

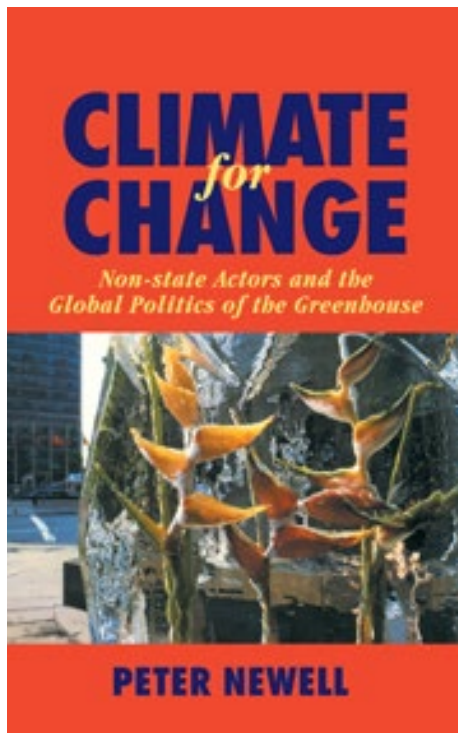
## My 2000 'Climate Book of the Year'

Newell, P. (2000) *Climate for Change: Non-State Actors and the Global Politics of the Greenhouse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 222pp.

This essay continues my series of monthly posts in which I select one 'climate' book to highlight and review from one of the 44 years of my professional career in climate research (starting with 1984, my first year of academic employment). The series will end in September 2027, the month in which I shall retire. [See here for more information](#) about the rationale for this series, and the criteria I have used in selecting my highlighted books.

This '2000 essay' can be [download as a pdf](#).

In 2023 and 2024, the annual conferences of the parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change—the 'COPs'—were held respectively in Doha (COP28) and in Baku (COP29), both petro-states. These two meetings revealed deep divisions between nations



over the key issues of climate mitigation, adaptation, climate finance, and the 'loss and damage' agenda. In recent months, this has prompted some climate policy influencers to begin voicing growing frustration with the intergovernmental process for operationalising and implementing the ambitions of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Commentators and analysts are beginning to argue that the process needs radical reform.

For example, in February 2023, under the auspices of the Club of Rome, a group of influential signatories [wrote an open letter](#), addressed to the UN Secretary-General and to the Executive Secretary to the UN Convention, arguing that "COP meetings would benefit from a [more] structured and legitimised role [for] non-state actors, including civil society organisations, businesses, and indigenous peoples as guardians of the Earth, to ensure access to the political process and proper representation during negotiations." Eighteen months later, in the run-up to COP29 in November 2024, a similar group [wrote another open letter](#), again addressed to the Convention's Executive Secretary, Simon Stiell. To prepare for the success of future COPs, they called for—among other things—a different balance of representation among non-state actors at these meetings, in

particular seeking limits to the presence of corporate actors at COPs and an increase in the presence of climate scientists.

This growing frustration about the multilateral climate process as it stands today was recently given further expression by the world's leading mouthpiece for science. A *Nature* editorial, published in December 2025, following the outcome of COP29 in Baku, lamented that: "In the climate-change sector ... there [is] a view that the processes of the summits known as Conference of the Parties have had their day or, at the very least, need to be reformed. The research community needs to carefully and systematically study why scientific knowledge is being pushed out, as a first step to finding a way forward."<sup>1</sup>

Against this background of rising disillusion with climate multilateralism, as represented by the COPs, it is interesting to look back 25 years to Peter Newell's book 'Climate for Change: Non-State Actors and the Global Politics of the Greenhouse', which I have selected as my **2000 Climate Book of the Year**. In this book, Newell was one of the first authors to draw sustained analytical attention to the importance of political actors beyond the nation-state—so-called 'non-state actors'—who exerted power and influence over the framing, public understanding and political negotiation of how best to address the newly emerging challenges of a changing climate. 'Climate for Change' was an important intervention and Newell's analysis focused on four such groups of often-overlooked actors: climate scientists (as represented by Working Group 1 of the IPCC), businesses (mainly the fossil fuel lobbies; see my [review last month of Jeremy Leggett's 'The Carbon War'](#)) and environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs; specifically the Climate Action Network), and the media. Given this proliferation of powerful stakeholders beyond nation states, Newell presciently drew attention to the unique international politics of climate change.

