

DEBATING THE PER CAPITA MEASURE OF CARBON EMISSIONS

VICTIMS WITH RESPONSIBILITY



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Deep within us we know and we feel that in some way we have been responsible,” wrote Earl Lovelace in 1965 in his first novel, *While Gods are Falling*.¹ The protagonist refers to crime and poverty. He proposes an ethic of social obligation for the new nation of Trinidad and Tobago (T&T). Fifty years after Independence, climate change raises the same questions of onus and duty. The average citizen dumps 28 metric tonnes (Mt) of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere – mostly through automobiles, air conditioning, and petrochemical manufacturing (See table opposite)². In per capita terms, only Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates do more damage than T&T. How does the country grapple with its disproportionate responsibility for climate change? I spent a year in 2009-2010 exploring this question ethnographically among environmental policy-makers and energy experts. While I was there, Port of Spain committed itself to a 6 per cent increase in carbon emissions. The country began construction of a new gas-fired power plant in La Brea – the overlooked sidekick of the much-detested aluminum smelter. When fully operational, the 720 megawatt plant will promote Trinidad and Tobago from fourth to second place in the per capita rankings³. Few citizens seemed perturbed. Why – even among environmentally-minded Trininis – did this carbon dumping provoke so little concern?

T&T’s sense of peril has overwhelmed its sense of responsibility. Indeed, this unconscious choice shaped the country’s approach to climate change from the beginning. Policy-makers have emphasised vulnerability to the exclusion of culpability. In 1990, Port of Spain and its Minister of the Environment, Lincoln Myers, spearheaded the formation of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). Profound endangerment – from rising seas – gave these atolls and archipelagos strength. “Their resource...,” Myers explained to me at his home,

“is the advocacy of justice and fair play ... We have to be the moral voice.”⁴ What was true for AOSIS, however, was not necessarily true for the twin-island petro-state itself. Myers’ deputy Eden Shand recalled a “strained feeling” at the Rio summit in 1992: “They were discussing carbon pollution and pointing fingers towards the North and the Middle East. Trinidad had to be very silent ’round the table.”⁵ At that point, Trinidad and Tobago’s emissions exceeded 9 Mt per capita, higher than that of France, Italy, and Japan. And diplomats calculated emissions in this way. An early draft of the Kyoto protocol “reaffirm[ed] that per capita emissions in developing countries are still relatively low...”⁶ On behalf of AOSIS, Trinidad and Tobago submitted that document to a 1996 preparatory meeting in Geneva. The Alliance gave T&T necessary cover, camouflaging culprits of climate change in a forest of victims.

This *carte blanche* worked for more than a decade – until international attention forced the government to restate its position on carbon emissions. In 2009, Port of Spain hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, considered a prelude to the Copenhagen Conference of Parties to the Kyoto Protocol. Under scrutiny, Prime Minister Patrick Manning defended his entire environmental record from oil and gas to the proposed smelter. His arguments stuck. The resulting document – the “Port of Spain Climate Change Consensus” – stipulated “a dedicated stream [of funds] for small island states and associated low-lying coastal states of AOSIS.”⁷ The Prime Minister passed his country off as a pure victim of climate change. When I interviewed him some months later, Manning counted his nation as responsible for only 0.1 per cent of global emissions. China, by contrast, emitted 22 per cent, “and they don’t care about anybody.” Responsible for less than 5 Mt, the average Chinese man or woman would seem to care much more than most Trininis – as

