

Sustainability Matters Now Podcast

Season 1, Episode 6. Sustainability and Politics: You Can't Separate Them

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Hello and welcome back to the Sustainability Matters Now podcast. My name is Tom Ritchie and today I'm really pleased to be joined by Caroline Kuzemko, Professor in Political Economy of Climate Change in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick. Caroline has just published a new book, *Climate Politics, Can't Live With It, Can't Mitigate Without It*, with Cambridge University Press. And it examines why politics is often so sidelined in climate research and policy and why this matters.

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Caroline's book draws on experiences from the 1990s through to the 2020s across global, national and local scales. And she argues that treating climate change as a purely technical problem means that we too often miss the social, political and power dynamics that determine whether climate action actually happens. Caroline, hello. Hi there. Thanks for having me. No, really great for you to join us. I wonder, Caroline, what brings you to this conversation on sustainability, please? So, I have been researching the

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politics associated with trying to mitigate for climate change in the energy sector for about 15 years now. And what I noticed over that time is that there seems to be sort of quite an interesting tension going on between how we expect policy to drive the sustainable changes that we need in order to meet our mitigation targets. But at the same time, there's like a real uncomfortableness around politics.

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And sometimes politics is just seen as conflictual or as a constraint for sustainable change. Sometimes it's just seen as something to be fearful of and something to avoid. And I found that to be sort of like such a fascinating thing that we want policy to drive change, but we don't want it to be too political. And for me, that is a pretty insurmountable.

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tension because my argument is that policy and politics are completely interrelated with one another, especially over the timeframes required to completely decarbonise highly emissions intensive global systems. Yeah. And I think it's really interesting you say about that almost contradiction between we need policy, but the politics of policy is what causes it to perhaps not be as effective as it can be in driving the change that we need.

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Was there a particular moment when you realised though that politics was being sidelined in conversations about climate action? I was working on a project where I was working more with economists and modelers, and I read sort of a fair amount of climate science. And I suppose I'd always had that sort of slight sense that politics was viewed as something rather negative. But it really came home to me when I worked on a project, which was about looking at integrated assessment models.

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and scenarios, the ones where we figure out how we get from here to 1.5 degrees, although that obviously seems a bit far-fetched now, but maybe a two-degree limit on global warming. I couldn't quite understand in the models what was driving the change. Then one of the models explained to me that it was policy. The assumption is that this is

going to be this blanket, politically accepted everywhere.

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price put on carbon and that policy was what was going to drive change. I remember thinking, that's a huge assumption because the reality of what that's going to look like is completely different. Actually, putting a price on carbon is really now just one of a plethora of other kinds of mitigation policies that you can choose between. It seemed like a really scary, to me, oversimplification of the realities, the political realities of trying to reduce emissions through public policy.

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I wonder if you could walk us maybe a little bit more through this central argument. So, you say that politics is poorly understood and they're often sidelined in climate research and policy. But could you try to explain why that is so problematic and what perhaps we're missing when we treat climate change as purely a technical problem? Yeah. So, if we come back to the assumption that policy is what's going to drive change, we can think about the fact

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that if you or I am sitting in a department somewhere, say we're in an energy department in a country in the world and we've just been told, go and reduce emissions. You have to think about how you can do that, not only in its own terms, but also in relation to the other policy goals that you have as an energy policymaker. And those goals will be affordability of energy; there will be security of energy.

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And so, all the time when you're making mitigation choices, they are relational with other policy areas. And if you think about other policy areas, up until very recently, most policy areas, any decision you made, like you're in a transport department and the issue is there's not enough roads. So, you build more roads, well, it's more emissions.

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So almost any decision that you would have made in any other area of policy was quite a high emissions decision. So, by not figuring out that mitigation policy interacts with all of those other higher carbon policy areas, that's like a political relationship that absolutely shapes the sorts of choices that policymakers can make. But if you're looking at

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as a technical issue, just not seeing any of those tensions. I think what we need to do is make it easier for our policymakers to reduce emissions. I think what we also need to do is not blame them for not having the most climate friendly decisions because the reality of the context that they're making decisions in is completely political.

