

Red, white, blue, and green: High politics

THE CLIMATE CHANGE CHALLENGE

There are already some signs of positive change around the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. President George Bush himself, in the 2007 State of the Union address, recognized for the first time that climate change exists and is a problem. Of course, these are only words, but we must keep in mind that before this public admission, the very existence of climate change was in doubt. Conservative think tanks, such as the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, and the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI), have spent a large amount of time and resources casting doubts on any scientific reports that supported the existence of climate change. Indeed, groups dominated by the Republicans, such as the CEI, lobbied against the *Kyoto Protocol*. Though they were not fully successful, *Kyoto* was never ratified by the United States.

RETOOL AND RETHINK

The issue of climate change has become an icon of the United States' lacklustre global participation, in contrast to the lead role taken by the European Union in global affairs. This does not appear to be a major problem for the United States—it is not the first time that it has refused to cooperate, particularly within the context of the United Nations. But if we add to this the anti-American sentiments found in almost every country in the world, the fiasco in Iraq, the financial world's rejection of the dollar, and the looming recession, the United States' global reputation becomes an argument worth worrying about. Fortunately, through association with a series of related ideas, including energy conservation, energy independence, the rising price of oil, and the invasion of Iraq, climate change has now become a security issue for the United States.

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of last year, the United States, despite initial resistance, agreed to a watered-down consensus for a new treaty to reduce carbon emissions. This treaty is intended to replace the *Kyoto Protocol* as of 2012, and it includes measures to preserve tropical forests and help poor countries adapt to a greener economy. This last-minute agreement—although “light” because it does not include tough limits on emission reduction or the carbon caps of climate change jargon and is based mainly on planting “sink” trees, which absorb carbon—can at least be seen as a step forward.

Another sign of change is the large number of climate change initiatives presented to the Senate and Congress. Of course, to date, few of them have passed in Bush's rarified milieu, but the post-electoral predictions for 2009 are

good. Due in part to the impetus of the Democratic leadership in the Senate and Congress following the legislative elections of November 2006, over 54 initiatives have been presented and there is a bit of everything among them: from lukewarm measures such as financing scientific research on alternative energy, through voluntary reduction measures, to imposing an obligatory cap and even more radical measures such as carbon taxes. Furthermore, these initiatives are originating not only from the Democratic Party but also from the Republican Party and cross-party support. For example, even Senator John McCain has proposed a bill to cut greenhouse gases. California provides further proof of shifting US attitudes toward climate change. Assembly Bill 32 passed in September 2006 and is the first law in the Americas to impose legal limits on carbon emissions. The law aims to reduce greenhouse gases by 25 percent by the year 2020 and 80 percent by the year 2050.

INSPIRATION BEFORE PERSPIRATION

Shifting attitudes toward climate change have been an important factor for the introduction of climate change policies in the United States. The Stern report of 2006, *The Economics of Climate Change*, an essentially economic document, played a vital role in this: it demonstrated that without an immediate, minor effort (representing spending of perhaps only 1 percent of the GNP), future sacrifices would be enormous and could lead to a decline in the world economy of up to 20 percent.

Prior to this, the perception of climate change was determined by the damages to companies' bottom lines and high costs for industries, which had to exchange traditional technologies for others that used less-polluting energy sources. But a new vision is beginning to spread, which tends to see climate change as a business opportunity for

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clean technologies. This view no longer calculates the damages, either to the environment or to industries, but rather focuses on the benefits that could be gained from the new technologies on the world market. One example is biofuels, which, despite how controversial they are environmentally, are already produced and heavily subsidized in the United States. Other technologies being developed in the United States today include solar energy, wind energy, fuel cells powered by hydrogen, and new carbon-capturing technologies.

However, the new renewable technologies have little value if a price is not put on carbon. This relies on the creation of a carbon market, which itself requires a federal law to impose a cap on industrial CO₂ emissions. Nowadays, organizations and companies that used to be the main opponents of any regulation of emissions, such as Edison Electric Institute, US Climate Action Partnership, GM, GE, BP, Alcan, and Alcoa, are considering accepting federal policies of this kind. This gives rise to optimism regarding the promotion of regulation on climate change, starting in the United States, and extending all around the world.

NIXING THE NAYSAYERS

The main argument of Kyoto naysayers is that the United States should not participate in any agreement that is not valid for all countries, including notorious polluters such as China, India, Brazil, and Mexico. This is at the very least a fallacy, but may also be deceiving. Those opposed to Kyoto claim that in a few years China will emit more greenhouse gases than the United States. What they do not take into account is that the main worry of climate change is the amount of emissions created by each person through his or her economic activity. Therefore, emissions must not be measured in total quantities, but rather per capita. If emissions are measured in this way, China is in 122nd place and India is in 164th on the list of the main greenhouse gas emitters in the world, while

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the United States heads every list of emitters: per capita, total quantity, and total throughout history. In addition, it would be illogical to ask India, where a large part of the population still lives without electricity, to make the same energy reduction sacrifices as the United States, the principal consumer in the world.

RED, WHITE, BLUE, AND GREEN

The subject of climate change has become an important issue in the current presidential campaign, which is unusual for an environmental issue. All of the candidates with the greatest chances of becoming president of the United States are in favour of federal action to combat climate change, although with differences in scope. This is in response to a greater concern on the part of most citizens—Democrats, Republicans, or Independents—about climate change because of its close relationship to the increasing cost of imported oil from the Middle East and therefore the war in Iraq.

Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama support an 80 percent emission reduction by 2050 while John McCain supports a 65 percent reduction; Obama supports

an increase in the car fuel-economy standard to 40 mpg, Clinton sometimes supports this, and McCain only supports an increase to 35 mpg. Obama proposes to channel 50 percent of the health care savings to research clean technologies for cars. Clinton suggests the creation of a US\$50 billion fund for the research and development of alternative energy. McCain summed up the feelings of all election frontrunners when he stated during his campaign that the issue of climate change and fuel independence is a question of national interest.

There is no doubt that with the end of Bush's presidency, there will be some federal action on climate change. Whether or not the United States will take on the obligations of a future Kyoto 2 will depend in part on who becomes the next president. Obama is the most likely, followed by McCain. Because climate change is linked to international reputation, it is important for the future president of the United States to foster a favourable atmosphere with a focus on environmental action and solidarity with developing countries. 

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