

# **Tackling the Climate Crisis Is Impossible – Yet We Need To Do It**

**Article by Oras Tynkkynen**

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World governments will again gather to discuss international climate action in Katowice, Poland. The 24<sup>th</sup> Conference of Parties (COP24) in December will be the first UN climate meeting after the release of the seminal new report by climate scientists. It will also be a space to discuss raising the ambition of current national emission commitments (Nationally Determined Contributions or NDCs in UN jargon) under the so-called facilitative dialogue.

The report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) highlighted the urgency of taking climate action, triggering massive attention and debate in many countries. But what does all this mean for our efforts to tackle the climate crisis? What is the role for Europe? And what should Green and other progressive forces do now? Though limiting warming to just 1.5 degrees is, in fact, impossible, we need to do it nevertheless. And this requires many of us to reconsider long-held beliefs.

## **Good news and bad news**

First, it may be helpful to understand a bit better what the new report actually is all about. The historic Paris climate conference in 2015 invited the IPCC – the main scientific body on climate change – “to provide a special report in 2018 on the impacts of global warming of 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways”. The fact that it was commissioned by all world governments lends it extra political weight.

The report highlights three key messages. First, it illustrates how a warming of just 2 degrees – previously the headline target for the EU and the world community – would be very, very bad. Two degrees can harm biodiversity, cut the global fish catch, and expose people to water stress twice as much as 1.5 degrees, for example. Second, the IPCC argues that it is still possible to limit warming to a safer level. The report presents four different paths that could – under certain conditions – keep warming to under 1.5 degrees. Third, the report shows how success would require efforts at gargantuan scale. Global carbon emissions would need to be roughly halved by the end of the next decade and then brought down to net zero by the middle of the century.

The response by some world leaders – for instance, in Australia and the United States – has been predictably underwhelming. However, in many other countries the report has triggered an unprecedented debate with a new sense of urgency. In my home country of Finland, for example, public discussion on climate has reached new heights. Climate was among top news in essentially all key media for days. Leading politicians of all shades promised stronger climate action. Helsinki saw the biggest climate demonstration in history.

## **Why 1.5 degrees is impossible**

The report kickstarted a long-overdue conversation about the climate and may mark a turning point in our efforts to tackle the crisis. At the same time, we need to be brutally honest with ourselves and recognise that limiting global warming to just 1.5 degrees is already essentially impossible. We should start by differentiating between different spheres of possibility.

The IPCC report shows that remaining below 1.5 degrees is possible physically. If we cut our emissions rapidly

enough, there are no atmospheric forces that would push us beyond the limit.

It is also possible technically. We either already have the required technologies or they are likely to become available in the necessary timeframes. And the task is possible economically. The cost would certainly be high, especially initially, but factoring in co-benefits to people and the environment as well as avoided climate impacts would make the overall bill manageable. However, limiting warming to 1.5 degrees is impossible politically. And it only takes one kind of impossible to keep it from happening.

I do not use the word impossible lightly. Politics can effect change, even radical change. If world events in recent years have taught us anything, it is that big surprises can and do happen. To understand why the task really is impossible, we need to unpack the scale and speed of emission reductions required. A helpful tool to do this is the global carbon law, developed by high-profile scientists.

## **Reality check**

According to the carbon law, the world would need to halve emissions every decade until 2050. So first halve global emissions once by 2030, then halve them again by 2040 and yet again by 2050. This would keep us broadly in line with limiting warming to 1.5 degrees.

Halving emissions every decade translates into cutting them by 7 per cent a year. Not just in some sectors, not just in some countries, not just in some years – all sectors, all countries, and every single year. To put this figure into perspective, global fossil carbon emissions dropped a total of 1 per cent in 1992 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The financial crisis left another temporary 1 per cent dent in 2009.

Emission reductions at required scale have never been sustained by even individual countries. For instance, even a country like Sweden – often considered a role model – has only managed to reduce emissions on an average by a little more than 2 per cent a year since 2005. How much is 7 per cent a year? Again, using the case of Sweden, the country would have to cut in less than 18 months emissions equalling the amount currently coming from electricity and district heating combined. Emissions from agriculture? As much would have to be cut in the next two years.

In many countries not even the most progressive parties dare to advocate for emission reductions at required scale and speed.

Of the current emission targets set by governments, precious few come even close to what would be required. According to [Climate Action Tracker](#), only Morocco and The Gambia have commitments compatible with limiting warming to 1.5 degrees – assuming that they are implemented, of course. Everyone else comes far behind. The world's biggest emitter, China, gets a rating of “highly insufficient”. The United States, the second biggest emitter, is rated “critically insufficient”.

The biggest challenge is not that no major polluter has emission targets even close to what is required. It is that no major polluter is even seriously considering anything close to adequate.

In the EU, Climate Commissioner Cañete is proposing raising the 2030 emission target from 40 per cent to 45 per cent compared with 1990 levels. Europe would not even do its average share of halving global emissions, let alone compensate for our historical responsibility and higher capacity. Even this conservative improvement is far from a done deal, thanks to opposition from member states.

