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RECKONING: GLOBAL WARMING: FORGET ELEGANCE. THE ANSWER WILL BE A HODGEPODGE The best way to solve our biggest problem: Be clumsy

DOUG SAUNDERS LONDON Please allow me to make, in my own distinctly ham-fisted way, an argument in favour of clumsiness. Not your pedestrian, jacket-tucked-into-underpants clumsiness, a form that I have mastered and have no wish to endorse.

No - serious clumsiness, clumsiness at the highest levels, official government clumsiness.

The War on Elegance should begin, I believe, with nothing less than the most pressing issue of our age - climate change. The global-warming debate has entered a new, very clumsy phase, and that could be our best hope.

Perhaps I should explain. Over the past year, I've been following a very new and rather obscure branch of scholarship that is usually called the "clumsy solutions school." Governments and international organizations tend to fail, argues this movement (launched, it seems, by German sociologist Marco Verweij), when they force neat, sensible, single solutions onto problems that are by nature complex and challenging.

These folks (the Clumsyists? the Clumsoisie?) have a fascinating manifesto, Clumsy Solutions for a Complex World . It is not, I'll admit, a book that is going to set the world aflame, and not just because of its \$97 cover price. At first, I wanted to throw it into the bin marked Irredeemably Flaky.

But their argument seemed appealing enough on paper. When governments face big, nasty problems, they hear contradictory stories from citizens: a) "We need to be forced to change our behaviour;" b) "We need to have regulations to keep things under control;" c) "We need to spend some money on an alternative;" d) "This isn't a problem at all and you shouldn't get in our way." Most times, leaders will choose one of these stories and find a solution that fits it.

The Clumsies argue that our leaders mistakenly strive for elegance, which "means pursuing just one of these stories and, in the process, silencing the other voices." More often than not, they say, better solutions can be found by giving each of the stories, however contradictory, a piece of policy.

"Despite appearances, [political] controversies are not typically zero-sum games," they write. "Most citizens are not moral extremists.

They are satisfied as long as they know that the law respects their social orientations and world views; they do not insist in addition that it should reject other people's orientations and world views." Yeah, well, sure. Even if you could convince these organizations they need a "clumsiness agenda" (one of those ideas doomed by its very name), it's hard to see where the idea would yield fruit. In Afghanistan? I don't think so. In federal-Quebec relations? Not quite.

Then, this week, I was struck by the clumsiness idea's ultimate application.

You may have noticed that conversations about global warming tend to turn clumsy very quickly. If you get people together to discuss the problem, whether it's in your kitchen over a beer or in the United Nations General Assembly, you'll soon find that they're telling very different stories.

One person will assume that we should be talking about changing our behaviour in profound ways and controlling the world's population.

The next will assume that we need hard and fast laws, specific limits on emissions, heavy taxes on those things that produce them and steep market prices. Someone else will be technological: We need to pump our carbon emissions into the ground (sequestration) until we can come up with cleaner devices.

Then there are those who favour mitigation: We need to build seawalls, develop new crops, redesign our cities to ready ourselves for the inevitable rise in water levels and temperatures. And someone will say we shouldn't do anything, because it would get in the way of the more important issues of economic growth.

On Tuesday, I happened to be at Canada House, where the chief executive officers of Canada's major oil, gas and energy companies were gathering to share ideas. In one room, we had the people most responsible for Canada's heavy contribution to global warming.

They also happened to be deeply worried about finding solutions: They knew their shares are getting hit by the uncertainty. It was one of those cases where an industry is begging for government regulation.

But there was little agreement on what form it should take.

I found myself talking to Deryk King, the CEO of the huge gas and electricity-selling firm Direct Energy (you may know them from their door-to-door salesmen). He has been the most outspoken leader in this industry in calling for tough, expensive solutions to climate change. I pointed out that his colleagues seemed to agree on little.

How could we ever find a consensus? "I don't think it's a question of choice," he told me. "You've got people like David Suzuki saying, 'Well, you don't need to do that because you can do this.' We're going to have to do everything.

"We're going to have to develop energy efficiency, impose limits, reduce consumption, develop new nukes, look at sequestration - every one of those things will be necessary to achieve what will have to be Draconian targets." This happens to be precisely the view of the Clumsies on this matter. I'm not sure if Mr. King was being fair to Mr. Suzuki, but I think he captured an important truth. There are some fundamental paradoxes in the climate-change problem that make any single solution self-defeating.

For example: Even if everything possible is done to cut emissions, there will still be temperature and water-level rises, so we'll need some serious defences. These are expensive, and will come to the countries that have stronger economies (as will the ability to enforce emission limits). But severely reduced levels of consumption or population growth are direct causes of poverty and government impotence.

So, simultaneously, we need to fight hard for limits and lifestyle changes, which will prevent the worst from occurring; for taxes and carbon markets, which will help governments enforce those laws, and earn the revenues to pay for them; for technology and flood-protection megaprojects, which both protect us and generate tax-earning activity that will finance more solutions.

And you even encourage the deniers, because their efforts to evade the solutions will generate economic growth in those countries that need to become prosperous enough to pursue all these paths.

In the end, if it works, nobody will be happy. Partisans of each solution will see their ideas as having been horribly compromised and half-complete. But the sum of their half-failures may be the best path to a full success. That's clumsy, but that's the real world.

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