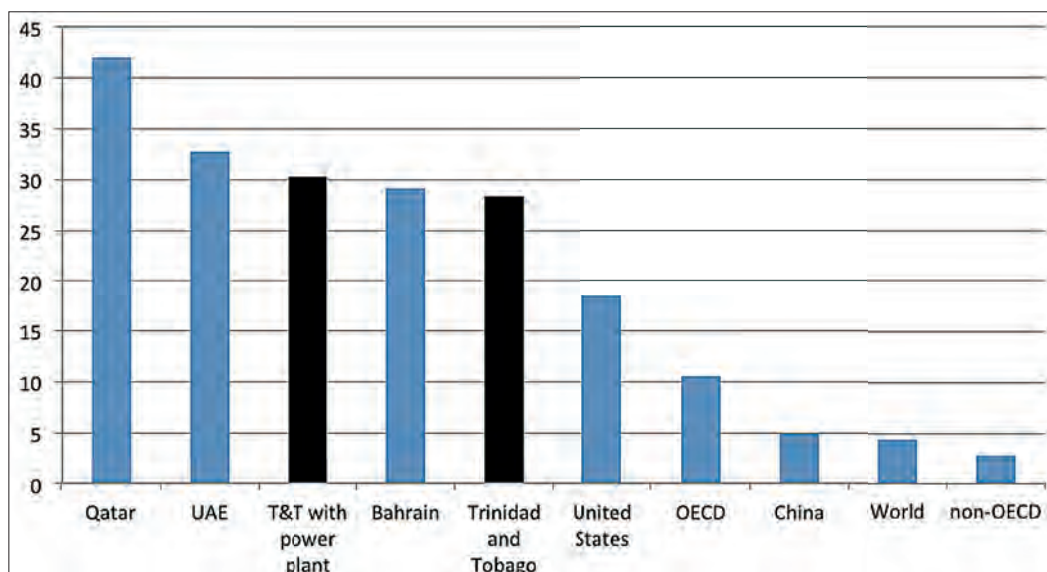
I suggested to Manning. “I reject this approach of counting per capita emissions,” he blazed back, “It’s not right. It’s not right. I fighting that.”⁸ Manning insisted upon comparing the total pollution of virtual city-states and mega-nations a thousand times more populous. His arithmetic classified victims with culprits and vice-versa.

Among mid-level civil servants too, expectations of future harm deferred the question of current responsibility. In March 2010, the government released its *Draft Climate Change Policy*. Of 20 pages of text, the document devoted two pages to discussing means of reducing the country’s carbon emissions – and in no great detail. Indeed, the author, Kishan Kumarsingh parroted Manning’s line: “...in a scientific context the atmosphere reacts only to absolute emissions and not per capita emissions.”⁹ Wide-eyed, Kumarsingh opened each of the ensuing public consultations with his characteristic note of alarm: “Sometimes a whole island is a coastal zone!” In fact, sea water threatened less than drought. “The whole of Trinidad is burning right now,” an environmental planner spluttered at the

first consultation.¹⁰ Two days before the second consultation, *Newsday* captured the sight of fire bearing down on Port of Spain. “Throughout the Southland,” the newspaper editorialised, “... the forests have been burned, the ground as black as the seeping oil – which itself had burned away in billows of dark black smoke.”¹¹ Would the public think through this cycle of carbon-driven damage and the responsibility it implied? Actually held in the southern oilbelt, the government’s second open meeting on climate change missed that opportunity. Speaking from the floor, an official from Petrotrin (the national oil company) insisted upon business-as-usual: “We have to realise that Trinidad is energy-based,” he reminded the audience, “Adaptation should be given a higher priority than mitigation.”¹² Indeed, the only risk analysis conducted in Trinidad and Tobago focused on the energy sector and predicted “catastrophic effects to onshore operations and offshore platforms.”¹³ In this way, encircling water greenwashed and exonerated the very industry perpetrating climate change.

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Per-capita CO₂ Emissions, 2008 (Mt)

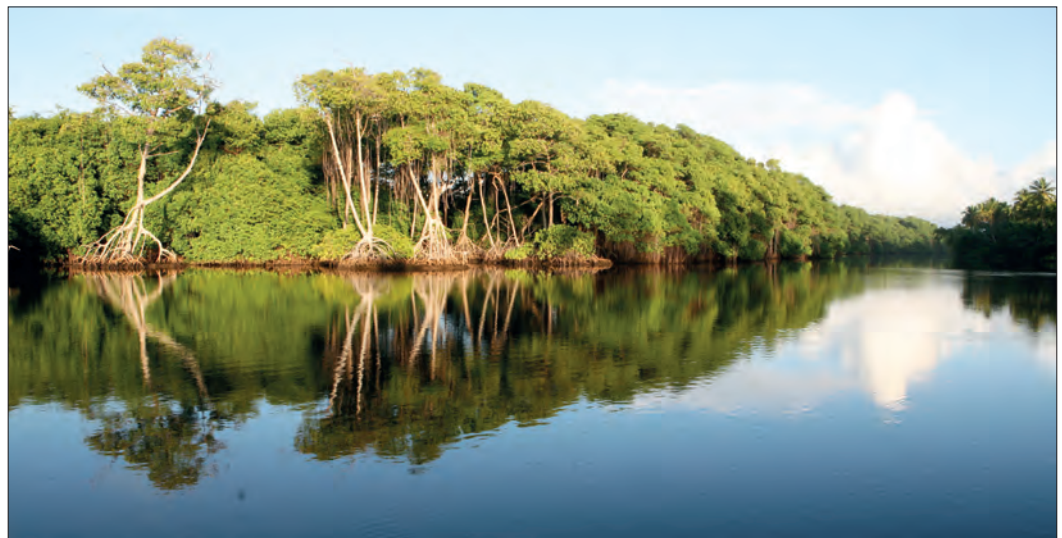
Climate change is thus giving rise to a simplistic narrative of victimhood and innocence. In the complex reality, Trinbagonians throw a pollution boomerang: they hurl CO₂ into the atmosphere, and it returns as an angry ocean to strangle them