In many countries not even the most progressive parties dare to advocate for emission reductions at required scale and speed. In many more, they remain visions of a small, fringe minority. We could, arguably, introduce strong enough climate policies if Green parties got 50.1 per cent of the vote in key countries. To have enough time to cut

emissions by 2030, this would need to happen in the next electoral cycle. How realistic that scenario is, I let the reader judge. (For reference: Europe Elects gives Greens currently a projection of 6.4 per cent in the European elections.)

## **Why we need to do it anyway**

Where does this leave us? The first option – advocated by many experts – is simply to acknowledge that we are bound to cross 1.5 degrees. However, as the IPCC report clearly shows, this would come at an extremely high price – in economic, environmental, and human terms. Anyone arguing for accepting a higher level of warming would also need to own the destruction it would bring with it. We should also be explicit about who would pay the highest price: the most vulnerable. Giving up on 1.5 degrees would mean giving up on the poorest people most exposed to disastrous climate impacts. A safer bet is to aim at limiting warming to as low as possible. Every tenth of a degree counts, measured in the grim metrics of human lives and species lost.

Ambitious climate action is essentially risk management. If we now decide to give up on 1.5 degrees, there is no turning back later as the remaining carbon budget is used up quickly. If we, instead, try to cut emissions much faster, we can buy time. This would allow us to still remain within 1.5 degrees if we are lucky enough to get happy surprises later – radical innovations, political shifts, the climate system turning out to be more resilient than estimated.

We should also never discount human ingenuity – nor perseverance.

American clean energy investor Jigar Shah makes the point that we should get key climate solutions up to 10 per cent penetration. If the time is right later and leaders finally wake up, the solutions would be ready to be scaled up with forceful policies. We should also never discount human ingenuity – nor perseverance. We have seen time and time again in history people rise to the challenge at the 11th hour.

The IPCC report shows that our societies and lives are about to change radically anyway. Either we reinvent our economies to drive down global emissions to zero to tackle the climate crisis, or we suffer the ravages of climate change uncontrolled. Either way, radical change is inevitable. But according to the IPCC, we can still choose which kind of change we want to live with. COP24 is an opportunity for world governments to reiterate their commitment to the goals of the Paris Agreement. It is also a time for them to have a frank discussion about how much more action that requires from all of them.

## **Making the impossible possible**

How do we then make the politically impossible possible? The answer is elusive, but some ideas can hopefully get us started.

First, governments need to increase the ambition of emission targets. The IPCC shows that if we fail in bending the curve fast enough before 2030, the game is over. In the EU, we need to raise the 2030 emission target to at least – 55 per cent, preferably higher. Aiming for net zero emissions before mid-century can also help, as long as it triggers more action in the short term.

Second, everyone needs to take action now. Concrete emission reductions on the ground are obviously needed to remain within the scarce carbon budget. However, they can also enable higher ambition in the future if we can show reducing emissions is both feasible and desirable.

Third, stronger alliances must be built. At the international level we need alliances of progressive countries to solve the game theory puzzles preventing individual countries from moving forward. At every level we need new and

surprising alliances across physical, sectoral, and mental borders to build enough momentum.

Fourth, financial flows have to be redirected. This means pulling money out of fossil fuel projects and companies – bound to fail anyway in a future with meaningful emission reductions. But this also means ramping up international climate finance to enable countries in the global South to leapfrog over the destructive fossil-driven growth model that the North followed.

Fifth, governments and companies alike need to multiply investments in climate innovation. This includes the development and demonstration of emerging solutions such as enhanced geothermal power. But we also need radical innovations that could in the future be game-changers, such as synthetic meat and direct air capture of carbon dioxide.

## **Tough questions for the Greens**

Greens should be uniquely equipped to deal with the civilisational challenge ahead of us. But we, too, may be faced with some uncomfortable choices – especially in countries and situations where we are in positions of power. We should not shy away from openly debating difficult issues. In that spirit, I present four questions we should be asking ourselves.

First, do we need to rethink our priorities? Greens have been the political force advocating for strongest climate action. But we have also had a host of other (undeniably important) issues in mind. Political capital is a limited resource. If we spend much of it on other issues, less remains for climate action. If we are serious about the urgency of the climate crisis – and the radical changes needed to tackle it – this needs to be reflected in the way we prioritise issues.

Second, do we need to reconsider alliances? Greens have been good at reaching out to like-minded partners in the civil society. At times we have been equally good – or even better – at rejecting co-operation with populists and industries, for example. A slogan often used by the climate movement argues that to change everything, we need everyone. But to get everyone, we may need to start talking with some surprising – and at times uncomfortable – allies.

Third, do we need to revisit which solutions we advocate – or reject? Classical Green solutions from energy efficiency to renewable energy and public transport would take us a long way in reducing emissions. However, they alone would not get us anywhere near the goal of net zero emissions. All pathways compatible with 1.5 degrees in the IPCC report require large amounts of negative emissions. If we are serious about tackling the climate crisis, we need to have a realistic plan on how to ramp up negative emissions at scale, while minimising the problems related to carbon dioxide removal.

Fourth, do we need to reconsider risk? The Greens have rejected for example gene editing techniques and extensions of nuclear reactor lifetimes based on their risks. These risks should not be belittled, let alone ignored. But we are also faced with the risk of the climate crisis destabilising our civilisation. How should these risks be balanced?

Answering these questions will be difficult. But if we really want to tackle the climate crisis – and if we want to make the impossible possible – then these questions deserve serious thought.

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