A UN conference on **global warming** makes progress, sort of

JEAN CHRÉTIEN, a former prime minister of Canada, described his country's relationship with its giant southern neighbour as like sleeping with an elephant. It was, he observed, good to have a few others around to watch the elephant as well. An important United Nations (UN) conference on climate change, which has just concluded in Montreal, showed just how right he was.

For two weeks, negotiators from nearly every country in the world converged on the frozen Canadian metropolis to discuss the future of the Kyoto protocol. That controversial UN pact obliges many industrialised countries (but notably not the United States) to cut their emissions of greenhouse gases (GHGs) by a fixed amount below their 1990 levels by 2012. The treaty's 150-odd signatories had hoped to map a rough outline of what should come after the treaty's first commitment period.

In the event, the American delegation strenuously opposed them, insisting that it was too early to contemplate life after Kyoto. Then, in shockingly undiplomatic language, Paul Martin, Canada's prime minister, denounced the American position and invoked the need for a "global conscience" to deal with this most global of problems. America's chief negotiator stormed off in a huff, throwing the meeting into chaos. The talks looked destined to fail. Then something odd happened that persuaded the elephant to dance.

Canada's friends came to the rescue at the last minute. Defying expectations, China, the biggest GHG emitter not to have an emissions target, and Australia, which also rejected the Kyoto treaty, agreed to talk about talks. Then Bill Clinton delivered a clever last-minute speech suggesting that the Bush administration's position on climate change is out of touch with the sentiments of many Americans and with the actions of the many American states and corporations that are already cutting GHG emissions.
Finding itself isolated, the American delegation reluctantly returned to the negotiating table—and, after an all-night session, a compromise deal was announced on December 10th.

The final pact is not quite the "historic agreement" some green groups claim, but it does, nonetheless, make progress in three broad areas. First, the signatories to Kyoto agreed on fiddly details essential for the implementation of the pact. For example, they accepted compliance rules that set out what happens if countries do not meet their targets. They also agreed on ways to improve the treaty's overly bureaucratic mechanism for rich countries to gain credits for reducing GHGs in developing ones and in former Soviet states.

Second, they agreed that future climate talks should take twin tracks. First, Kyoto signatories will now start negotiations on what binding emissions targets the rich countries of "Kyotoland" must accept for the second commitment period. These negotiations must be completed in time to ensure that there is no gap between the first round and what follows.

Second, everyone—including America—agreed to start talks on a possible UN climate pact that would include America and China. This is not as big a breakthrough as it might seem, for the American delegation insisted that mandatory emissions targets must not be part of these discussions. Even so, it represents progress of a sort, and it creates a UN process through which a post-Bush America could take on meaningful emissions targets.

The final, and largely overlooked, outcome of the conference may yet prove its most important: delegates agreed to promote carbon capture and sequestration technologies, and to get serious about adaptation to climate change.

Carbon sequestration matters because the world cannot simultaneously meet its energy needs and climate goals without developing technologies for using the vast global reserves of coal in ways that do not contribute to global warming.

Adaptation matters because even if future rounds of Kyoto succeed in bringing America on board, many aspects of global warming are already inevitable. The sea level, for example, will continue to rise for decades to come, with awkward consequences for much of humanity, especially in the poorest parts of the world.

The Montreal summit therefore deserves credit for bringing America back into the UN's climate negotiations. However, its enduring legacy may be greater still if it results in serious efforts around the world to adapt to the inevitable consequences of climate change.

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