

Drew Christiansen, S.J.

# Beyond Kyoto: Equity in Global Climate Change Policy

**T**he Arctic ice pack is thinning; the Antarctic ice shelves are breaking up; glaciers are melting. Coral reefs are dying; coastal nations, like Bangladesh, are eroding; and islands, like the Maldives, are threatened with inundation. From California to Europe to the Himalayas, shrinking glaciers and less reliable snowpack threaten water resources. Polar bear habitat is diminishing. Countless species are migrating, and others are growing extinct. Global warming is no longer a computer forecast. It has become an incontrovertible fact.

More and more governments have become aware that climate change is a problem they must jointly address. British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who hosts the G-8 meeting in Gleneagles, Scotland, this coming July, has announced he will put global warming on the agenda. He has also suggested that if the United States expects the world's cooperation in fighting terrorism, it must join other nations in reducing the greenhouse gas emissions which are the principal cause of climate change. There will be heavy pressure for President Bush from other leaders to re-sign and ratify the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

From the perspective of Catholic Social Teaching, U.S. participation in a global climate policy is an imperative. Climate change is an issue affecting what the U.S. bishops in their 1991 pastoral statement *Renewing the Earth* called "the planetary common good" – the welfare of the Earth as a natural system. It is not a matter of one bioregion or ecosystem. It is a matter of the functioning of the whole natural and human environment on Earth: from atmosphere, to ocean circulation, to river systems, to animal habitat and human settlements and natural resources. Problems don't get much bigger than that.

The common good is the overarching principle of Catholic social teaching. Promoting the common good is the responsibility of every government, as well as establishing international mechanisms and transnational authorities to fulfill the unmet needs of "the universal common good," of which the planetary common good is a premier instance and a key responsibility of public officials everywhere. For that reason, U.S. nonparticipation in the Kyoto Protocol is a grave dereliction of responsibility. In saying this, I do not mean to single out the Bush Administration. Congress as a whole has been a major obstacle to U.S. participation

in the treaty. And the Clinton Administration, while it favored action, submitted the agreement for ratification only in its closing days and did little to create a climate of opinion among the American public in support of this international agreement. The failure of leadership belongs to the whole American political class.

## EQUITY IN CLIMATE POLICY

In addressing climate policy, there are two issues to deal with:

- (1) equity among nations in reducing greenhouse gas emissions; and
- (2) sacrifice in making adjustments of lifestyle to accomplish that end.

Equity concerns the fair distribution of burdens in global climate change policy. Kyoto recognized that it would be unfair to deprive poor nations of the opportunity for economic development through imposition of uniform emission standards. It also understood that the historic level of greenhouse gas emissions, and so current patterns of global warming, were due to the industrialization of the rich nations over the last century and a half. As a result, Kyoto crafted a compromise in which the tougher targets for reduction of greenhouse gases, especially carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), were imposed on developed countries, and developing countries were excluded from the first phase of reductions ending in 2012. This exemption applied even to the so-called "giants" – China, India and Brazil.

From the start, opponents of the treaty seized on the exemptions as supposedly being "unfair" to the U.S., to justify their rejection of the treaty. The rapid industrialization of the giants over the last decade has made the case for their inclusion within standard reduction limits stronger, but the exemption continues to make sense for the first phase. On average, Americans still produce six times the pollution per capita as Indians, and the U.S. remains the world's largest per capita producer of greenhouse gases. It is the U.S. self-exemption from the treaty rather than the first-phase exemption of the giants that is unfair. To be sure, in the next climate agreement, adjustments must be made for the increased pollution of Third World countries, but for now the true scandal is U.S. nonparticipation. Catholic social teaching has long held the right of poor nations to development and specified the obligations of justice and solidarity of rich nations to help in that development.

Kyoto exemplifies, though in a fairly modest way, a just international compact in the interest of development.

Equity is also a question we must address in domestic policy. It affects both responsibility for generating greenhouse gases and the costs of adjustment and remediation due to problems brought about by global warming. The chief way in which equity has arisen as an issue in the U.S. has to do with decreased air quality over the Northeast due to pollution from Midwestern power plants. But as the country tries to meet its obligations under Kyoto or a follow-up agreement, questions of relative responsibility for carbon emissions will have to be addressed. Accommodation will have to be made to states and localities which provide resources to other regions, but efforts need to be taken to see that all do their part.

California is an outstanding example. Though it has the nation's largest population and its largest number of autos on the road, its energy consumption is the lowest in the country, due to tough pollution laws. Montana has the highest levels of pollution per capita as a result of its role as a power producer, but it has not taken the steps to reduce pollution from its plants in the way California has done. In spreading the burdens of adjustment, California has a case to make for avoiding some further reduction, but Montana, despite its role as an energy exporter, could be expected to make far greater adjustments to meet new national goals.

### SACRIFICE AND MARKETS

A second set of moral issues arises around a favored, but half-hearted method of meeting emission reduction targets which allows developed economies to trade "carbon" (that is, pollution) with less-developed countries that have met their Kyoto targets. Russia, for example, has lots of clean-air credits to trade because of the collapse of the old, Soviet economy. The U.S. can buy those credits and put off remedying its own pollution problems to a future date. The idea is that payments will provide funding for sustainable development in poorer countries that have more than met their emission targets. The overall reductions would be the same as if all had done their assigned part.

Politicians prefer carbon trading because they don't have to regulate. Economists like it, because it seems an ingenious economic device to meet the Kyoto caps that doesn't resort to regulation. Businesses want it because in the short run they can avoid adjustments in the way they meet overall targets. Trading, however, allows polluters to buy their way out of responsible action to correct their own bad behavior, and delay makes any future adjustment more difficult.

Trading also prevents improving the rate of reduction needed to make a genuine difference in halting and eventually reversing global warming. By itself, Kyoto is a hesitant half-step toward controlling climate change. Even with Kyoto's limits, temperatures worldwide are expected to continue to rise rapidly. Eventually there will need to be a multifaceted policy of emission reduction including technological innovation, lifestyle changes and government regulation.

Fundamentally, the carbon market is flawed because it preserves an illusion that the U.S. and other developed nations can meet their obligations at negligible, or at least minimal, cost. It tries to avoid making sacrifices, whether in the form of technological adjustments, lifestyle changes or government regulation. There will be opportunities for developing new markets around less polluting, renewable energy sources; there may even be room on the margin for markets in emissions. But, responding to global warming demands adjustments in energy use, technology and lifestyles. Some will inevitably regard the costs demanded by these changes as painful "sacrifices," but they will only be the rightful payment for living beyond our means.

### LIFESTYLES FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

In 1991 Pope John Paul II wrote of the collective responsibility of affluent nations to support development in the Third World. This responsibility he said would involve "sacrificing the positions of income and of power enjoyed by the more developed economies." He added, it may also entail making "important changes in established lifestyles in order to limit the waste of environmental and human resources . . ." (*Centesimus annus*, 52). The same principle applies to the eco-development compact which is Kyoto.

We have to face up to paying the costs of greenhouse pollution. In the short run, they may look like sacrifices. In the long view, they are an overdue bill for an extravagant lifestyle and the down payment on a sustainable future for all the earth. ■



*Drew Christiansen, S. J. is associate editor of the Jesuits' national Catholic weekly **America**. He was chief staffer in the preparation of the U.S. Catholic Conference's environmental pastoral "Renewing the Earth" (1991) and designer of the bishops' environmental justice program. He has lectured on global warming and Catholic social teaching at the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, Yale University and the University of Notre Dame.*