Peter Newell is now Professor of International Relations at the University of Sussex, where he specialises in the politics and political economy of energy and climate change. But 25 years ago, he was a 28-yr old early career academic, three years out from the award of his PhD by Keele University for a thesis titled, 'The International Politics of Global Warming: A Non-Governmental Account'. Advised by his subsequent employers at Warwick University that for his career advancement he needed to have a book published with a university press, Newell found a home for a revised version of his PhD thesis with Cambridge University Press (CUP), aided by commissioning editor Matt Lloyd, whose remit for the Press included publishing the IPCC reports.

Newell was dissuaded by his original PhD supervisor from researching climate politics because of its complexity, but the arrival at Keele of political scientist [Matthew Paterson](#) gave Newell the confidence to study the role of non-state actors in the international climate negotiations. In Newell's own words,

Getting access to negotiations, lobbyists and others was easier back then because the COPs (my first was COP2 in Geneva) were of a manageable scale and

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<sup>1</sup> Anon (2024) UN Summits : One step forward, two steps back. *Nature*. 636: 521-522. 19-26 December.

there were hardly any social science researchers in attendance. As I was writing up my thesis, I was also working as a researcher and lobbyist for Climate Network Europe in Brussels which allowed for significant participant observation of one of the NGO networks I was researching.<sup>2</sup>

‘Climate for Change’ was published at a time when the field of international policy studies and international relations (IR) was dominated by [regime theory](#) and its focus on inter-state negotiations. Newell sought to challenge this framing and to point out its limitations when it came to understanding the specific conditions pertaining to global climate change. As he explains in the book, in regime theory “the level of analysis is the state, and international institutions [are assumed to be] the fora in which the key bargains are struck, and hence are the presumed loci of explanations of cooperation” [p.31]. But, says Newell, it is not possible “to reduce the politics of global warming to ... inter-state bargaining and its emphasis on ... problem solving” without paying detailed attention to the role of non-state actors, such as businesses, NGOs, local governments, media and scientists, who often operate independently of national governments. The book criticises the generalisable hypotheses, beloved by the regime theorists, pertaining to how inter-state relations work.

Newell’s challenge in 2000 to the dominance of regime theory and the hypotheses of IR scholars met with some resistance. The distinguished American political scientist [Robert Keohane](#), Professor of International Affairs at the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs, wrote a very critical review of ‘Climate for Change’ for the *Journal of Politics*. Keohane withheld his recommendation of the book, claiming there was no “significant new empirical description of non-state actors in climate change, [no] theoretical contribution to the study of global environmental politics, [and no] policy analysis of the serious issues that the world faces.”<sup>3</sup> Keohane is widely associated with the theory of neoliberal institutionalism in international relations, and in 1999/2000 had been President of the powerful American Political Science Association. Newell later interpreted this review as “a heavy handed attempt by one of the foremost scholars of the discipline at gatekeeping the regime analysis ... from younger upstarts like me daring to say this account was missing the role of non-state actors.”<sup>4</sup>

Other reviewers were more sympathetic. For example, writing from a development studies perspective, Emily Boyd praised the book for going beyond regime theory. She recognised that “influence and power—assumed to lie with the state—are actually channelled to the state through non-state actors, and ... influence the state’s choice of cooperative strategies”. The political actors that Newell used to illustrate his study are representative of

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Newell, pers. comm., 6 May 2025.

<sup>3</sup> Keohane, R.O. (2002) Review of ‘Climate for Change: Non-state Actors and the Global Politics of the Greenhouse’. *The Journal of Politics*. 64(1): 328-330.

