

Kyoto is dead. Long live Kyoto! Climate Change and the “Chamberlain Syndrome”

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Beginning sometime in the fifteenth century the death of the reigning monarch in France was greeted with the cry, *Le Roi est mort. Vive le Roi!*

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, speaking at the APEC summit in Australia yesterday, is quoted as saying, “the weight of scientific evidence holds that our atmosphere is getting hotter and that human activity is a significant contributor.” Mr. Harper’s main agenda in Sydney is in fact getting an invitation to join the “Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate (AP6),” currently made up of Australia, China, India, South Korea, Japan, and the United States, which describes itself as “a ground-breaking climate change approach bringing together key developed and developing countries on practical, pro-growth, technology-driven efforts.”¹

The current Government of Australia is a driving force behind AP6, and it is to its Prime Minister, John Howard, that we owe the charming phrase, “aspirational goals,” with respect to reducing greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs). Aspirational goals are a substitute for Kyoto’s mandatory GHG-reduction targets. AP6 countries are also keen on substituting energy efficiency targets, based on calculating the energy inputs per unit of GNP or industrial output, for GHG-reduction targets. They are very keen on putting their faith in technologies, new and old (such as atomic energy), as the definitive solution for climate change. Conveniently, that means we don’t have to change our behaviour – and, specifically, that we can all go on merrily expanding our GNPs while solving the climate problem at the same time.

What I call the “Chamberlain Syndrome” is the human proclivity to perceive the situation we face as we would like it to be, as opposed to the way it really is. In September 1938 Neville Chamberlain, having sold the Czech people down the river in Munich, returned to Britain describing the “dispute” between Nazi Germany and Czechoslovakia as “a quarrel in a far away country between people of whom we know nothing.” Even as he spoke these appalling words some muted interior voice must have told him that what he had actually done was to embolden a ruthless dictator to seek other victories, including one over his own country, one that came uncomfortably close to realization.

The Chamberlain Syndrome could also be called, more generally, *willful blindness*; as such it forms one term in a trinity, the other two of which are *procrastination* (not in my term of office) and *artful rationalization*.

The gulf in Chamberlain’s mind separating actual reality from faith-based reality closed a mere one year later. There is a similar type of gulf in the minds of those who refuse to concede that mandatory GHG-reduction targets are the only effective response to climate change issues. That gulf will take longer to close, because the global climate system is large and ponderous, requiring centuries to resolve the forces now at work in it, and because it will not reveal the final outcomes until that much time has passed.

¹ <http://www.dfat.gov.au/environment/climate/ap6/>

But by the time the actual reality of climate change supplants the faith-based reality so many prefer, it will be too late to take meaningful mitigation measures. Almost certainly, and quite literally, it will be a type of situation described in the phrase attributed to Louis XV: “Après moi le déluge.” We can already foresee, I believe, that *if climate change represents a potentially catastrophic risk for modern society, then this is not a problem that humanity will be able to solve.*

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The Kyoto Protocol, agreed to in December 1997 and thereafter opened for ratification, was intended to be the implementing mechanism for the core objective of the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change: “stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.” The agreement divided the world into two groups of nations, those which would have immediate, mandatory targets for GHG reductions, and others, largely “developing” countries, which would be assigned targets at some later date.

The model for Kyoto was another international agreement, one that was “made in Canada”: the Montréal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, which was agreed to in 1987 and came into force two years later, and which set different conditions for industrialized and industrializing countries. The similarities between the two processes are quite fascinating. For the industrialized nations had come to a conclusion that action on ozone-depleting substances was required on the basis of “modeled data.” In other words, there was a scientific consensus that strongly suggested a causative relationship between specific chemical compounds, on the one hand, and depletion of stratospheric ozone, on the other, but not (yet) a solid empirical confirmation, which came sometime later.

Does this sound familiar? Indeed it does, but energy use plays a far, far more significant role in economic growth than a small set of chemicals used as refrigerants could ever do. There is a direct correlation between energy use and economic prosperity. “Energy efficiency” is irrelevant in this equation, except in the very long term, for the same reason as improved fuel-efficiency in our automobile engines is: It’s canceled out by a combination of more people and increased per capita demands.

So Prime Minister Harper may now accept “the weight of scientific evidence” on climate change, but it actually doesn’t matter that he changed his mind on this subject, for the other parts of his faith-based reality system on this topic render the science irrelevant. This is how the logic of the policy process works:

1. Controlling the influence of “human activity” on climate change means only one thing: Greenhouse-gas *concentrations* in the atmosphere must be “stabilized.” For example, there are plausible reasons for thinking that we should not exceed either 450ppm, or alternatively, twice pre-industrial levels (550ppm). *If we don’t try to do this, nothing else that we might do, or not do, matters.*
2. Global emissions of GHGs, which drive concentrations with a lag-time of about one century, are still rising rapidly on a year-over-year basis. Emissions must be “stabilized” – held at some peak, or (depending on when this is achieved, reduced from some peak level) – before concentrations can be stabilized. *If we don’t do this, nothing else that we might do, or not do, matters.*

