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Trump and climate change

Donald Trump claims that climate change is a hoax. If he does not believe it, he is a liar. If he does believe it, he has not taken even a moment to consider the evidence. That would be utterly irresponsible, since on the basis of this claim he plans policies that will do immense harm to people everywhere. Whether he believes it or not, Trump displays appalling immorality in making this claim. Politicians' disdain for the truth has recently become a subject for jokes and satire. But we should not be so good-humoured about it as to forget that the President of the United States is morally a very bad man in this way as in others.

Unfortunately, his views about climate change are orthodox within the Republican Party, which controls Congress, so they will undoubtedly prevail. But climate change cannot be brought under control without the cooperation of the US, the world's second-biggest emitter of greenhouse gas. So we need a new approach to climate politics that does not ask for morality.

For twenty-five years, countries have been told that they should reduce their emissions for the sake of future people and for the sake of the world's poor, who suffer most from climate change. This is a moral approach. It has not worked, and it is now doomed to total failure in the US because the President and Congress do not care about future people or the poor.

It is pointless to continue appealing to morality. Instead we shall have to appeal to people's and countries' self-interest. Climate change wastes the Earth's resources; in economists' terminology, it is "inefficient". If we bring it under control, there will be a huge benefit from doing so, which will be available to be distributed among countries and among generations. With proper distribution, it could be used to benefit everyone in the world, both in the present generation and in the future; it would be in each person's interest. This comes as a surprise to many people because we are so used to thinking we must make a sacrifice for the future. But it is true.

Arranging for a proper distribution will nevertheless be difficult. We need new international financial institutions that will make it possible for countries to finance some of their decarbonization by borrowing. Our efforts should now be focused on creating these institutions, so that we need not ask for morality.