

## Global Warming Gridlock

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Victor starts with the premise that global warming is real and that the international community needs to do something about it. He provides a little bit of background on the science, summarized under the auspices of the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Control, but then goes into the political issue of doing something about it.

He says that there are three dimensions to a climate change strategy. First we need to regulate emissions. This means that we need to acknowledge that carbon-based fuels, and in particular coal, are going to provide a lot of the world's energy for a long time to come. Instead of dismissing them and praying for something new, we need to work intelligently with fossil fuels. In particular, we need to recognize that coal will continue to be used and encourage the most efficient possible practices for extracting energy from coal, and for dealing with the carbon dioxide created in burning coal.

Second is new technologies. As much as the Greens might wish, and politicians might promise that wind power, solar power, and hydroelectric are going to provide most of our energy really soon now, it simply cannot happen. There isn't enough wind, or enough real estate to put the solar collectors, or enough rivers to dam.

Victor says surprisingly little about nuclear energy. He should, given that it is the only plausible alternative source of the vast quantities of energy that the world consumes. Nuclear, while it does not contribute to global warming, is fraught with its own political problems, which have only become more serious since the earthquake in Japan. But this is a side note – he is right to focus on fossil fuels, where the major battle is to be fought.

Victor's third dimension is the most controversial. Given that the world cannot conceivably put the brakes on carbon emissions before there is substantial climate change, what do we do then? He talks about the rich nations' moral obligation to the poorer countries, the politics of adapting geo-engineering solutions which would employ a man-made devices to control the climate, and triage, simply giving up on places that cannot be saved. All of these involve difficult moral decisions. They would be difficult even for a single world body with the authority to implement them; they are almost impossible for a fractious bunch like the United Nations.

His major thesis is that we are using the wrong models to attempt to form international agreements. The world was lucky dealing with the ozone layer. The rich nations agreed to work on the problem, and it turned out to be easier to solve than anybody thought. The rich nations could easily afford to compensate the poorer nations for whatever sacrifices they made. And we went on to pretend that it was a truly global success, when in fact a handful of industrial nations had made it happen.

The United Nations is precisely the wrong place to look for a meaningful solution to global warming. First of all, many of the nations do not even know how much carbon dioxide they are emitting, among industry, deforestation, agriculture and other sources. Secondly, no country can promise significant changes. The amount of carbon dioxide produced is a matter of the level of economic activity, the rate of technological change, and a number of other factors that are beyond government control.

Diplomats at the UN level are trying to get commitment to binding agreements. Countries don't want to take chances by committing to things that they cannot deliver. Kyoto is a case in point. Bill Clinton's negotiators committed the United States to more than the Senate thought we could achieve, so they didn't ratify the treaty. Other countries did, some like Russia and China because the targets to which they committed were absurdly low, levels that they already met, and there were economic inducements such as money from cap-and-trade. The European Community, the so-called "enthusiastic countries," did put useful policies in place, but they also engaged gamesmanship, such as buying carbon credits.

Lastly, at the UN, the carbon fuel exporting companies are not keen on seeing their markets disappear. These same countries often don't have much of a green movement pushing them to reduce emissions. Victor calls these the "reluctant" countries, which have to be bribed for any concessions whatsoever.

After making it clear that the UN is the wrong forum, and binding treaties are probably the wrong vehicle, Victor talks about how it ought to be done. He says that the best models involve small groups of countries forming "clubs" involved in successive rounds of negotiation. GATT was the product of a number of rounds of negotiation among the leading economies of the world. The European Union started as the coal and steel community, a small club of powerful European countries. These efforts evolved into the WTO and the EU/NATO/Euro zone. Victor notes that as they have increased in size, their negotiations have become exponentially more difficult.

Victor notes that a mere handful of political entities – the United States, the European Union, China, and optionally Japan, Russia and Brazil, account for most emissions, and almost all of the science and technology to do something about them. They are also home to the most powerful green movements. It would make far more sense, he proposes, for these countries to negotiate among themselves. They should establish targets, which can be much more ambitious than binding agreements, and measure each other's progress toward these targets. They should structure their negotiations to keep the benefits within the negotiating group – something which Victor concedes would contravene agreements with the WTO.

Much more has been written on the science of global warming, and the threat of global warming, than the politics of doing something about it. Victor says as much. He cites the "scientist's myth" that scientists can agree on causes and safe levels of global warming, the "diplomat's myth" that countries can arrive at a treaty which is in the collective best interest, and the "engineer's myth" that the markets will naturally converge on intelligent solutions to the problem because there is money to be made.

Victor's focuses on the "diplomat's myth," certainly worth an entire book, and this is a worthy book on that topic. I recommend also "A vast machine" which describes the science of modeling global warming - how we know it's real - and "Whole Earth Discipline" which is a surprisingly undogmatic assessment of the problem by a longtime member of the Green community. If anybody reads this review and has not yet read the IPCC reports, easily downloaded from the Internet, whatever their flaws they are essential background to any participation in the climate change discussion.