

Reflections on Kyoto

(Op-Ed Piece Syndicated by the LA Times, 12/12/97)

Richard S. Lindzen

Forty years ago, when weather modification was popular speculation in meteorology, the Soviet Union realized that climate was always changing while our ability to modify it was minimal at best. It, therefore, reached an agreement with the US never to use climate modification as a tool of war, thus preventing people from mistaking the inevitable droughts, floods, heat waves and cold spells for acts of war. The agreement displayed an unusual and admirable appreciation for nature and concern for mankind. The graceless machinations at Kyoto over the past 10 days have illustrated how far both have deteriorated since.

The negotiations present an unseemly picture of diplomats desperate for some treaty at any cost, industrial interests asking that any treaty, however bad, be applied to the developing world, and environmental advocates insisting dishonestly and absurdly that all scientists agree with the most lurid scenarios. The last follows an ignominious tendency of the 20th century to invoke the perceived authority of science in behalf of policy, however evil. In the case of global climate change, there was a blatant attempt to coopt the science through the establishment of a politically led international panel, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), allegedly 'representing' science. The present head of the IPCC is currently at the World Bank. He has never contributed to our understanding of the physics of climate, but has publicly declared that binding emissions restrictions are essential.

Given the potentially immense costs to all, and the suspicions (not totally unfounded) of the developing world that environmentalism will be the disguise of imperialism in the 21st century, it was not surprising that the negotiations were contentious.

In many ways, the science was irrelevant to the outcome. However, it is worth remembering that even the IPCC could not hide the immense uncertainties concerning such an elementary process as the greenhouse effect. Nor could it ignore the substantial evidence that current primitive models are exaggerating the effect of emissions on such a basic quantity as global mean temperature. Claims concerning storms, floods, droughts, disease, climate 'surprises' (whatever they may be) are so speculative that *we do not know if emissions controls are likely to help or harm*. In point of fact, we do know that the emission controls, arrived at in Kyoto, however costly, and even if globally implemented, would have little real effect on climate no matter what one believes. The point is that emissions levels are different from atmospheric levels. The atmosphere will continue to accumulate carbon dioxide for many years to come, and its influence on the climate, though small, will continue to rise. According to present models, only global emission reductions of about 60% will stabilize atmospheric levels (though these models are questionable). Clearly, if one is truly concerned about global climate change, one will have to be prepared to adapt. Whether huge international regulatory regimes will improve adaptability seems dubious.

Since we propose to give ourselves 12 years to act, let's close the negotiations. Let us, instead, use the resources thus released to encourage science to really ascertain whether there is a problem or not, while sparing ourselves the spectacle of more Kyotos. And let us develop a more prosperous world where there will be sufficient food for all, where diseases like malaria are brought under control, where real pollutants are adequately reduced in air and water, and where the talents of all can be released to deal with the inevitable but unanticipated problems we will actually face. Among these may be a climate that will warm or cool regardless of the presence of human beings.

The author is the Alfred P. Sloan Professor of Meteorology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a member of the US National Academy of Science.