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something that we can all see on local, national and global scales quite easily. Those perceived bad decisions that don't seem to be making the change, as you mentioned about 1.5 and the challenges that we're seeing with that. I wonder though, are you able to give us a concrete example where understanding the politics has made the difference between policy success and policy failure, please? Yeah. So, I'm going to give an example, which I think is really pertinent right now, because I think part of

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The environment that climate policymakers are in is sort of this wider environment of fossil fuel phase out. And of course, as fossil fuels are starting to be phased out, coal is sort of further down the track. But obviously, we now have very different estimates for what the demand profile for oil and gas are starting to look like over the next 10 years or so. And as spoiler alert, it's not positive for oil and gas companies.

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So, we're sort of sitting in this sort of very particular moment and a lot of the backlash that's coming at the moment is the backlash from the fact that some fossil fuel companies are facing stranded assets. And so, I mean, on the one hand, that might make you fear the politics of this moment, but on the other hand, those policymakers that have recognised that a necessary outcome of phasing out fossil fuels is that some people will lose jobs.

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And then taking the next step to realise, shall we speak to those people? Shall we consider with them what else we can put in place that's going to mean that that is not going to be a majorly negative life event for them? There's like a couple of sub-national governments in Spain and there were governments in coal producing regions. They realised that to meet goals, they were going to have to phase coal out. And so instead of just saying,

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by X date, there will be no more coal, which is if you're only thinking about emissions reduction, that's what you'd be doing. But if you're also thinking about the social implication of phasing out coal and reducing emissions in that way, then you think, let's talk to the stakeholders involved. And so, they did actually invite in companies, but uh unions, employees to deliberate together what would be the best way of going about this.

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And then the conclusions were that education, reskilling, regional economic policy, bringing green and renewables type industries to those regions to replace the coal industries, et cetera, et cetera. So, by thinking through the fact that it is political to phase out coal, they managed to do it in a way that was so smooth.

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that they were re-elected. That government that did it was actually re-elected. And the way the noise is at the moment around climate mitigation, you would just never think that that would be possible. But actually, it is if you think about the politics of it and then consider that when you design your policy. And I think it's a great example that you're able to share of where a government has managed to do this successfully, given the context of the time that we live in where, as you say, the systemic climate change

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requirements that we need to make do seem to almost be beyond our grasp sometimes and beyond the grasp of the politics that we have. And I think the nuance that you raised about the social implications of climate change politics is something that isn't always considered. And I think one of the biggest challenges when it comes to the climate is the impact of decisions on the global South. And that nuance can sometimes be lost because people in the global South won't necessarily always have the voice or the agency in the process discussion or decisions that we are making politically. And you talk in your book about climate mitigation.

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being more socially inclusive and politically acceptable. Whose voice is it interest you think have historically been left out of climate policymaking and why do you think it matters for trying to get more effective action? It's a wider question than global north or global south. mean, the broad answer to this is that it is only the most vulnerable in society who will suffer the most as a result of climate change.

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To a degree, I think that that is not recognised at the global level. If we go all the way back to when the original Kyoto Protocol and then Paris, the main UN agreements were negotiated, there was actually a lot of global North viewpoints, but they were contrasting with one another. Broadly speaking, the United States and Japan were a bit more sceptical.

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the European countries, including the UK at that time, were really, really trying to drive change. But then you had a bunch of middle-income countries. So, countries like India and Brazil were actually very vocal in climate change negotiations and managed to sort of negotiate themselves a position where they could be parties to the agreement, but not actually have to reduce emissions like for some considerable time. So, this is kind of a roundabout way of saying it's quite

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complex to think about because by negotiating a longer time to not have to reduce emissions over for a lot of countries, the impact of that is that emissions have obviously not just for that reason, but partly for that reason, emissions have continued to grow. So, if you look at where emissions are growing, like they have been in China and India, rather than in European and other OECD countries. And the outcome of that

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is that those that are living in areas most vulnerable to climate change because of floods, because of fires, because of droughts, crop failure, et cetera, et cetera, those are the voices that really were not heard in that debate between we need to reduce emissions and well, you guys do, but we don't need to because we need to continue to grow our economy.

