

Raise a Glass to Kyoto

By Tom Athanasiou

The climate showdown, as everyone knows, is coming soon. The Europeans are doing their best to ratify Kyoto, but the Japanese—essential to any ratification coalition that lacks the U.S.—are waffling, and the U.S. is going to do everything in its power to get its way. If it does, the setback will be both serious and demoralizing. So it's important to realize that, whatever happens, the Kyoto Protocol has already succeeded—if only as the “good first step” that its defenders always claimed it would be. Moreover, if Kyoto goes down, there will be serious collateral damage, a point that G.W. Bush's handlers have only recently begun to realize.

The recent tussle over Kyoto has moved the debate about the next step out of the conference halls and onto the front pages. The responsibility of the rich world is now a matter of public discussion, as is the problem of designing a fair global carbon treaty in an unfair world. No matter what happens in the next year, the debate has started at earnest, and it's going to be a good one. Even the realists in foreign policy circles are realizing that ecology is now high politics.

Kyoto has already succeeded, for it's focused the debate about “sustainable development” in a way that no other initiative has been able to do. It has widened the split in the elite classes (let's call the two sides “the Neanderthals” and “the Neoliberals”). It has also shifted the balance of American electoral politics (Senator Jeffords, the author of a once-promising bill that would have regulated carbon dioxide in the utility sector, has cited “environmental differences” as one of the reasons he switched sides) and made it quite impossible for the U.S. to refuse the coming greenhouse treaty without sharply accelerating the erosion of its geopolitical hegemony. All this is still the overture; as the EU pursues ratification, and when the climate transition finally begins in earnest, there will be a great deal more.

True, the negotiations could end in disaster, and clearly the U.S. is going to do everything in its power to see that they do. The exciting thing, however, is that it looks like the Neanderthals, and particularly the administration of George II, aren't going to be able to kill Kyoto without badly damaging them-

selves, or at least their international credibility. Indeed, no less a pundit than Dick Morris (*NY Post*, June 12, 2001) thinks Bush's refusal of Kyoto may mark his Waterloo.

The Bush administration's climate policy has done nothing to calm a world that was already reacting testily to an America it regards as brazenly, and dangerously, unilateralist. Forget, for a moment, the Euro-American friction over nuclear missile defense, Plan Colombia, the death penalty, North Korea, and even genetically modified foods. If you're trying to handicap the coming confrontation over global warming, remember that even Washington's traditional strategic allies in Europe helped to expel the U.S. from the United Nations Human Rights Commission. Such a move would have been inconceivable even a few years back, but U.S. behavior, and particularly its continued refusal to condemn Israel for its use of disproportionate force against the Palestinians, seems to have become too much for even the Europeans in the realist camp to tolerate.

The climate showdown has taken the real-world politics of deals and understandings and coalitions far beyond the language of the “Pronk text.” In this initiative, Jan Pronk, the Dutch Environment Minister and the president of the current negotiations, is trying to finalize a protocol that would entice even wavering Japan into breaking with the U.S. and throwing its chits in with the emerging European/G-77 bloc.

The setup has been falling into place for years now, and nothing in the Bush administration's recent signaling indicates that U.S. climate change and energy policies are going to change. The Bush energy policy, with its call for 1,300 new fossil-fuel power plants, was not the act of an administration that takes global warming, or overseas concerns about global warm-

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Foreign Policy In Focus Policy Report June 2001

Foreign Policy in Focus is a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). The project depends on sales and subscription income, individual donors, and grants from The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, General Service Foundation, and various church organizations. *In Focus* internships are available.

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ing, seriously. Since the energy policy rollout, there's been a good deal of administration backpedaling. What we have mostly seen are contrived photo opportunities, halfhearted spin, and calls for "more research" (shades of the 70s!)—all intended to soften the Bush administration charge that Kyoto is "fatally flawed." Altogether, it's a package that may or may not fly in Peoria, but which is certainly not going down well in Paris.

The trouble, as it turns out, is that enviros aren't a marginal fringe group after all, especially not in Europe, and that global warming is taken as a dead serious threat throughout the world. Even if you're a Republican and a Bush sympathizer, the best you can say is that the administration, split between its Neanderthal and Neoliberal wings has played this rather badly. As a temperate Condoleezza Rice recently admitted, "it might have been better to let people know again, in advance, including our allies, that we were not going to support the protocol."

