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Another kick at the Kyoto can

US President George Bush's spurning of the Kyoto Protocol in late March was a very palpable hit to environmentalism, punching a sizeable hole in an already tattered accord. Eighty-four countries have agreed in principle to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to pre-1990 levels by the year 2012. Ratification by 55 signatories is needed, but only 33 have made their final vows, among them Azerbaijan, Bolivia, Cyprus and Uzbekistan: in short, virtually none of the industrialized Annex I nations, from whom the protocol requires immediate action.

Without the United States (which, with 4% of the world's population, emits 25% of all anthropogenic greenhouse gases) one might reasonably fear that the accord is dead. Some commentators have treated Bush's stance as a sustainable species of economic prudence.¹ Perhaps (just perhaps) it has the virtue of honesty, in contrast to the less-than-subtle foot-dragging of the Canadian government, whose environmentalist sincerity is cast into doubt by wrangling over carbon sinks and the trading of emission credits.

We didn't have our own lack of resolve on our minds when Bush's pronouncement sparked indignation here in Canada: "I oppose the Kyoto Protocol because it exempts 80 percent of the world, including major population centers such as China and India, from compliance, and would cause serious harm to the US economy."² Unadorned by regret or soothing talk of alternatives, this statement brought self-interest to a new pinnacle of legitimacy. Howling in outrage might make us feel better; if only we really were. Our CO₂ fossil fuel emissions rank 8th in the world.³ The agreement we signed in 1998 requires us to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 6% from 1990 levels; what we've managed so far is a 13.5% increase.⁴

International environment ministers will have another kick at the can when the UN climate change talks resume in

Bonn in July. However, hopes of ratification recede with talk of a new US proposal that would jettison the Kyoto accord in favour of a new deal, one that would not let developing countries off the hook but would allow the US to dangle more comfortably on theirs.⁵ After Bonn we could, most dishearteningly, have a new proposed agreement, with a new name. Whatever that turns out to be, the Canadian minister of the environment, David Anderson, proposes to take it back home for public consultation.

Spare us. Despite US recalcitrance (and the unresolved disputes that sank the Hague talks in November), we have no excuse in Canada or anywhere else to stall the implementation of the hard-won accord forged in Kyoto in 1997. Overconsumption is in no one's best interest. The sooner we face up to our responsibilities to global health⁶ and to future generations, the sooner we'll find ways for renewable energy and greener technologies to make a virtue of necessity. Let's also hope that the Bonn meeting is recognized for what it is: an opportunity to show international leadership by putting our good name on the dotted Kyoto line. — CMAJ

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