

Life after Kyoto
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It is time to start work on alternative global mechanisms for dealing with climate change

EVEN Stuart Eizenstat, the man who negotiated the Kyoto Protocol, a UN treaty on climate change, on behalf of the Clinton administration, thinks “with great remorse” that the Kyoto treaty is dead. Yet the Europeans do not quite agree.

Instead, they are fighting hard to salvage Kyoto at a big environmental meeting this week and next in Bonn (see article). The treaty was dealt a serious blow a few months ago when George Bush affirmed his strong opposition to it. The EU could still, in theory, ram it into force if Japan now also signs up; but the Japanese are playing coy. So the treaty may well collapse in the coming months—and the Europeans can then join Mr Eizenstat in bidding Kyoto a tearful farewell.

The real question now should be: what ought countries that genuinely care about climate change, as opposed to those that prefer moralistic posturing, to do after the death of Kyoto? European leaders will be tempted simply to throw mud at the United States. Mr Bush indeed deserves much blame for clumsily wrecking a painstakingly negotiated effort to respond to what looks increasingly to be a real threat of global warming. Yet if only acrimony and finger-pointing follow the demise of Kyoto, there will be little chance of any co-operation on any global climate treaty for many years.

That would be a pity, for the best approach to tackling this most global of problems must be through a binding global treaty. To give Mr Bush his due, Kyoto was and remains a badly flawed treaty. Its targets are too ambitious, and its timetable too short; this has made it front-loaded and so needlessly expensive. And although rich countries, which have produced most greenhouse-gas emissions, should act first, Kyoto fails to impose commitments on poor countries, even though within decades India and China will be the biggest emitters.

Kill Kyoto to save it?

Optimists still insist that such flaws in Kyoto could be fixed by sincere negotiators willing to find clever ideas for compromise. The targets could be made more reasonable, and the timetable extended, hugely lowering the costs of complying with the treaty, and also making it easier to win a promise of action by poor countries. Sadly, the Kyoto process has not been blessed with much sincerity or cleverness: the Americans have been lacking in the first, and the Europeans woefully inadequate in the second. The resultant bitterness goes a long way to explaining why Kyoto has in effect reached a dead end, whatever Japan eventually decides.

The Europeans’ response to this now seems likely to be to thumb their noses at the Yanks and go ahead and implement a high-minded, “European” version of Kyoto. Their idea is that, as with some earlier free-trade deals, their good example will eventually lure the Americans back on board. But the trade analogy does not hold: freer trade is of greatest benefit to the liberaliser itself, whereas Kyoto imposes costs, giving non-participants all the advantages of free riders. Moreover, if the Europeans do indeed proceed with an inflexible implementation of Kyoto, they will make it even less likely that an American administration will ever join a global climate pact.

The best hope for action on climate change may lie neither in fussing for months to produce a rump Kyoto Protocol, nor in its partial implementation by Europe on its own; but, rather, in hastening its demise. Then countries that are serious can forge ahead with trading schemes, carbon taxes and the like on a domestic or regional level. Europeans, for example, could continue with their plans for an EU-wide carbon-trading scheme—and even keep to their Kyoto targets if they can persuade European industry that it will not thereby be unfairly burdened. Mr Bush, similarly, could put his recently mooted notion of a North American emissions-trading regime to the test, though he would have to accept some mandatory targets (which he has so far rejected) to make it work.

Those countries that do nothing of substance will then be shamed to be shown up as hypocrites. And, once the dust from Kyoto has settled, all countries can then try again to agree a treaty which is binding in its targets yet flexible in its mechanisms, is long-term in scope, adapts as science and technology improves, and includes poor countries. It would be worth the delay of a few years to get a treaty that America could embrace. Climate change will be with us for at least a century. It will need a solution large enough and durable enough to last at least that long.