

Climate Change: Europe at the Crossroads

By Tom Athanasiou

It's hard for Americans, even progressive Americans, to imagine a future in which the U.S. is no longer the "indispensable country." This is as true when it comes to climate politics as it is in any other area, and for much the same reason: the U.S. looms so large that it simply cannot be ignored. We emit, in particular, such a high share of world's carbon that, in the end, any climate regime to which we do not immediately subscribe is doomed to failure.

Or so, at least, it seems. Which is why the history of the climate talks is in large part a history of attempts to placate America. Which is, again, a big part of the reason why the Kyoto negotiations—and the Kyoto Protocol itself—are in such a sorry state. The fact of the matter is that, barring sudden deliverance by a new energy revolution on a computer-boom scale, the U.S. as we know it today will refuse any climate treaty even remotely appropriate to the threat. The fossil-fuel lobby is just too powerful here. Which is why, perversely and quite inadvertently, the Bush administration may have just done the world a colossal favor.

The "Four Pollutants" bill that George Bush has just repudiated was as clever as anything the Washington environmental corps could ever hope to contrive. It lumped carbon dioxide in with sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide, and mercury—all "traditional" air pollutants that not even a Republican can afford to overtly ignore—and in so doing it promised a form of carbon regulation that was both low profile and business friendly. It was the kind of bill that gives pragmatism a good name, and for a while it even looked like it would work. When EPA Administrator Christine Todd Whitman flew off to the G8 confab, she told her counterparts that Bush intended to set "mandatory reduction targets" for several pollutants, including carbon dioxide. The Europeans were, according to reports, pleasantly surprised. Was it possible

that the new American administration wouldn't be total Neanderthals after all?

There was, no doubt, a bit of pixilated hope, in Berlin as in Washington. Maybe Bush would surprise us all and do a "Nixon to China!" After all, the U.S. under Clinton had (almost) negotiated a tough deal at The Hague. What if the Bush administration decided to support it? It sounds crazy today, but not long ago you could find seasoned enviros willing to argue that Bush was surprisingly green, and indeed that he was set to regulate carbon. And if he decided to support Kyoto, Bush, unlike either Clinton or Gore, could actually deliver the Senate. Right?

Well, goodbye to all that.

Fortunately, there's another strategy brewing in Europe, and now, after Bush's climate back flip, it just might get a proper hearing. The idea, suddenly hot from London to Berlin, is a "European Leadership Initiative." Its core is that Europe can now cut the chain binding it to Washington and move toward Kyoto's ratification, while looking South, and East, and working to build a coalition that might actually get the Protocol over the top and into international law—a coalition that, at least initially, does not contain the United States.

Kyoto, crucially, is written so that no single party can torpedo it. If Europe and the G77/China could move toward ratification, and if they could fill out the Kyoto rules so that the Russians and the Japanese can eventually come along, they would have started a whole new ball game. This is all the more true because such a European/G77 ratification coalition would be under tremendous pressure from the very beginning. To hold it together, the Europeans would have to find ways to approach the so-far-untouchable capstone issue—the terms of the inevitable allocation in which each nation, rich and poor, is granted a fair share of



the atmosphere's limited carbon-absorption capacity. They don't necessarily have to engage the details, not yet, but they have to clearly signal that when push comes to shove, and it will, Europe will stand with the South on the essential issue of "fairness."

Not long after the American elections, I asked Hermann Ott—Climate Policy head of Germany's influential Wuppertal Institute and a key enviro voice in the German foreign office—if he thought Bush's ascension would rouse Europe's elites to support a Leadership Initiative. The Hague talks (officially known as COP6) had just deadlocked and the green diplomats were scurrying around trying to organize a rematch—the "COP 6bis" meeting now scheduled for July. The new American administration was, however, requesting a delay, and Ott was pessimistic: "With all this talk about postponement of COP 6bis I fear that the Europeans are already retreating again."

Which is of course was no surprise: ever since World War II, the Europeans have always buckled under U.S. pressure. They're always retreating, and retreating again, and why would anything be different this time around?

