

CLIMATE CHANGE



Plenty of cigarettes but no cars in old Kyoto

Postmodern or Postkyotan?

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Introduction: another step for the international community

Everybody now knows that humans must reduce some half dozen global greenhouse gas emissions, most notably carbon dioxide or CO₂ – or else. Most people will also be familiar with the Japanese city of Kyoto and the infamous too soft for some and too hard for others soft Protocol to which it gave its name – drafted in 1997 but not fully ratified until 2005. At that point, however, almost 40 developed (and so-called transitioning) economies committed to modest average emission cuts of some 5% by the end of the Protocol's first committal period in 2012. Despite slow gestation and a tentative beginning, despite the fact that the Protocol is still an evolving political instrument, despite the fact the ultimate bearing of the Protocol, finished or unfinished, remains unknown, this extended seven eight year moment between 1997 and 2005 in world history will be a truly defining one.

The title of this piece is intended to suggest this, though I will not get to the postmodern and postkyotan stand off until the discussion nears its end. Here I just want to say that it not easy to make a case for an iconic or historic moment that is still unfolding. Every thing is little uncertain. There is a little urgency, however, as we may, and it is only a may, be dealing with another “end of history” rather different to the happy fantasy conjured by Francis Fukuyama some 15 years ago in *End of History and the Last Man*. Fukuyama's “end” turned on the achievement of the (near) perfection that global capitalism and liberal democracy were. If climate change is our undoing it will be as result of something less than perfection, indeed of failure. And “end” will be “end” in a more literal and brutal sense. For that reason, the identification or turning points or iconic moments must happen sooner rather than later: we may never have the perspective afforded by the distant and satisfied

retrospective glances made possible by Fukuyama's optimism. So if we do not write the history now, it may never be written and the **Kyoto Protocol** will become an altogether unheralded defining moment. Under this doomsday scenario, claims must be staked early, or not at all.

Of course, in the next few decades we may be lucky, we may bring global warming and climate change under control – and let's hope we do... and that 200,000 year story of Homo sapiens continues for a while longer. Even then, however, the **Kyoto Protocol** will stand out like a beacon above the surrounding forgettable dross of late 20th century corporate mergers and proliferating free-trade agreements facilitated by greed driven processes of globalisation. The **Protocol** will, in fact, be a crucial part of that turn in fortunes and it will stand out as the moment in which humans cut through thickets of choking weed and greed and courageously forged just enough international common cause to seize a last chance. Perhaps we not approaching an end of history, but very close to last chances we certainly are.

The **Protocol** is, of course not a free standing international treaty or instrument. Rather, it forms a part of the earlier **United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change** (UNFCCC) negotiated as part of the **UN Conference on Development and the Environment** (better known as the **Earth Summit**) in 1992. The **Kyoto Protocol** shares the overarching objectives as well as administrative structures of its parent instrument or convention. What's so special about the **Protocol** and why was its birth so protracted?

The answer is essentially the same for both questions. **Kyoto** takes international governance of the global environment in general and climate change management in particular, a very significant, even if as yet insufficient, step forward. Prior to 2005 when the Protocol eventually came into force, the UNFCCC remained incomplete: little more than well-intended appeal and preparatory work waiting for something more. It either made no firm or specific commitments or, where it did, these related to easy procedural objectives – common ways of measuring, monitoring, reporting on greenhouse problems were established.

The **Convention** promised a great deal but did not yet make the necessary enforceable demands. With only a few limited exceptions – most notably the **Montreal Protocol**¹ – it seems fair to say that the international community has lacked the shared will and clarity of purpose to take this extra step. This changes in our extended moment, between the years 1997 and 2005 and while there is still a long way to go, the **Kyoto Protocol** brings globally enforceable and specific nation-by-nation emission reduction targets. This is the further step it takes and it is also, in a sense, a first step. It now seems fair to say that the world or a large enough part of it has seen the writing on the wall, has taken a critical first step towards understanding that a finite planet needs effective political protection from a now global growth economy driven by consumer impulse and imaginaries of limitlessness. Furthermore, that understanding has moved beyond the limited circles of science and environmental activism and is now, by way of a million conduits drifting into the citizen imagination.

