

## **Blowing Hot and Cold? Russia and Ratification of the Kyoto Protocol**

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“Global warming is the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people and the world” says US Senator, Jim Inhofe, Chair of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works. But for Klaus Toepfer, Director of the UN Environment Programme, speaking at the Ninth Conference of the Parties to the Climate Change Convention, climate change was not a prognosis but a real phenomenon that “will increasingly bring human suffering and economic hardship”. The Ninth Conference in Milan neatly illustrated this division of views of climate change as Russia prevaricated about whether it will join the USA in refusing to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. Russian ratification is crucial because the Protocol requires ratification by at least 55 per cent of those emitting greenhouse gases in 1990 – the baseline year for Kyoto calculations. Russia kicks in with a big 17 per cent slice of this, meaning that, in the face also of US intransigence, Kyoto commitments to reduce greenhouse gases might never take effect.

Yet, in the words of the German Environment Minister, Kyoto is the “only game in town”. Representing a classic example of diffuse pollution, no single country can combat climate change – not even the USA, which, with 4 per cent of the world’s population, contributes 25 per cent of current greenhouse gas emissions. Climate change calls for concerted action. The Climate Change Convention of 1992 and the Protocol to it, agreed at Kyoto in 1997, provide the necessary international framework, and, however else it is dressed up, only crass self-interest stands in the way of the limited solution it promotes.

Rubbishing climate change theories in the manner of Jim Inhofe, is becoming an increasingly untenable line. It is true that meteorologists are reluctant to speak in terms of cause and effect but, in a classic application of the precautionary principle, there evidence of potential cause and increasing concern about the threat of a rapid change to the climate. The targets contained within the Kyoto Protocol relate to six gases, namely Carbon Dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), Methane (CH<sub>4</sub>), Nitrous Oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O) and the three industrial gases, Hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), Perfluorocarbons (PFCs) and Sulphur Hexafluoride (SF<sub>6</sub>). Although these gases form a relatively small part of the total atmosphere (this consists mainly of Nitrogen (78%) and Oxygen (21%)), they play an important part in the balance of the climate of the earth. This is because they help warm the earth by allowing incoming short waves solar radiation to pass through, while trapping long wave radiation as it is emitted from the earth’s surface.

In effect a blanket of greenhouse gases is necessary to keep the earth warm, but thickening this blanket (e.g. by Carbon Dioxide emissions from the use of fossil fuels) is likely to mean

that the earth will warm rapidly. The increase in greenhouse gases and their accumulation are not a matter of doubt. However, the impact upon the earth's climate is beset by uncertainty. Only longer-term trends will confirm the global warming fear. But while we have seen a rise of .050C in the last 150 years, scientists suggest we could easily see a rise of 20C within this century. In the meantime there is growing concern at unprecedented weather patterns. To take Britain alone, not only did last Summer see the first three figure Fahrenheit air temperature (101.3f) since records began in 1659, but four out of the five hottest years measured by these records have occurred since 1990. Temperature records were also set last summer in India, Sri Lanka, and ironically the USA. The accompanying fires, tornadoes, glacial melts, rises in urban mortality, flooding and the drying up of rivers cost an estimated \$60bn and an estimated 150,000 lives.

Progress, even for those countries committed to greenhouse gas reduction is painfully slow. Only two of 15 EU States are on target for their Kyoto commitment for 2012. Of those exceeding target only three are within 10 per cent of their commitment. Ironically, the Kyoto commitments present little problem for Russia. Because 1990 is taken as a baseline, slow down in manufacturing means that Russia is likely to be a net seller under the trading mechanisms of the Protocol. But the biggest bidder was always likely to be the USA, and their withdrawal from Kyoto implicitly reduces the available economic gains to Russia. In effect Russia can be seen as holding out for a better deal, hence its departure from Milan with its position no clearer than when it arrived.

This reflects the tension at the heart of Kyoto. Russia has had a hard time economically. If it is to be asked to forgo its right to increase greenhouse gas emissions as it pursues growth then it would like to be compensated for doing so. It also feels that certain developing countries, not far removed from it in terms of wealth, have yet to be set targets under Kyoto. This view is widely shared. Democrat contender John Kerry recently argued when questioned about Kyoto that it didn't demand enough from the developing countries. Yet some of the countries worst affected by any change in climate, such as island states, have done little to contribute towards the problem. Even now Chinese emissions per head are one-eighth of those of the average American. In India, this becomes one-twenty-fifth. The view of the developing nations has not changed since Kyoto, demanding that those responsible for historic pollution show their good faith through the first Kyoto period (2008-2012) before the commitments for the second period are negotiated.

Time is running out on a problem, which, if real, is hugely serious in its impacts and potentially irreversible. The USA rejected Kyoto because it was "an ever increasingly regulatory straightjacket", but this is an accurate depiction. It is made necessary because climate change itself tightens its grip on the earth. And in a sense, the choice for Russia is a vital one. Does it, as the USA has chosen to do, stand aside from the global compact, or does it become a citizen of the world community?