narrative of victimhood and innocence. In the complex reality, Trinbagonians throw a pollution boomerang: they hurl CO₂ into the atmosphere, and it returns as an angry ocean to strangle them. Many fear the return and forget the throw. In another context, Lovelace criticised such a partial attitude. “[Y]ou can’t take from the world and not pay,” chides one of the characters in *The Gods Are Falling*. “You cannot take one part and reject the other.”¹⁴ Regarding climate change, Manning and other influential Trinbagonians have taken the vulnerability and rejected the culpability. But people sometimes change their minds. Port of Spain bears comparison with New Orleans. Franny Armstrong’s 2009 film follows the reckoning of a petroleum paleontologist living in that city. To Alvin DuVernay, “oil smells so much like money it’s just beautiful.” Then, he smells corpses rotting after Hurricane Katrina. The scales fall from his eyes. “Happiness is not in the latest gadget,” he reflects, “...not for me anymore.” We are living in “the age of stupid” – the title of the documentary – DuVernay concludes. Uncomfortable as it is, such self-criticism cuts carbon emissions more rapidly than does

blaming others. With luck, Port of Spain, New Orleans, and other petro-cities will assemble and export this recognition of responsibility. It is now more essential than oil. ■

1. Earl Lovelace. 2011 [1965]. *While Gods are Falling*. Leeds, UK: Peepal Tree Press, p238.
2. The figure would run much higher if it included either emissions from airplanes or those from hydrocarbons produced in Trinidad but combusted elsewhere. All emissions statistics derive from 2008, as published and disseminated in International Energy Agency. 2010. *CO₂ Emissions from Fuel Combustion: Highlights*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development / International Energy Agency.
3. Alutrini’s public presentations in support of the power plant (at Vessigny on 13th and 17th December and 5th and 11th March 2007 and at Couva on 17th December 2007) projected its daily consumption of natural gas as 121 mcf. At that rate, the plant would generate 2.5 million MT of CO₂ per year, a 6.5 per cent addition to the 2008 national output. The per capita figure would rise to 30.21 Mt. When completed in late 2011, the power plant was only running at 35 per cent capacity (250 of 720 MW). Therefore, the increase in carbon emissions at that point amounted to 2.3 per cent.
4. Interview, Gran Couva, Trinidad, 2nd July 2011.
5. Interview, Newark, Delaware, 20th June 2011. Having left his position as Deputy Minister of the Environment, Shand attended the UN Conference on Environment and Development as an NGO representative.
6. “Draft protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change on Greenhouse Gas Emissions Reduction,” submitted on 17th May 1996 as Paper No.1 by Trinidad and Tobago on behalf of AOSIS for consideration by the Ad Hoc Group on the Berlin Mandate, fourth session, Geneva, 9th-16th July 1996. Downloaded from <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/1996/agbm/misc02.pdf> on 28th June 2012.
7. “Port of Spain Climate Change Consensus: the Commonwealth Climate Change Declaration,” Port of Spain, 28th November 2009, Clause 13.
8. Interview, San Fernando, 29th June 2010.
9. Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, “Draft national climate change policy for Trinidad and Tobago,” 2010, p7.
10. Public Consultation on Climate Change Draft Policy, Port of Spain, 23rd March 2010.
11. “Fire everywhere,” *Newsday*, 4th April 2012.
12. Public Consultation on Climate Change Draft Policy, La Romaine, 6th April 2010.
13. As presented by Garret Manwaring to the Health, Safety, Security and the Environment Conference of the American Chamber of Commerce of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain, 29th September 2009. Petrotrin has never released the full report.

Serene T&T: Problem?
What problem?



Mairani River on Trinidad's north coast. Photograph: Stephen Broadbridge