<sup>4</sup> Newell, pers. comm., *op. cit.*

four groups of non-state power holders that, in Boyd's view, "have not received significant attention in the literature on global warming".<sup>5</sup>

The veteran climate geographer and policy analysts Ian Burton also noted the significance of Newell's analysis.<sup>6</sup> In his review of the book, written in the immediate aftermath of President Bush's withdrawal of the USA from the Kyoto Protocol in 2001, Burton noted that the Protocol would have to be substantially renegotiated, if not entirely started again (which, indeed, it later was). For Burton, Bush's withdrawal didn't challenge the fundamental assumption of Newell's book,

which is that non-state actors have a powerful role to play in the resolution of international environmental issues such as climate change. On the contrary, it makes it all the more relevant. For those who seriously want more insight into how international agreements are negotiated, and how these non-state actors intervene to influence the process and the outcome, this book will be fascinating to read. How the negotiations unfold from this point will depend much upon the non-state actors. This book shows why and how.

Newell's 'Climate for Change' was the first published book that dealt exclusively with the role of non-state actors in the climate negotiations.<sup>7</sup> It appeared before the later dramatic rise of the sub-field of 'climate change governance', which expanded enormously after 2009 prompted by the failure of COP15 in Copenhagen to negotiate a replacement climate treaty for the Kyoto Protocol. In my corpus of several thousand climate books, there are 64 which have the word 'governance' in their title, but 61 of them were published after 2009 and none before 2001.<sup>8</sup> The significance of Newell's early analysis of non-state actors in the climate regime is further evidenced by the book's citation history. 'Climate for Change' has been cited nearly 800 times since its publication in 2000, but its peak citations occurred between 2012 and 2014, in the three years between the failure at COP15 and the signing of the Paris Agreement in 2015 at COP21.<sup>9</sup>

'Climate for Change' was re-published by CUP in 2006, perhaps signalling the growing interest by then in the role of non-state actors in shaping the politics of climate change. Nevertheless, reflecting much later on the impact of his book, Newell doesn't think it had a huge amount of traction at the time: "IR scholars were still not very interested in

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<sup>5</sup> Boyd, E. (2001) Review of 'Climate for Change: Non-state Actors and the Global Politics of the Greenhouse'. *Environmental Politics*. 10(3): 155-176.

<sup>6</sup> Burton, I. (2001) Book Review: 'Climate for Change: Non-State Actors and the Global Politics of the Greenhouse'. Peter Newell. *Agricultural and Forest Meteorology*. 109(1): 75-76.

<sup>7</sup> A couple of years earlier, the young Dutch political scientist, Bas Arts, had published a less focused study: 'The Political Influence of NGOs: Case Studies on the Climate and Biodiversity Conventions' (International Books, 1998). And there was also emerging work that had begun to theorise the role of non-state actors more broadly in international politics; see for example Higgott, R., Underhill, G. and Biler, A. (eds.) 'Non-State Actors and Authority in the Global System' (Routledge, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> The first book with 'governing' in the title of a climate changing book was in fact co-written by Peter Newell himself, with Harriet Bulkeley, in 2010, 'Governing Climate Change' (Routledge), the year after COP15.

<sup>9</sup> [Google Scholar](#), 8 May 2025.

environmental issues and the social science of climate change largely focussed elsewhere, more on science-policy [interactions] than on the role of business or media actors in particular. Maybe it was one of those books that was ahead of its time; or else it just didn't go far enough in pushing the boundaries.”<sup>10</sup>

What is certainly true is that climate multilateralism did not evolve in the way that political theorists and climate policy advocates in the 1990s hoped it would, or should. Writing much later in 2017, Karin Bäckstrand and colleagues reviewed the role of non-state actors in climate governance.<sup>11</sup> Drawing upon Newell's 2000 book, they argued that “ever since UN negotiations ... were initiated in the early 1990s, NGOs, businesses and local governments have been present as activists, experts and diplomats”. Climate governance was never solely about what happened “in the hallways of interstate diplomacy or the formal rooms of international negotiations”. Nevertheless, after COP15 in Copenhagen a new climate regime emerged which was “complex, dispersed, fragmented and polycentric”. The role of non-state actors expanded, as did their ability to exercise authority over the negotiations, as was revealed in the final outcome of COP21 manifest in the Paris Agreement.