Predictably enough, all but the most far sighted corporate interests and those stretches of the of state they control are, predictably enough, digging in or strategically regrouping becoming last minute champions of carbon trading or

¹ The Montreal Protocol successfully and quickly brought the menace of ozone depletion under control. Negotiated in 1987 and fully ratified within 15 months, it was hailed by Kofi Annan as the UN's "most successful international treaty to date." But the control of ozone depleting chemicals did not challenge the central drives of the modern industrial economy.

non-existent clean coal or non-existent safe nuclear plant. As of this fraught, extended, complex and still inconclusive moment, however, we live in **postkyotan** times, in a **postkyotan** world. Australia's not quite there yet and nor the US - the two developed nations that have not ratified Kyoto. But that will not last and obdurate voices of refusal in both nations will be swept aside as an increasingly angry planet increasingly alarms voters... Nothing is resolved at that point. Rather, a new struggle unmistakably begins. But it is by no means assured of success – we can only guess at the damage already done to the planet and the proponents of free markets, libertarian dreaming and the imaginaries of limitlessness are not done yet.



Conflicting imperatives

If the UN has been slow and hesitant in responding to climate change and the **Kyoto Protocol** itself remains a tentative document in need of more commitment and resolve, then this is not difficult to explain: the organisation remains torn between the two great imperatives of our time gestured at above: on the one hand, ongoing economic growth and development driven by global markets imaginaries of limitlessness; on the other, global environmental protection increasingly based on an awareness that the earth has limits define less by size than by its own life. An enormous amount of the UN's work over the past two or three decades struggles to effect reconciliation between these imperatives. But it isn't easy and UN discussion and documentation are often like endless dances of deferral in which one is never quite sure who is leading. One minute it is the flash dancing global economy and the next, it is Earth, slower, but dancing surely to its own often still secret epochal rhythms.

Nowhere is this more apparent than at that other great recent UN moment noted above – the **Earth Summit**. The main outcome of this famous conference was a 900 page document – **Agenda 21**. Read that and you will quickly discover that the event's official name was wrong. It was not the **UN Conference on Environment and Development** but, at that stage, the **UN Conference on Development and the Environment**. That was the order once you got inside the cover. Perhaps the contending economic and environment lobbies negotiated a deal – one got the title and front cover while the other got the insides and the substance....

In the Protocol, however, one senses movement: it **begins** the work of lifting international environmental treaty making, if not the UN as a whole, above this irresolution and uncertainty, above the level of well-intended cover pages or empty theatrical display. **One step forward and two steps back becomes two steps forward and one step back**. That is to say, again, it begins to define specific obligations that its parties deem legally binding. And the difference between UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol can be seen directly not just in the letter of the documents but also indirectly in the time taken for draft instruments to be ratified as working law: two years in the former case, eight in the latter. Everyone understood that Kyoto was asking for more, that it was a kind of watershed and that its firmer more specific commitments took longer to deliver accordingly. Some, like Australia

and the US, refused altogether. When and if future humans look back on these times, these historically shameful acts of refusal will be read as evidence of Kyoto's authenticity.

Of course other factors were also involved in this slow progress. For most of the developed world, the costs of action were immediate and weighed against benefits that were remote and could be made to appear uncertain. Also the world's biggest polluters – who had to foot the larger part of the global emissions control bill – were, naturally enough, its economic and political heavy weights. (See Figure 1 – Australia, which is not shown, is right up there with the US in per capita terms.) Getting and consuming lots of fossil fuels isn't a bad indicator of national wealth and power. The big polluters could and, in the case of the US after the election of Bush in 2001, again, did make their resistance felt. It is hard to imagine more difficult circumstances in which to negotiate a demanding and fair international treaty or more destructive behaviour than that exhibited by Australia: first holding out for unjustifiable concessions, then backing out when Bush was elected anyway. The Australian Government revealed itself for what it was. not their grandmothers this time, but their grandchildren for a mess of pottage.