3. There is a powerful built-in inertia in the emissions scenarios. Obviously, making sharp reductions within short periods of time would severely disrupt economic growth. Thus if only more modest initial constraints on global emissions growth are feasible, they must begin sooner rather than later. This was one of the basic propositions motivating the signers of the Kyoto Protocol. *But every day of delay in beginning to constrain emissions growth makes the stabilization target progressively harder to reach (see: procrastination).*
4. The nations of the world must come to an agreement on how to share “equitably” the burden of constraining global emissions growth. *There is currently no such agreement, and zero prospects for arriving at one (see further below).*
5. Any agreement on constraining global emissions growth must then be properly implemented and enforced.
6. Finally, notwithstanding all of the above, Canada and the AP6 nations will not agree to any pathway to stabilization in which “normal” economic growth scenarios are constrained *in any degree.*

At present, thanks in large part to the recalcitrance of the United States, there is no enforceable global agreement on setting a path toward constraining emissions growth, and no motivation to even seek one. But lurking in the background is a much, much bigger problem: *If such an agreement were to be discussed, on what basis would a sharing of burdens be possible?*

The Kyoto Protocol based its implementation strategy on assigning national targets (combined targets in the case of the EU). Is this fair? I think not. Quite recently, the governments of India and China have begun to put a new proposition on the table: per capita emissions targets. They have started to say, in effect: We will promise to hold our per capita GHG emissions at or below the average level of emissions in the industrialized world.² (This is especially relevant to Canadians, because on a per capita basis our emissions are the highest in the world.)

This is a bombshell, because it is indeed a proposition that is equitable. It cancels out the arbitrary advantages otherwise held by the “early entrants” into the grand game of industrialization, namely, the Western world (Europe and North America). It is also a bombshell because it means, in effect, that the emissions reductions targets of the richest nations suddenly become a lot more onerous.

China and India have thrown a spanner into the works with this proposition. If it is equitable, however, as I believe it is, on what reasoned basis are the rest of us going to oppose it? (No Western government has yet commented on it.) And if the rest of us decide we don't much like it, what are we going to do about it?

At the moment, this is a moot point, because the world is stuck at point #2 of the policy process. There is no realistic global plan on how to constrain anthropogenic GHG emissions, and no prospect of having such a plan anytime soon. “Aspirational goals” are the mantra of the day. This is understandable, I suppose, given the unchallenged sway of

² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/main.jhtml?xml=/earth/2007/06/12/eaindia12.xml>

the religion of economic growth, which is the one goal that almost everyone in the world supports. But there is another dilemma lurking in the climate science that politicians don't want to confront.

Despite all the unreasonable abuse that the so-called "skeptics" have heaped upon the IPCC process, the fact of the matter is that IPCC's large-scale consensus process means that its projections, including impacts scenarios, are quite conservative in nature. We already have plenty of evidence that some actual trends are exploding the worst-case scenarios adopted in IPCC's 2001 report. Some examples are: growth in emissions; rate of loss of summer Arctic ice cover; and rate of melting in the Greenland ice sheet.

Finally, in terms of confounding factors, there is a serious under-appreciation at the "political" level of the significance of what climate scientists call the "locked-in" dimension of future climate change. In the words of the UK's Tim Lenton: "We have already made a 'commitment' to ~0.6 °C of further warming even if we could stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations tomorrow (which we can't)."³ With every day that passes, we are more firmly locked-in to additional impacts.

Next week our Prime Minister will return from Australia, where the AP6 nations will have strengthened their resolve to bury the Kyoto Protocol. What should the rest of us conclude from the foregoing analysis?

First, *willful blindness* rules the day: There is no agreement on the need for a path to constraining emissions growth *whether or not economic growth is constrained as a result*.

Second, *procrastination* rules the day: In Canada's case, *all* of the hypothetically-meaningful emissions reductions scenarios are pushed well into the future, long after the present government's mandate will have run its course. Marc Jaccard and Nic Rivers have shown that the government's long-range targets cannot be met.⁴ Thus this forms a perfectly smooth continuum with the equally futile record of the Chrétien regime, during which time the federal government talked a good game while idly watching Canada's GHG emissions rise relentlessly.

Third, *artful rationalization* rules the day: The governments of Canada and the AP6 nations claim to accept "the weight of scientific evidence" about climate change and pretend to have an effective approach for addressing it. They do not. And they are constructing instead an elaborate smoke-and-mirrors performance to hide this simple fact from public view.

I end with another modest prediction. By next year we will be a mere thirty years away from the one-hundredth anniversary of Chamberlain's 1938 debacle. Thus I predict that in 2038 the leader of the world's leading faith-based regime, the United States, will present a resolution to the United Nations General Assembly. Having opposed the idea of mandatory GHG emissions reductions, the U. S. resolution will seek to make prayer

³ <http://researchpages.net/ESMG/people/tim-lenton/tipping-points/>

⁴ http://www.cdhowe.org/pdf/workingpaper_5.pdf

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mandatory, for all the world's citizens, wherein petitions will be addressed to the God of one's choice, asking Her to stay nature's hand in the case of climate change.

There is a darker scenario, too. Perhaps the use of climate models will be branded an act of witchcraft, with the practitioners of the same subjected to the usual penalties. Then we can continue to do as we please with a clear conscience.

Le [protocole de] Kyoto est mort. Vive le Kyoto !