Maybe because the Bush people have been just a bit too clumsy, just a bit too bald. Because at the brink of Kyoto's collapse, the U.S. has chosen to give it a push. The Japanese, who actively want to ratify Kyoto, are reportedly upset, and "upset" is too mild a word for the comments coming from European leaders. No wonder, then, that the friends of the European Leadership strategy are coming out of the closet like never before. Suddenly, and this is new, there's open talk is of going forward

without the U.S. For example, Rainer Hinrichs-Rahlwes, the director general at the German environment ministry, recently told reporters that "maybe it will be necessary to ratify the [Kyoto] protocol without the U.S. and to instead pave the way for them to join later."

The U.S. administration is quite unperturbed. On March 16th, the *Washington Post* quoted Philip Reeker, a State Department spokesman, speaking these hoary words: "Our message to other parties, and that includes European countries, is they shouldn't make any assumptions about our policy until our review is complete." Which is, as the Brits say, a load of bollocks. Clearly, the U.S. is going to play its old game, coming on strong and hoping that the Europeans fold and give them everything: unlimited sinks, unlimited trading, nuclear, and all the rest of it.

Or maybe this'll get even worse. Some European NGO analysts fear that this July, at COP 6bis, the Bush people are going to go for broke, and loudly insist that the Kyoto Protocol, and entire process that led to it, is unfair to the United States. In Bush's letter to Senator Hagel—the one in which he announced that he wouldn't be regulating carbon dioxide after all—he averred that "I oppose the Kyoto Protocol because it exempts 80% of the world." And why wouldn't the Bush people just continue in the same vein? The climate community won't buy it—count historical emissions, and the 20% of the world covered by Kyoto is responsible for 80% of the problem—but the Republicans know it plays in Peoria.

This is going to get worse before it gets better, but it's important to see that it could indeed get better, and maybe soon. This is particularly so

because the politics of the climate negotiations are closely suggestive of just the sorts of "balance of power" problems that weigh so heavily in traditional "realist" thought. As the world's only superpower, the U.S. is free to focus on its internal political dynamics, free to be unilateralist—but the U.S., it must be remembered, is not quite the hegemon it used to be. And if the Bush people overplay their hand, if they come to COP 6bis talking about the need for the developing countries to accept emission-limits before the U.S. can accept any of its own, then it will finally be the hour of decision for Europe, and for all the rest of the U.S.'s allies besides. Because if the South is left to stand alone against such a charge, well, the whole Kyoto Process would go down in flames.

It's a dangerous situation, but it's also heavy with opportunity. The Bush people have thrown down the gauntlet, and it's only reasonable to expect that they'll toss another when the talks resume. At a deeper level, though, what happens next will depend less on the U.S. than on the rest of the world, and how it, or rather its elites, face their now obvious conditions of existence. The science is grim, the global economy unstable, and the political field suddenly too open for old rules to suffice. The Europeans will probably go along with the Bush crowd, for the habits of servility die hard. But, crucially, they may not. The fact is that European servility no longer makes geopolitical sense, and that the trans-Atlantic tensions engendered by U.S. climate politics join a growing portfolio of friction points on issues as disjoint as nuclear missile defense and genetically modified foods. Besides, when hegemonies overreach, anti-hegemonic alliances become possible. They sometimes become necessary as

well, but necessity, as we all know, or should, becomes a force only when people recognize and fight for it.

Just now, necessity dictates that the climate regime be protected from the Americans. And it's possible, just possible, that the Europeans are ready to give it a try. Not, to be sure, that this is a time for optimism. If the Bush administration forces the issue of developing country participation, all hell is going to break loose. If the Europeans and the Japanese want to save Kyoto, they're going to have to move fast, and just now the Japanese

don't seem ready for decisive action of any sort. The South, for its part, will go along with anything reasonable, anything that gets the first phase of the treaty in place and sets the stage, finally, for the big event—the North/South deal that will finally determine if we can get the global climate onto a “soft landing corridor.” Or if we should just give it up.

I could be wrong, but it looks to me like it's going to come down, this time, to the Europeans. And I'm hoping that they're as pissed off as they sound.

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