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So specifically, those voices of the most vulnerable, I think, were the ones not heard, but also definitely within climate policymaking at the sort of more national level. Until about 10 years ago, I suppose, there was very little thinking about who is bearing the cost of mitigation policies, who will lose their jobs, which areas of the economy will not grow, those were kind of the voices that weren't being heard.

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And it's interesting for me as someone who obviously doesn't work in this area that that hasn't been thought to be listened to until fairly recently. It feels like a very obvious thing to include people who these things will affect. And I wonder for you though, what's been the most surprising or challenging thing that you've learned through this research, either about how climate politics actually works or about why we struggle so much to take action despite

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I think all of us probably knowing what needs to happen. Well, I mean, I suppose I can come back to sort of, you know, the central argument of the book and that is that we've just totally underbaked, under considered, haven't understood why climate mitigation policy is so political. I know it might be quite hard to understand this, particularly from an academic point of view, but there's actually only one author that I know about, Matthew Patterson, in his 2021 book on local climate politics, actually in Ottawa in Canada.

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That's the only attempt that I know of where someone has tried to actually conceptualise what we mean by politics in relation to climate change mitigation and its policy. When I started the research of the book, thought, well, I can just start.

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dipping in and out and working with and engaging with other conceptualisations, but they just weren't there. I thought maybe that really tells us something about the degree to which we have just relied on the technical arguments. We've relied on the urgency that scientific debates give us. The IPCC is telling us further 43 % reduction in emissions over now four-year timeframe.

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We've been relying on that to drive the changes that we need to see. But telling us what's going to happen doesn't tell us how to go about that in a social way or in a political way or in a way that allows us to keep climate mitigation policy on political agendas for the decades that it's going to take to reduce emissions especially if we think about how embedded high emissions systems are.

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So yeah, I was like really surprised at how little attempt there has been made to understand the politics of it, which means that like it's a huge opportunity, I think, for my book. But it also means that writing the book was like super complicated because I had to come up with my sort of conceptualisation on my own complicated nature of climate politics.

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in the examples that you've given, as well as others that people will know about how this is such a kind of tangled web that's very difficult to unpick. You've been doing this work for a lot of years now and working on it through different phases. So much of the discussion when I speak to my students about climate change and other things is this sense of inevitability. So, I wonder what keeps you going and where do you see effective climate politics actually working in future so that people can begin to see that change, and they feel like they are being included in that social element of it as well.

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So yeah, I mean, one of the points of writing this book to look at the specific ways in which reducing emissions has social and political and economic implications. Once you recognise that, and then once you start to understand the details and the nuances, because it looks slightly different in different parts of the world. If you're talking about this in like a fossil fuel producing

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nation like Saudi Arabia, obviously this looks very different than if you're in a country like Germany, which imports quite a lot of its energy. This is actually partly what the book is about. What keeps me going is that although climate mitigation is a very embryonic policy field, so was only really invented as it were in the 1980s and only really became policy mid-1990s onwards.

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It was really hard to do this in some ways at the start, but in other ways, we now have nearly 30 years of examples of what's worked, what's not worked, why it's worked, why it hasn't. We now realise that more distributionally, ways of reducing emissions are really necessary. We now know an awful lot more about the dual or the co-benefits of emissions reduction.

