

# Greenhouse Hypocrisy

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Almost a decade ago I suggested that global warming would become a "gushing" source of political hypocrisy. So it has. Politicians and scientists constantly warn of the grim outlook, and the subject is on the agenda of the upcoming Group of Eight summit of world economic leaders. But all this sound and fury is mainly exhibitionism -- politicians pretending they're saving the planet. The truth is that, barring major technological advances, they can't (and won't) do much about global warming. It would be nice if they admitted that, though this seems unlikely.

Europe is the citadel of hypocrisy. Considering Europeans' contempt for the United States and George Bush for not embracing the Kyoto Protocol, you'd expect that they would have made major reductions in greenhouse gas emissions -- the purpose of Kyoto. Well, not exactly. From 1990 (Kyoto's base year for measuring changes) to 2002, global emissions of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), the main greenhouse gas, increased 16.4 percent, reports the International Energy Agency. The U.S. increase was 16.7 percent, and most of Europe hasn't done much better.

Here are some IEA estimates of the increases: France, 6.9 percent; Italy, 8.3 percent; Greece, 28.2 percent; Ireland, 40.3 percent; the Netherlands, 13.2 percent; Portugal, 59 percent; Spain, 46.9 percent. It's true that Germany (down 13.3 percent) and Britain (a 5.5 percent decline) have made big reductions. But their cuts had nothing to do with Kyoto. After reunification in 1990, Germany closed many inefficient coal-fired plants in eastern Germany; that was a huge one-time saving. In Britain, the government had earlier decided to shift electric utilities from coal (high CO<sub>2</sub> emissions) to plentiful natural gas (lower CO<sub>2</sub> emissions).

On their present courses, many European countries will miss their Kyoto targets for 2008-2012. To reduce emissions significantly, Europeans would have to suppress driving and electricity use; that

would depress economic growth and fan popular discontent. It won't happen. Political leaders everywhere deplore global warming -- and then do little. Except for Eastern European nations, where dirty factories have been shuttered, few countries have cut emissions. Since 1990 Canada's emissions are up 23.6 percent; Japan's, 18.9 percent.

We are seeing similar exhibitionism in the United States. The U.S. Conference of Mayors recently endorsed Kyoto. California and New Mexico have adopted "targets" for emission cuts, reports the Pew Center on Global Climate Change. All this busywork won't much affect global warming, but who cares? The real purpose is for politicians to brandish their environmental credentials. Even if rich countries actually curbed their emissions, it wouldn't matter much. Poor countries would offset the reductions.

"We expect CO2 emissions growth in China between now and 2030 will equal the growth of the United States, Canada, all of Europe, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Korea combined," says Fatih Birol, the IEA's chief economist. In India, he says, about 500 million people lack electricity; worldwide, the figure is 1.6 billion. Naturally, poor countries haven't signed Kyoto; they won't sacrifice economic gains -- poverty reduction, bigger middle classes -- to combat global warming. By 2030, the IEA predicts, world energy demand and greenhouse gases will increase by roughly 60 percent; poor countries will account for about two-thirds of the growth. China's coal use is projected almost to double; its vehicle fleet could go from 24 million to 130 million.

Like most forecasts, these won't come true. But unless they're wildly unreliable, they demonstrate that greenhouse emissions will still rise. Facing this prospect, we ought to align rhetoric and reality.

First, we should tackle some energy problems. We need to reduce our use of oil, which increasingly comes from unstable or hostile regions (the Middle East, Russia, Central Asia, Africa). This is mainly a security issue, though it would modestly limit greenhouse gases. What should we do? Even with today's high gasoline prices, we ought to adopt a stiff oil tax and tougher fuel economy standards, both to be introduced gradually. We can shift toward smaller vehicles, with more efficient hybrid engines. Unfortunately, Congress's energy bills lack

these measures.

Second, we should acknowledge that global warming is an iffy proposition. Yes, it's happening; but, no, we don't know the consequences -- how much warming will occur, what the effects (good or bad) will be or where. If we can't predict the stock market and next year's weather, why does anyone think we can predict the global climate in 75 years? Global warming is not an automatic doomsday. In some regions, warmer weather may be a boon.

Third, we should recognize that improved technology is the only practical way of curbing greenhouse gases. About 80 percent of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions originate outside the transportation sector -- from power generation and from fuels for industrial, commercial and residential use. Any technology solution would probably involve some acceptable form of nuclear power or an economic way of removing CO<sub>2</sub> from burned fossil fuels. "Renewable" energy (wind, solar, biomass) won't suffice. Without technology gains, adapting to global warming makes more sense than trying to prevent it. Either way, the Bush administration rightly emphasizes research and development.

What we have now is a respectable charade. Politicians and advocates make speeches, convene conferences and formulate plans. They pose as warriors against global warming. The media participate in the resulting deception by treating their gestures seriously. One danger is that some of these measures will harm the economy without producing significant environmental benefits. Policies motivated by political gain will inflict public pain. Why should anyone applaud?