

Time for NZ to lead on climate change

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Warning signs: Stadium Southland lies ruined after a snowstorm hit Invercargill last month. Will significant climate events, such as Southland's unprecedented big snow, finally make us realise that change needs to happen?

Perspective

A one-day symposium on climate change in Christchurch on Thursday will highlight the opportunities that New Zealand should be grasping, writes MARK PRAIN.

Peggy Liu is a frequent media face, from CNN to The Economist to, in recent months, front covers of China's Tatler and Elle. The venerable New York Times' headline for her September 18 interview was cryptic but compelling: While America's Republicans turn "climate change" into a four-letter word - J-O-K-E - China's Communists also turned it into a four-letter word - J-O-B-S.

Liu was typically on message in that interview. "China is changing from the factory of the world to the clean-tech laboratory of the world. It has the unique ability to pit low- cost capital with large-scale experiments to find models that work.

"China has designated and invested in pilot cities for electric vehicles, smart grids, LED lighting, rural biomass and low- carbon communities. They're able to quickly throw spaghetti on the wall to see what clean-tech models stick, and then have the political will to scale them quickly across the country.

"This allows China to create jobs and learn quickly."

But China's current capability limitations and strategic smarts ensure it also reaches out for partners. Liu's visit to New Zealand this month is, in part, about that search. Liu will lead the 3rd Annual Hillary Symposium in Christchurch on Thursday, which will include progressive business leaders encouraging the Key government to establish a clean- tech task force. In the spirit of Rahm Emanuel's famous mantra, "Never waste a crisis", there'll also be focus on the recovery opportunity here in Canterbury.

Within minutes of our September 4 quake I was reminded of Asimov's equally pungent phrase: "If my doctor told me I had only six minutes to live, I wouldn't brood. I'd type a little faster."

Within an hour, I had a call from a Hillary colleague in the US. With a green-build reconstruction team in Haiti since their 7.1 quake killed a quarter of a million and virtually destroyed a nation state, his question was simple: Should he come on down? I informed Matt whatever he was seeing on CNN, we were upright, just. The Blackberry continued to ring, Liu one such call.

Through all this province's agonies and inequalities, wiser heads have been urging the decision-makers to slow down, step back - be clear about the distinction between the merely urgent and the truly important. With reflection comes opportunity, economically, socially and politically.

I have another colleague who maintains the world won't wake up to the real threat of climate change until a major city is devastated: Manhattan or London drowning, Rome or Melbourne burning. We're most of us too self- involved, too avaricious to make modest lifestyle changes potentially vital to the wellbeing of our progeny; Katrina wasn't enough; Pakistan's floods displacing 20 million, not enough; Southland's lamb crop, under worst in living memory snow? Hardly.

After all, hasn't the so-called climate science been discredited? Well no, actually - it's strengthening year on year, ever- increasing erratic and frequently catastrophic weather events clear harbingers of ongoing warming. But are we listening?

The spread of scepticism, pseudo-science and lobbyist lies to lengthen business as usual's hegemony past the bell is understandable, if clearly wrong- headed - some even call it "the human condition".

History shows us the brave are rarely rewarded for acknowledging uncomfortable realities, or "inconvenient truths". Despite historically significant, hard-won, legislative victories in health and financial reform, the Obama Administration has seen its political capital significantly decline.

November's mid-term elections will give a strong signal as to just how deep runs the infantile Tea Party's politics of disenchantment.

The UK's newly-elected young turk, David Cameron, is enunciating painful financial reform right upfront, in a bid to defray the same kind of decline. However, the history of the markets also tells us early adapters often reap major awards, and China is not alone in recognising clean-tech as the global opportunity of this century.

Eighty per cent of the world's largest 500 corporations now proactively disclose information on their greenhouse gas emissions, to the independent not-for-profit CDP (Carbon Disclosure Project), thereby enabling both risk and opportunity management. Direct global investment in renewables has this year outperformed conventional energy investment for the first time.

Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Finland and a host of other forward-thinking nation states now measure their green economy exports across multiple sectors, in the billions - and New Zealand, markedly alone, lays claim to premium credentials by marketing to our global customers as a clean, green paradise.

Never mind we haven't as yet so much as done a capability study looking at what we actually have, or that our environmental performance generally continues to degrade our natural capital and our balance of payments continues to deteriorate. Just how naive do we think our trading partners are?

Were the nation, on the other hand, to take this opportunity seriously, as some of our most entrepreneurial business leaders are suggesting (Warehouse, Les Mills International, 42

Below, Ice- Breaker, Air NZ among them), the upside is compelling. In the words of Phil Mills, a 100 per cent no- brainer!

This is not about running in defensive fright from the latest example of Sainsburys putting a carbon miles label on our butter, nor earnestly bemoaning higher wages offered across the ditch.

It's about harnessing the innovation and production smarts we like to think we have. It's about government actually having an economic plan which goes beyond one three-year term.

It's about giving us something real to aspire to that once again reasserts New Zealand's place in the world: punching above our weight, taking leadership.

And key to all of this is China; more particularly the world's two most populous nations, China and India, and others on their heels, Brazil and Russia.

The choices made on the streets of Beijing and Delhi and Sao Paulo over the next 20 years will likely mean sink or swim for the rest of us.

No-one on Beijing's streets argues the toss about anthropogenic climate change or environmental degradation. The Chinese are eating the outcomes every day, and once in a blue moon (or an Olympic bubble) they might just see the sun!

There is, however, plenty of upside if we exercise that other great definer of the human condition - creativity - and its partner in crime, optimism.

Like it or not, however, the clock is inexorably ticking.

Right now, this decade, we are at a critical juncture between the ascendancy of our best qualities and the tyranny of our worst.

The developing world may save us all yet, but not without a large dose of accord, co-operation and innovation, from nations like our own.

*** Mark Prain is the executive director of the Hillary Institute for International Leadership.**

PEGGY LIU

The Hillary Institute has selected China's Peggy Liu as its 2010 Leadership Laureate on Climate Change Solutions. Chair of JUCCE (Joint US-China Collaboration on Clean Energy), Liu is based in Shanghai and has also been honoured by The Clinton Global Initiative, The World Economic Forum and TIME since founding her clean-tech, not-for-profit brokerage in 2007. Liu is the second Hillary Laureate (2009 was Jeremy Leggett from the UK), chosen by the institute's international board from a global watch list of exceptional leaders in mid-career. See www.hillaryinstitute.com

TOMORROW: Peggy Liu and China's Green Revolution