THE EQUITY QUESTION

What's really interesting, though, is that the attack that the Bush people have chosen against Kyoto—rejecting it as "unfair to the United States" because it excludes developing countries like China and India—has catapulted the climate debate several years into the future. Six months ago, neither Northern environmental NGOs nor the G-77 would talk much about developing country commitments—they were just too hot a topic, with too high a potential for squirreling the whole deal. The plan, instead, was for all parties to keep their heads down and work for the best possible set of Kyoto-framework rules and regulations. Then the ratification battle would start, and (in our dreams) even the Americans (under Gore) would sign on. Then and only then, the discussion about how to include the developing world in a "second commitment period" treaty would finally go public.

Well, goodbye to all that. The battle over Kyoto's implementation language is of course continuing, but it has, at least for the moment, been entirely obscured by the turmoil of the Euro-American showdown. Although the greenhouse news continues to feature the ever grimmer science, and the new technologies that could reduce emissions without sending the whole capitalist edifice into macroeconomic shock, we're also hearing, finally, that China has radically reduced its carbon emissions, even while its economy has boomed. And we're hearing—even in the elite press—that the citizens of the rich world, particularly those in the U.S., use far, far more than their fair share of the earth's carbon-absorption capacity.

Here's an example, from a front-page story in the June 12th edition of the *New York Times*. You wouldn't have seen this last year, not unless it was in the Science section!

Producers of Major Greenhouse Gases

Following are the 10 countries that produce the most carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide, which make up the majority of the greenhouse gases. Figures are for 1997.

	EMISSIONS PER CAPITA (In metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent)	
	TOTAL EMISSIONS (In millions of metric tons)	↓
UNITED STATES	6,503.8	24.3
CHINA	4,964.8	4.0
INDIA	2,081.7	2.2
RUSSIA	1,980.3	13.4
JAPAN	1,166.1	9.3
GERMANY	956.0	11.6
BRAZIL	695.7	4.2
SOUTH AFRICA	677.2	15.9
CANADA	634.0	20.9
BRITAIN	618.7	10.5

Source: Environmental Protection Agency; Census Bureau International Database

So, thanks to the Bush administration for moving the equity question up the political agenda and giving us a chance to talk, for once, of fundamental things.

Of course, the administration's particular fairness claim—that North and South must act simultaneously for the climate regime to be fair—is an absurd one. The developing world is quite right to insist (along the lines of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, which, incidentally, the U.S. ratified under G.W. Bush's father) that we—the rich—made this mess in the first place, and that the South can justifiably refuse formal emissions limitations until we begin cleaning emissions up in earnest. No misleading statistic about rising (absolute) Southern emissions can change this rather overwhelming moral reality. Nor could it alter the political fact that the Kyoto Protocol, hard won after ten years of talks, is still the only game in town.

Nevertheless, they brought it up, and we should welcome the opportunity to talk about it. And there's so much to say. This, after all, is a matter of global justice, and even though we don't want to saddle the climate negotiations with the whole gruesome problem of global inequity, we can hardly expect that the subject won't come up. Then there is that elephant in the room—the fact that global greenhouse gas emissions are already far too high, and that they must come down by about 70%, even while poor-world emissions rise, as they must, even under an entirely green regime for the development of the South.

You might, if only as a thought experiment, think for a moment about global equality. If you do, you'll see that the numbers work out to be pretty startling—to get to sustainable levels, the average citizen of the U.S. would have to cut his or her emissions by over 90%. This number represents the percentage cut that each American would have to make (by 1990 figures) before her or his per capita emissions had dropped to the point where emissions distribution was "fair" in the most straightforward and naive sense of the term—that is, where

s/he emitted only as much carbon as the climate system would bear from each and every one of us.

In practice, of course, this isn't going to happen, not at least for a long time. Instead, emissions trading and other "flexibility mechanisms" are going to be used to smooth the transition. The big issue in the negotiations, therefore, is how to get these "flex-mechs" right. But however things come down, the inescapable fact is that, in the climate showdown, we face a major problem of global distributional justice—one driven by geoeological dynamics that will

something is going to happen, and it probably won't be good.

So, sure, Kyoto is entirely inadequate as a solution to the problem, just as the Bush administration insists. This, however, is a truth bracketed by lies. Although Kyoto is not global, and though its emissions caps were assigned by late-night negotiation rather than the transparent application of some comprehensible and morally justified principle, Kyoto has shown us a new path, one that a good number of the world's people would like to take. If the Republicans (or the Democrats, for that matter) balk, this

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respect neither rhetoric nor greenwashing. This problem, moreover, is not one that will admit to easy solutions, or respect anyone's cherished political theories.

