

SPRU Friday Seminar

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Speaker Kevin Anderson (University of Manchester)

Title Real clothes for the Emperor: Facing the challenges of climate change

Abstract

Many scientists and policy-makers continue to claim it is possible, albeit challenging, to contain the global increase in mean surface temperature at or below 2°C relative to preindustrial levels. However, despite the increasingly vociferous rhetoric around 'transitioning to a low carbon economy', current emissions growth is much more aligned with temperature rises of 4°C or higher, and possibly within just a few decades. Disturbingly, against the backdrop of unprecedented emissions growth, even a 4°C future now demands significant levels of mitigation. This framing of climate change represents a radical departure from the more incremental mitigation proposed by many policy makers and scientific reports. Whilst orthodox expertise maintains "2°C is not only possible but achievable without sacrificing the benefits of economic growth and rising prosperity", this paper argues "it is difficult to envisage anything other than a planned economic recession being compatible with 2°C, 3°C and increasingly 4°C futures". Consequently, whether in terms of mitigation or adaptation, we face a profound paradigm shift, triggered ostensibly by climate change, but with repercussions across all facets of contemporary society. Such a fundamental transition leaves society with three clear choices. To continue the delusion that climate change can be addressed adequately through rhetoric, financial fine-tuning and piecemeal incrementalism; to interpret such conclusions as a message of despair and futility; or to acknowledge that "at every level the greatest obstacle to transforming the world is that we lack the clarity and imagination to conceive that it could be different", and that through immediate harnessing of human will and ingenuity we can yet deliver relatively low-carbon and climate-resilient communities.