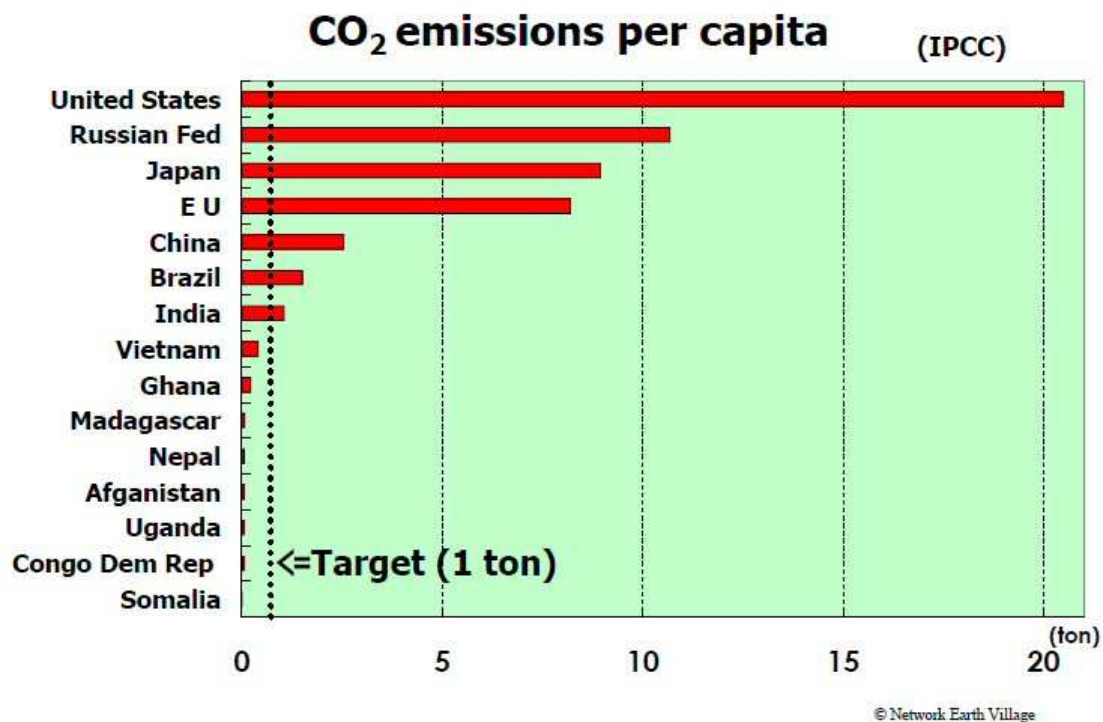


Figure 1. Prepared in 2005 and based on IPCC data (1 ton of CO₂ = 0.27 tons of carbon)

CO₂ per capita emissions – www.koshland-science-museum.org

More important things to do

Finally, underscoring and compounding these difficulties, the whole world and particularly the developed world had much more important things to do: it was pre-

occupied with different globalising projects. It was making a global economy, heroically clearing the world of barriers to free trade so that more stuff could flow more quickly freely around the Earth. How could saving the planet stack up against that manly and money making enterprise? This was a tough environment in which to propose new regulation of any kind – never mind regulation that was global, potentially very tough and radically strategic. How could the still emerging transnational political economy, still flexing and testing its global muscle and centred the greatest marketising and market-extending project of all time – how could this energetic global colossus not cast its shadow over the culture of the UN. And over that lesser globe made of earth and air and water? I mean, what are these homespun things compared to a Porsche, a penthouse or private jet? No wonder it was an uphill battle for **Kyoto** – a miracle that it happened at all really.

A year or so after the **Kyoto Protocol** finally became law in 2005, **The Stern Review**, would declare climate change the greatest market failure the world has known. In the light of Stern's brave acknowledgement, we can now reappraise the conduct of the world's movers and shakers while they haggled and filibustered over the costs of climate change at Kyoto and elsewhere for a decade or more: they were too busy making and extending market failure to worry about correcting it. And this is also a very useful perspective from which to begin a richer assessment of the meaning Kyoto: it is a brave attempt to steer the stampeding herd away from failure's unforgiving cliff.

Once again, US and Australia were the most obdurate and bloody-minded here, the keenest to rush the herd to failure. But this should not be taken to mean that virtue prevailed elsewhere. On both sides of the developed/developing world divide, many of those willing to make small concessions to climate change, were much more concerned about global free trade than about global warming. The market's greatest failure was unfolding before a world on the way to becoming seriously myopic – blind even the notion of market failure. Some even began to deny that such a thing was a possible. Free market outcomes, even if they did result in planetary destruction, were right because individual consumers were sovereign.