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If you live in one of the Chinese cities where you couldn't see beyond at the end of your street and where people were being incredibly negatively affected, if not dying from inhaling a lot of coal dust, you can really clearly see what the health implications are of reducing emissions. But I mean, if you reduce emissions through energy efficiency in homes by insulating homes and making them warmer to live in, then you reduce the

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costs of living in those homes, you reduce the health implications of living in those homes. we now know so much more about the other positive implications of reducing emissions. And some parts of the world, China, India, Vietnam, South Korea, have had green industrial policies now where they are making the low carbon goods that go into renewable energy systems like

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turbines and blades and solar panels and batteries, et cetera, et cetera. They are now growing their economies significantly on the basis of that. So, all of this stuff is going on, but the issue is that we're not hearing it. so, part of the message in my book is also, let's just keep talking about this stuff because the upsides beyond not having the world warm to three degrees above

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pre-industrialised levels, which we also mustn't forget about as being such an important factor of our need to continue to change. But the positive arguments about the positive side effects of reducing emissions, the evidence base for that is much greater than it used to be. we're in a position where we could actually be shouting from the rafters about that kind of stuff. And the more that you don't allow the debate to be dominated by those people with very specific

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high emissions, energy, and transport and agriculture interests. They are dominating the debate, but we are in a position now where we could be fighting back because a lot of their arguments just don't stand up anymore because there are so many positive effects of reducing emissions as well. Yeah, I agree with you. And I think having this array of examples of what worked and what hasn't worked and being able to see the impact that it is having. I think so often when we have conversations about climate change,

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focus is on, we going to miss 1.5? Which yes, that obviously comes with its own challenges. But so much we don't talk about how our work, and our efforts have actually helped to mitigate that from something potentially a lot worse. And we don't tend to tell that side of the story, which I think is something that can lead to that sense of inevitability that I mentioned earlier. But with all of that said, Caroline, what steps do you think that we can take to engage more effectively with climate politics and build a more sustainable future? Well, I think that one of the

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first steps are to really think about how we are designing our mitigation policies and to move away from the very real and obvious emphasis on the goal of mitigation policies being to reduce emissions. Of course, is the goal. mitigation policy has become so complex, and it exists in so many different other areas of policymaking. It exists in industrial policy.

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in it exists an energy policy, it's no longer enough just to look at emissions reduction as what you want to achieve. Now, when you're designing your policies, you really need to be thinking, okay, so if we've got a policy to phase out coal, what are our policies to reskill to have regional economic development?

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Obviously, if you think about all fossil fuels, only found in fixed places. In those regions where you do find fossil fuels, what do you do about it? Like Aberdeen is a really perfect example of this, isn't it? Because from Aberdeen, you have all of this back and forth and maintenance and industry involved around historically maintaining North Sea oil and gas. There are huge questions now, will there be a just transition for all those jobs in Aberdeen?

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and my daughter just happens to be at university in Aberdeen, so we have been going up quite a lot. And when you go up there, it is absolutely evident that they are thinking through, okay, how might skills involved in maintaining North Sea oil and gas be relevant to the skills needed to maintain offshore wind? And really, really thinking about the relevance actually of those skill sets to one another. And then

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ways in which you can transfer those jobs over from the fossil fuel or the dirty energy side to the green or the clean energy side of it. I think that it's happening and it's real. I think that one of the most interesting aspects of that also is that the new energy company, GB Energy, that's just been set up, one of its jobs is the Just Transition and they have headquartered it in Aberdeen. You can actually

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Think about what you're going to do, how you're going to design your policies, which parts of the economy or the country need to be held to long most when you're designing those policies with those social outcomes in mind. And I really like your example of Aberdeen. I've also spent some time there in the last year or so working with the university and have had similar conversations, obviously understanding the legacy of energy in Aberdeen and how it's a crucial part of their industry.

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And think what you've touched on really nicely is this idea of the need to take a systems thinking approach and realising you can't just take one thing away. You have to think about, as you say, how do we mitigate for future jobs? How do we translate these skills elsewhere? And I think that's such a nice way to kind of bring this podcast to a close is to emphasise that whenever we're thinking about sustainability and climate, we have to engage with it as a system and not something with simple solutions that we can just stick on a manifesto or something like that.

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Caroline, thank you so much. It's been really, really great to speak to you and good luck with the rest of what comes with the book. Hopefully we can have another discussion in future. Amazing to chat and I'll speak to you again very soon. Tom, it's been a great pleasure and thank you so much for having me on. I've really enjoyed it. Thanks so much. Bye.