Civil Polity, Civil Society and Climate Change

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The research focused initially on the role of two contrasting network NGOs (Non-Government Organisations) in influencing the outcome of global and national public policy on climate change. The two organisations were an environmental network NGO – Climate Action Network (CAN) and a business network NGO – the Global Climate Coalition (GCC). The research involved face-to-face interviews in a number of countries with individuals associated with these network NGOs and a variety of other organisations involved with national and global climate change public policy. The wide range of print media coverage generated by Climate Action Network and Global Climate Coalition was also analysed along with other media coverage of both the organisations’ climate policy proposals or activities.

The research indicates that in understanding and trying to influence global and national public policy, it may be more useful to think of society as consisting of two spheres, political society (governments and government bodies and agencies at all levels – local, state, national, international) and a broad civil polity including for-profit as well as non-profit organisations and citizens acting independently of government. Within these two spheres, various actors have different degrees of agency, influence and power and the two spheres interact to form national public spheres or a global public sphere within which the process of developing public policy takes place.

One advantage of this approach is the reduction of complexity that stems from focusing on only two spheres (government and broad non-government) rather than three sectors. The major advantage is that for major environmental and other issues, policy advocacy coalitions normally span profit and non-profit organisations as well as parts of government. For example in the climate change public policy field, that was the focus of the research, Environmental NGOs have been allied with renewable energy businesses, government scientists and governmental environmental departments and agencies in pushing for more effective action to address global warming. Initially this was resisted strongly by many Business NGOs and particularly those associated with fossil-fuel driven corporations. More recently, less stringent climate change policy options have been promoted by many Business NGOs, particularly those with close links to fossil fuel and transport industries in partnership with corporations in these industries and Government Economic and Industry Departments and Agencies.

This two sphere model also has advantages where the issue is international, which is clearly the case for the ozone layer and global warming. Both not-for-profit (Climate Action Network (CAN) and its larger members – Greenpeace, WWF, Friends of the Earth) and for-profit (Global Climate Coalition (GCC) and its members – Exxon, BP, Shell, GM, Ford) aim to influence political society across many nations. The development of global climate change public policy can therefore be seen as a political battle between a global Precautionary Policy Coalition led by CAN and its allies (including political society and civil polity allies in many countries) and the global Economic Growth Coalition led by GCC and its allies (including civil polity and political society allies in many countries, but particularly in the US, Canada, Japan, Australia, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia).

Regrettably for the sake of human civilization, the Economic Growth Coalition has been effective in ensuring that global and many national political societies have not taken effective action to address the problem of global warming. The much-contested Kyoto Protocol will only reduce global greenhouse gas emissions by 2012 by about 1% below business as usual. By 2012, global greenhouse gas emissions will be 30% above the level in 1990 when
international experts in climate science through the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) first confirmed the global warming problem.

To address the problem of climate change and many other major issues, we need to mobilise the political influence of both the business sector and third sector organisations within the civil polity to influence the government and political society. The research concludes that a two sphere model, focusing on political society and the civil polity, may provide a useful framework for undertaking and understanding many types of activism and social movements.