paradigm was reflected in the 2015 Paris Agreement. During the period that began with the unsuccessful Copenhagen Conference of the Parties and led up to this agreement, those involved became more favourable towards bottom-up approaches, meaning that there was better inclusion of cities, companies and transnational coalitions on climate change (Hale 2016, 14).

International coalitions and initiatives, such as the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, have led exemplary efforts which should be welcomed and further encouraged. From an EU-led initiative in 2008, the Global Covenant has grown into an
international alliance of cities and local governments with a shared long-term vision of promoting action to combat climate change. An additional telling example is the recent ‘We are Still In’ initiative, which more than 230 cities from all of the American states have joined. It serves as a global pledge that the US will adhere to the goals set out in the Paris Agreement, regardless of the puzzling intention of President Trump to withdraw from the global pact. This initiative brings together local mayors and governors, business representatives and community leaders who are committed to reducing the carbon footprint of American cities. Only with the fully fledged involvement of such actors can the implementation of climate-change measures and international agreements bring about effective results in the long run.

**Economic opportunities, technology and private-sector involvement**

It must be highlighted that all of the targets set for greenhouse-gas reduction, renewable-energy production and energy efficiency also have to keep in mind the impact on businesses and industry and ensure a stable transition which does not negatively impact the competitiveness of the sectors involved. There should not be an obligatory trade-off between reversing the effects of climate change and radically altering people’s lifestyles or sacrificing whole industrial sectors. Economic data from the previous two decades indicates that the low-carbon transition within the EU is compatible with economic growth (European Political Strategy Centre 2017, 7). The goal of a greener, more sustainable low-carbon economy can also be perceived as a potential economic opportunity. There has been a rapid growth in new employment opportunities in Europe—more than one million people are directly or indirectly employed in renewable energy–related sectors, for example (EurObserver 2016, 4). Future scenarios for the jobs market in 2050 take into account the displacement of coal-related jobs but also project that the newly created positions in the renewable-energy, energy-efficiency, grid-enhancement and energy-flexibility industries will lead to a net gain of 11.6 million jobs (IRENA 2018a, 12). Potential job creation is only one aspect. Climate-related extreme events such as floods, tropical storms or prolonged droughts in the EU and European Economic Area partner countries accounted for more than €400 billion of economic losses between 1980 and 2018 (European Environment Agency 2017, 8). These figures may well increase and move the price tag of climate change several percentage points up the scale of the EU’s gross domestic product.

Support for entrepreneurship and technological innovation is key and could aid the fight against climate change, alongside a coordinated government effort. A case can be made for the importance of small and medium-sized enterprises, which could be negatively impacted by climate change but also have the opportunity to adapt to such challenges and contribute to tackling environmental problems. Renewable-energy technologies, digital solutions for energy efficiency and innovative tools to fight climate change are prominently on the rise and have the potential to reshape the whole approach to this issue. At the moment even the distributed-database technology of Blockchain is being explored as a possible aid to carbon-emissions trading, renewable-energy trade and
climate-action crowdfunding (UN Climate Change 2017). Numerous green start-ups and entrepreneurs could tap into the possibilities offered by technological breakthroughs and explore new solutions to these challenges. Creating the necessary conditions for small and medium-sized enterprises and start-ups to thrive, adapt to and address environmental concerns is a must.

Bigger businesses also have to be incentivised to contribute to this global effort. The greatest bulk of greenhouse gas comes from the energy and transport industries (US EPA 2017), which are lagging behind in sufficiently cutting down their carbon footprints and adopting greener alternatives due to technical difficulties and associated costs. Realistic targets have to be pursued for the deployment of renewable energy and energy efficiency—there is a lasting trend in the falling price of renewables, which are projected to become cheaper than fossil fuels within the next decade, leading to a significant shift in the energy paradigm (IRENA 2018b, 3). At the same time, new technologies for carbon capture and storage should be further developed as they are key to limiting CO2 emissions. When it comes to the transport industry, technological improvement is also one of the most viable options within the sector, which has seen a rise in emissions in recent years. The electrification of vehicles and the use of hydrogen and biofuels offer paths for a stable transition within the next decade.

The falling costs of eco-friendly technology, limited government intervention in the form of emissions trading and an internal push for environmental sustainability could be the biggest drivers behind the private sector playing an essential role in the pursuit of reduced carbon emissions.

