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Thin-Air Syndrome

Last week in Marrakech, negotiators from 160 countries agreed to a legally-binding set of rules to enforce the Kyoto Protocol on so-called “greenhouse” gases. News reports say that after days of marathon talks, delirious negotiators exchanged “handshakes and hugs” over a late-night agreement on punishment for noncompliance.

A press release says our own government is “delighted” with the deal. Environment Minister David Anderson calls it “good for Canada and good for the environment.” The head of the EU delegation, Olivier Deleuze, boasted “the Kyoto Process is now irreversible.”

Kyoto will be the most costly economic restructuring we’ve attempted since gearing up to fight WWII. How do we know our leaders have a deep enough grasp of the science and economics to justify imposing these costs on us? The latest reassurances on this point comes from the Ontario Minister of the Environment in a report called “Air Quality and Climate Change: Moving Forward.”

The news release says: “Much has been written on the subject recently that may be confusing to the average person. This report seeks to demystify the science of climate change and explain the potential effects of greenhouse gases.”

Well that sounds promising. The report begins by claiming greenhouse gases “trap heat from the sun’s rays in our atmosphere. This heat in turn, naturally warms our planet.” Wow! To think, all these years scientists had it wrong, saying that greenhouse gases do not absorb incoming solar radiation. All those textbooks that tell us the sun warms the surface of the earth, and the outgoing infrared radiation is partly absorbed by greenhouse gases, now have to be rewritten. They have it backwards!

It goes on. “During the last several decades, things have heated up considerably.” Hmmm. Are they referring to the same atmosphere that they think absorbs the sun’s rays? Funny, the weather satellites that measure global tropospheric temperatures show no warming since 1979.

Then: “In a little more than 140 years, the Earth’s average temperature has risen by a full degree Celsius.” Really? The only record of global average surface temperature changes extending back to the 1850s is maintained by the Hadley Centre in the UK. It shows a net increase of 0.67 degrees C over the period, not 1 degree. And the average temperature in the decade 1936-45 was 0.4 degrees above that between 1856 and 1865, meaning two-thirds of the temperature increase occurred before the end of WWII, long before the big increases in fossil fuel use.

Then the report tells us that global warming means “severe weather events such as hurricanes, tornadoes, floods and drought, will occur more frequently.” And a paragraph later (in case you missed it the first time) Ontario will experience “more frequent severe weather events such as thunderstorms, ice storms, tornadoes, floods or droughts.”

Wait a second. My copy of the latest Great Big Report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says that (page 575) “climate models currently lack the spatial detail required to make confident projections” of extreme weather events like “thunderstorms, tornadoes, hail and lightning.” In fact none of them are simulated in climate models. And on page 573 it says: “we cannot reach any definitive conclusions concerning possible future increases in hail and lightning, and there is no information from AOGCMs [climate models] concerning future changes in tornado activity.”

So how is the Ontario government so sure that global warming will cause an increase in these things? And what’s that about more frequent floods *or* droughts in Ontario? One results from greatly increased precipitation, the other from greatly reduced precipitation. Which is it?

In truth, the kids who put this report together don’t have a clue. They paraphrased some jargon and junk from the Environment Canada Climate Change website. Then the Minister, who evidently doesn’t have a clue either, signed off on it, creating yet another piece of superficial and erroneous nonsense from an “official” source, increasing the confusion felt by the “average person.”

Why bother pointing all this out? Why pick on our overworked and undertrained leaders?

Because these are the same geniuses who just flew back from Marrakech after signing off on the new Kyoto rules. This disastrously expensive policy commitment is being undertaken on the basis of a pervasive ignorance, demonstrated by all levels of government, of the relevant science and economics.

Despite rumours to the contrary, the US Administration acted on the best technical advice available when it bailed out of the Kyoto Protocol. By contrast, the reports and websites produced by our provincial and federal governments show how shallow and flimsy is the thinking on which our involvement in this circus is based.

A month ago I was one of the presenters at a meeting of US government staff convened to discuss the costs of global warming policy options. Another presenter was an economist from a large consulting group in Australia, known around the world for their policy analysis work. I noticed that in their latest Kyoto simulations they assume that Canada does not ratify. I asked him if his group has some inside information.

“No,” he explained. “We ran the model with Canada ratifying but the US and Mexico staying out. We looked over the results and decided that Canadians are probably not prepared to commit economic suicide over this issue. So from now on we assume Canada won’t ratify.”

“And,” he added, “if anyone in your country is unclear on this point, I’d be happy to travel over to present a briefing on the subject.”

I told him that there’s little point. The federal government’s own Analysis and Modeling Group produced a report not long ago looking at the effects if Canada acts alone on Kyoto. By 2010 the potential sectoral output losses include: iron ore mining and truck assembly both down 30%; iron and steel making down 20%; rubber and plastics, automotive assembly, leather goods, clothing, electronics, non-electrical machinery, each down 15%; coal mining down 40-50%.

You'd think that would register on Ottawa, Queen's Park, and elsewhere, especially with a recession upon us. But then again you'd think that if the Province of Ontario wanted to produce a report "demystifying" the science of climate change they'd take the trouble to learn the science first.

You'd think. But a few weeks ago a government official explained to me that the global warming file is no longer about science or economics. He described it as a runaway train. "And," he added, "no one is willing to throw himself on the tracks to try and stop it." Everyone saw what happened to Bush. We just don't have leaders like that in Canada.

Instead, there they were in Marrakech, hugging and holding hands in a sleep-deprived stupor after two weeks of being locked in a meeting hall with green pressure groups and activist politicians from Europe.

There are a lot of reasons the Canadian dollar continues to crumble. But I wonder if it's just a coincidence that the latest slide began about the time Canada's delegation flew off to Marrakech.