Whether climate multilateralism under the auspices of the UN, the COPs and the Paris Agreement will survive the next decade remains to be seen. It is certainly facing significant new challenges. But what is clear is that Newell's early attempt from 2000 to identify, analyse and explain the role of “actors beyond the state” in framing, agenda-setting, negotiation bargaining and implementing climate policy responses offered an early, and a crucial, insight that would be confirmed by later events and by the rise of climate governance scholarship.

It also explains why now, in 2025, many voices are wanting to re-balance the roles of state versus non-state actors in the COPs, either by enhancing the status of some non-state actors, or else by proscribing the roles of others. Either way, Newell's insight that the politics of climate change are too important, and too difficult, to be left to nation states has been fully vindicated.

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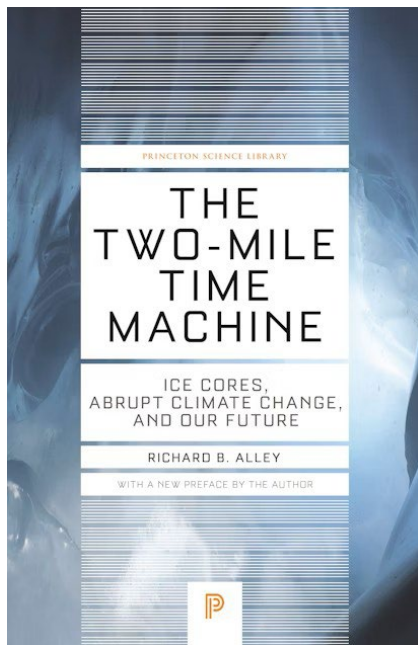
<sup>10</sup> Newell, pers. comm. *op cit*.

<sup>11</sup> Bäckstrand, K. et al. (2017) Non-state actors in global climate governance: from Copenhagen to Paris and beyond. *Environmental Politics*. 26(4): 561-579.

### Other significant book published in 2000

Alley, B. (2000) *The Two-Mile Time Machine: Ice Cores, Abrupt Climate Change and our Future*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 228pp.

In the years between 1989 and 1992, the drilling of the GISP2 (USA-led) and GRIP (European-led) cores deep into Greenland's ice sheet enabled major advances to be made in scientific understanding of the Earth's climatic transitions out of the last ice age between 15,000 and



10,000 years ago. One of the lead scientists of the GISP2 project—[Richard Alley](#) of Penn State University—published in 2000 a very readable and eye-witness account of the science behind this ice-core climate science in '**The Two-Mile Time Machine: Ice Cores, Abrupt Climate Change and our Future**'. The 'two miles' in the title refers to the depth of the GISP2 core from which annually resolved ice layers allowed new scientific insights into the Earth's climate history to be gained. Alley has worked in the Earth and Environmental System Institute at Pennsylvania State since 1988, completing three field seasons of research in Antarctica—where he has a glacier named after him—eight seasons in Greenland and three in Alaska.

The first scientific paper analysing the GISP2 core was published in *Nature* in April 1993, with Alley as lead

author, its content rather sensationally summarised in the blurb for his book as the "discovery that the last ice age came to an abrupt end over a period of only three years". Although such a claim gives a rather misleading impression of ice age dynamics for public audiences, there is no doubt that the GISP2 (and GRIP) revelations confirmed the idea that 'abrupt' changes *have* occurred in the climatic past for natural reasons and that these transitions could be quantified. 'The Two-Mile Time Machine' offers an engaging introduction to this ice core climate science, even if it includes some rather more speculative material about possible climatic futures and their human implications. The book was chosen in 2001 by the America's oldest academic society, Phi Beta Kappa, as its 'Science Book of the Year', and the book's popularity was marked with a second edition, with a new Preface, in 2014.