The complexities here are mind-boggling, but the bottom line is clear: we in the rich world—and particularly we in the U.S.—consume far more than our share of the world's atmospheric space, and the question, terrifying and inescapable, is how we're going to reduce it. It isn't going to be easy, because the sky, as it turns out, is far smaller than any self-styled post-environmentalist could have imagined. The tap already needs to be turned down, but the Energy Information Agency is projecting that, by 2020, U.S. carbon emissions could rise 50% above the 1990 baseline, or even higher. That may not happen, but

will be a problem in the short-term, but it will also, perhaps paradoxically, radically increase the pressure on the world's elites to find a new development path.

If, for the sake of argument, we imagine that there's a reform wing in the party of the elites, then, certainly, it's far stronger in Europe than in the United States. The EU Summit that President Bush recently attended—overshadowed as it was by the trans-Atlantic conflict over Kyoto—made that clear. Its agenda featured a new European sustainable development strategy that not only mandates greenhouse gas emissions reductions but also accelerates efforts to establish comprehensive transportation infrastructure limits and hazardous chemical controls. The specifics, presumably, are not beyond reproach, but there's

something comprehensive in the vision here, and like Kyoto, it's a real step in a new direction.

In the meantime, raise a glass to the Kyoto Protocol and to the first steps already taken. Ratification, of course, would be a wonderful thing, but even without it, we shouldn't imagine that the game is lost. We're already on the path, and as we proceed it will become increasingly difficult for the Neanderthals—whether they are Americans or Europeans, or, for that matter, third world elites—to justify any supersized notion of what the good life implies. Kyoto is, moreover, a political fact, and if it is architecturally inadequate as a sustainable global warming treaty, it seems as well that it was just the political medicine we needed. It has focused discussion, taught us a great deal, and allowed the world's assembled scientists, activists, and diplomats to drag unpleasant realities out into the light. And it has clarified the need for a new leadership—one free of the wagging-the-dog dynamics by which the right wing controls American politics.

A SMALL CONCLUSION

Is all this insufferably optimistic? Perhaps. After all, Kyoto's enemies may yet prevent its ratification, and for all the damage this would do to the Republicans, it would be a stunning setback. And even if Kyoto becomes international law, it would take years to establish enforcement measures useful against free riders as powerful as the United States. In the short term, Kyoto's implementation language may wind up containing emission-trading rules so shoddy and sink loopholes so large that the rich world (including Europe) can simply buy its way out of the need to make real emission reductions. The Dick Cheney's of the world (abetted by a global recession) could stall the solar/efficiency revolution yet again. The Europeans may even, as Bush apologists claim, only be pretending that they're about to drive toward ratification.

But it surely doesn't look that way. After the recent EU summit, European Commission President Romano Prodi

announced: "In any case, we [the EU] are going to ratify the Kyoto Protocol." It's not the move of a player about to back down, and why, in any case, should Europe do so? Just now, the climate showdown offers Europe an immense political opportunity, one that it can only seize if its sticks close to the science. The science on climate change is now so grim, with implications so inescapable, that mainstream voices routinely draw conclusions once left to green radicals to worry about alone. The world's emissions really must be cut by more than half, even while the aspirations of the poor are somehow satisfied, or, if you prefer the language of traditional realism, contained. Take this all together, and it's a bottom line indeed.

No wonder that even the big American environmental groups have started to talk about the North's outsized per capita emissions. It's suddenly past time to start preparing for the next phase of the greenhouse battle, and the stark global disparity of per capita emissions is clearly going to define the field when that battle arrives. How can it not? Clearly, the task after Kyoto will be to define a framework for allocating emission rights in a manner that's not only global but also fair enough to be workable.

So Kyoto may or may not be ratified, but the outcome of this most immediate battle is no longer the only issue. There's no longer any doubt that the climate equity debate is finally about to heat up. The questions that remain concern only the exact timing, and what the equity debate will look like when it finally arrives.

Is this too strong a claim? Not at all. Because when something as ubiquitous and natural as the air (and its carbon cycling services) becomes suddenly and seriously scarce, then sharing, as they call it in kindergarten, is on the table as well. And having finally arrived, it's not going away.

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