

The Paris Agreement

Amid the clamour over climate change, I believe something significant is being overlooked – something that, if managed carefully, could be advantageous to the US and arguably to the rest of the world.

Last August, Professor Judith Curry published a short article of mine showing how the Paris Agreement exempted developing countries from any obligation to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions (<http://tiny.cc/z2z7iy>), a finding confirmed by this more detailed study by David Campbell, Professor of Law at Lancaster University School of Law, UK: <http://tiny.cc/w2w7iy>. (See footnote.)

If Campbell and I are right the implications are profound: countries responsible for some 65 percent of global GHG emissions (and for essentially the entire increase in emissions since 1990) are under no obligation to reduce them now or in the future, with only developed countries having to take action. And, as Russia and Japan seem not to be seriously interested, in practice that means only North America and Western Europe. Yet, although China alone is responsible for about 30 percent of emissions, North America and Western Europe are responsible for less than 25 percent. In other words, the major emission reductions demanded by many Western scientists are in practice impossible. It's an outcome that's a disaster for all involved in the climate debate: from anyone who believes emissions must be cut substantially and soon (because that's not going to happen) to anyone in the West who believes the whole thing is grossly exaggerated (because the Agreement commits her/his country to expensive and pointless action). It therefore completely sidesteps the toxic and seemingly endless debate between 'alarmists' and 'deniers'.

The negotiations reaching that conclusion were essentially a face off between the US and China – initially publicly exemplified by the US/China summit in November 2014 (<http://tiny.cc/davyjy>). And the US was outplayed – precisely the sort of situation Trump said he would rectify.

A recent report (<http://tiny.cc/03w7iy>) may provide an initial clue as to how he might do that. Responding to a question about Trump’s threat to “cancel” the Paris deal, Xie Zhenhua, described as “China’s veteran climate chief”, said: *“I believe a wise political leader should take policy stances that conform with global trends.”* Yet this is the same Xie Zhenhua who, reflecting direct and indirect evidence of Chinese political and scientific scepticism, has said (<http://tiny.cc/g6w7iy>), *“There are disputes in the scientific community. We have to have an open attitude to the scientific research. There’s an alternative view that climate change is caused by cyclical trends in nature itself.”* And that’s not so different from Trump’s recent comment (<http://tiny.cc/64y7iy>): *“I’m very open-minded. Nobody really knows. Look, I’m somebody that gets it, and nobody really knows”*.

But he went on to say, *“I do know this: Other countries are eating our lunch.”* He may well be right. And a way of resolving it might be, first, for the US to initiate or threaten to initiate the process of withdrawal from the Paris Agreement (probably by giving the one year’s notice required to withdraw from the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change), thereby triggering an inevitable international crisis. The US might then respond by putting its notice on hold pending the outcome of a USA/China summit at which the main topic would be the detailed determination of each country’s position on climate science – something that’s never seriously discussed at top level UN climate negotiations. The key

questions would be these: is mankind responsible for recent increases in atmospheric temperatures and, if so, should/can anything be done about it – and by whom?

I believe the outcome of such a meeting would open a lot of eyes and might lead to a more balanced and sensible global position on climate change. It certainly couldn't make things any worse than they currently are.

Robin Guenier: March 2017

Note: Professor Campbell's paper is now hidden behind an almost impenetrable paywall. However a pre-proof version (so far as I can see the only change is that the end-notes have been tidied up) can be accessed here: <http://tiny.cc/1ixtjy>

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