**European leadership**

This coordinated effort between government and business to invest in climate-related measures is of paramount importance in the upcoming decade. The current European Commission, headed by President Jean-Claude Juncker, has emphasised the need for incentives for private and public investment, most notably through the 2014–20 EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), which made substantial commitments to climate mainstreaming. The MFF not only set a 20% goal for climate mainstreaming, but also ensured the inclusion of technical provisions to secure climate goals as an integral part of the EU’s spending (European Commission 2016, 41). The EU is on track to reach its target by 2020, totalling approximately €200 billion of climate-relevant spending over the entire seven-year period (European Commission 2016, 21). The current Commission proposal for the next MFF (2021–7) goes even further and features a target of at least 25% of EU expenditure contributing to climate objectives (European Commission 2018).

The recent reform of the EU’s carbon market, the EU Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), represents an integral part of the EU’s response to climate change. The EPP recognises the importance of the ETS as a vital pillar of EU climate policy as the system applies to more than 11,000 industrial sites in Europe and aims to contribute to the substantial reduction of CO2 emissions in the next decade. However, two of the biggest
challenges that remain for the ETS post-2020 are the price of carbon allowances and carbon leakage. One inherent problem of the ETS is the annual surplus of emissions allowances which has built up, especially since the economic crisis of 2008/9. The surplus of allowances lowers the carbon prices within the ETS, which ultimately removes the incentive for industries to reduce their emissions. Even though the ETS price per tonne for carbon has more than tripled in the last 18 months (Carbon Tracker Initiative 2018), it still remains volatile and relatively low. Measures such as the Market Stability Reserve4 should be reinforced in order to prevent imbalances between the supply and demand of ETS allowances. Furthermore, the EU should make a continuous effort to prevent carbon leakage—that is, the migration of businesses to third countries that have laxer environmental rules, which can even lead to increases in overall CO₂ emissions. This has to be achieved through improved cooperation with third countries and also through continuous efforts to uphold global commitments and specific climate-related targets. The ETS remains the world’s biggest emissions-trading market and its long-term success would enable it to set the global benchmark.

This brings us to the ultimate point. Most importantly, the EU should further enhance its role as a leader in environmental protection on the global stage. In the case of climate change, a hallmark achievement for EU institutions and member states was the adoption of the 2015 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Paris Agreement. EU leaders, the Juncker Commission and the French presidency of the UN Conference of the Parties played vital roles in the historic negotiations.5 Given the disappointing intention of the US to leave the Agreement in the near future, the EU should step up its continued support for implementing the global pledge and also ensure that vital players, such as China, are on board. The potential departure of the US from the Paris Agreement leaves a vacuum in global climate leadership (Palackova 2017, 253) which could be filled by the EU in the coming decade.

Conclusion

The centre–right is sometimes criticised as not being ambitious enough with regard to climate change. However, environmental protection is entirely consistent with the centre–right’s tenets and its core values, which can serve as a template for addressing this global issue. Such an ambitious effort should involve as many stakeholders as possible and transfer ownership to local and regional authorities, which should be engaged in both the design and the implementation of climate-change policies. Coordinated governmental efforts should also facilitate the involvement of the private sector by creating the necessary environment for businesses and start-ups to develop new solutions and tap into nascent technologies which could have a tangible impact in the future.

Lastly, the EU should pursue an ambitious and coherent strategy based on three main pillars. A sizeable part of the EU budget should be devoted to climate-related objectives, and European funds invested in agriculture or regional policy should be in line with climate goals for reduced emissions. The European Commission should also step up its
efforts to improve the ETS in the next decade and promote a balanced and effective mechanism to deal with the negative environmental externalities caused by the industrial sector. As a final step, the EU should make full use of the opportunity to lead the global effort on climate change by designing specific policies and also by convincing third-country actors to honour their environmental commitments and bear the corresponding responsibility for their carbon footprints.

Notes
1. The term ‘centre–right’ is used here as equivalent to the EPP and its member parties—that is, it includes Christian Democrats, conservatives, centrist groups, and other like-minded parties in the EU and its neighbourhood.
2. The Global Covenant of Mayors is a unique international alliance of cities and local governments with a common long-term strategy for tackling climate change. Further details can be found at https://www.globalcovenantofmayors.org/.
3. Integrating climate change mitigation and adaptation measures into policy across different policy sectors.
4. As of 2019 the Market Stability Reserve will try to address the current surpluses and manage emissions allowances placed in reserve with the aim of balancing the supply and demand of emissions allowances.
5. For a further discussion, see Oberthür 2016.

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