



The Kyoto Enigma – Science versus Science, or Science versus Politics?

by Walter R. Stahel

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Many Americans would have been startled to see the way Europe's press covered the statement from the Bush administration about the Kyoto agreement on global warming. Given President Bush's opposition to the treaty throughout his election campaign, and the fact that the Senate (which would have to ratify it before it could take effect) passed a resolution denouncing the plan by an adequate margin of 95–0.

It had taken years to come up with the Kyoto targets for reductions in greenhouse gases. The Clinton administration took part in all good faith, and the treaty was duly signed.

But even the 'The Economist' in its issue of April 7, 2001, admits that America had two good reasons to reject the Kyoto accord as it stands:

The target to which Mr Clinton committed the USA, a reduction in green-house emissions by the end of this decade of 7% below a 1990 benchmark, was literally unachievable when the deal was done, and is even more clearly so now. Today, the target implies a cut in emissions of maybe 30%, relative to trend, in less than ten years – it could not be done except at a disastrous cost for the U.S economy – and potentially disastrous repercussions on the World economy.

The approach of the existing agreement – abrupt reductions in emissions in the short term, and no commitments yet agreed for more distant years – is not well suited to the challenge of global climate change. Better would be a longer term plan, based on milder reductions at the start followed by more demanding targets farther out.

And 'The Economist' concludes in its leader of April 7:

'Will Mr Bush propose changes of this kind to the Kyoto framework, or simply walk away? If the latter, foreigners' rage will begin to be justified. Contrary to what Mr Bush and some advisers have said in April, a firm scientific consensus now holds that man-made global warming is a problem which must be addressed. In this, America's participation will be vital, and its leadership most desirable. The Kyoto process does need to be reformed – something that European intransigence, in large measure, has prevented up to now – or else a new approach must be proposed to take its place. Mr Bush needs to champion one or the other alternative.'

For America to withdraw its attention from the issue altogether would be inexcusable. Its rejection of the Kyoto targets in their present form is not merely excusable, it is right.'

Having defended Mr Bush's position myself in workshops in Germany, on the basis that most experts agree that the Kyoto targets are outside the reach of most industrial countries, I have been told by German civil servants that 'Kyoto is a vision, an important milestone, even if it will not be reached'. In my own narrow mind, signing a contract knowing that it cannot be fulfilled is a sign of unethical management – and sustainability is also about ethical and social issues.

Furthermore, Germany is a good example to illustrate Mr Bush's point. From 1990 to 1997, Germany and Russia have considerably reduced green house gas emissions at the price of chaos. In the case of Russia, the reduction has been due to an economic crash that has reached a level at which the sheer

survival of many citizens is uncertain. In the case of Germany, the reduction is due to closing down the open cast brown coal mining industry in the former German Democratic Republic – at a tremendous economic and social cost, and not least a rise in right wing politics.

But I have yet another fundamental critic of the Kyoto agreement: a global view of sustainability has to give not only future as well as present generations the same rights to resources, but also all people on this planet. Emission targets therefore have to be fixed as a number per capita per annum – in this means the same number for the people of any and all countries worldwide.

Historians of the 22nd century will certainly write books on who was right. For our part, I suggest to **study the repercussions of climatic changes on the environment, health, economy and society in different world regions**. This is the objective of the forthcoming M.O.R.E. 16 – Seminar in Venice. This newsletter contains a CALL FOR PAPERS that is addressed to researchers, insurance experts and managers interested in this subject.

Several speakers have already been invited to speak on subjects such as new uncertainties in the Japanese building industry created by termites migrating North, and the health risks of ticks moving into new territories in Scandinavia. Further topics of interest are the dying forests of Alaska, and the potential for large mudslides caused by the thawing of permafrost in the Alps.

The other day of the seminar will be devoted to the issue of the insurability of risks and its implication for policy makers that will be analysed in detail in a research programme 'INTEREST' initiated by The Geneva Association.

Author: *Walter R. Stahel, Editor, Vice Secretary General and Director of the Risk Management Research Programme of The Geneva Association, walter_stahel@genevaassociation.org*

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