Katrina

The real significance of Kyoto

Yes, again, it could have been quicker, more encompassing and stronger. Nor is it clear yet what the end of the **Protocol's** first commitment period in 2012 will bring in terms of actual performance – or whether the second commitment period will improve significantly on the first.

The **EU** is promising much more (60% reductions by mid century) and electoral defeat for Bush and Howard will also be a great help. All of that said, the difficult birth and the unwelcoming world acknowledged, the **Kyoto Protocol** will, I want to say again, come to be seen as a watershed in world history. At some point in time, and if time is on our side, both the occasion and the city that hosted it will almost certainly become famous or historic icons.

If the **Protocol** does the work it is supposed to do, it will, again, mark a brighter next chapter in the 200,000 year story of *Homo sapiens*. If not, it will stand as history's greatest missed chance and the beginning of epic decline. It is going to be a very – significant event either way. To add yet further uncertainty, if Kyoto proves to be a decisive moment in a tragedy, then death may come suddenly and abruptly or it may be or slow, drawn out over centuries and gradual. We just don't know and those interested in possible endings should read James Lovelock's 2006 book, *The Revenge of Gaia*. But we are almost certainly in death's jaws one way or another. And we are about either to escape or be swallowed – in single quick gulp or chewed slowly first.

Why all of this uncertainty? Because the outcome depends on two factors one of which now falls right outside of our control and other of which lies only just within it. The second is Kyoto itself and the way the instrument develops. That makes **Kyoto** significant every which way.

The uncontrollable relates to features of the world's climate system we know too little about. Have we already, as Lovelock fears, triggered irreversible positive feedback climate change mechanisms that will now bring about biological holocaust and either quick or slow death? The scientific jury is still out on this question and this, incidentally, is where scientific uncertainty lives. John Howard still wants us to believe that scientists are arguing about whether or not bad things will happen as temperatures rise. At the cutting edge of climate science, that's no longer an issue. *The only interesting argument is not about bad but about how bad*: are we already heading down a path of unavoidable global catastrophe? Only seriously disordered thought processes would use that uncertainty as a reason for taking it easy, for refusing even the minimal controls so far sought by Kyoto. And that's how it is with our great leader and his many eager lieutenants: disordered thought processes.

If we have run out of luck, it is only a question of how long the end game will be, how quickly we run out of civilisation and how long historians survive to tell the story, any story for that matter. Leaving the romance of time capsules aside, our stories cannot outlive us. If the future is not one of sudden collapse but slow decline, then Kyoto's story will become that of history's greatest missed chance. That's about as important as a marker can be. It may not be a happy story, but many like to think it's an important one.

On the other hand, if Lovelock and other pessimists are wrong, if we have not yet run out of luck, then everything depends on how far we push the luck we still have left. It depends on what we do with the rapidly receding opportunity that the **Kyoto Protocol** now is or might be. Here, again, we have some control – if we can act as a "we", as humans facing common dangers. If we embrace and enhance the **Protocol**, stop dithering, stop messing too much with the climate, then we can lay claim to a brighter future. If we continue to stall and haggle and resist as we have been, then today's chance will quickly become tomorrow's squandered opportunity. Instead of leaping from death's jaws, we hang around waiting for them to swallow us - whole or chewed to bits first. We will, in this way, deliver ourselves to those forces over which we have no control – the positive feedback loops that taking temperature control right out of our hands.

Either way, **Kyoto** will stand as the place and the extended moment in which a last chance was either seized or let slip: "We just made it!" or "We blew it!", there and then – "there" being **Kyoto** and "then" being, let's say, again, that small window of opportunity that stretches from the **Kyoto Conference** in 1997 and stretches over a long decade to 2007 or 2008 when the **Protocol's** second commitment round will be

finally settled. This is **Postkyoto's** first chapter and never did so big a story with such momentous outcomes have such uncertain beginnings.



Foreign tongues?

If we get it right, we will be able to say that we humans or, enough of us, heard the planet speaking at that moment with a new clarity. We realised that it was not infinite, that occupation and use of it needed to be more respectful and careful. We, “we” being more than handful of scruffy scientists and activists, saw that we could not endlessly jockey for or voraciously consume its bounty in the hope that the party could go on forever or that market signals would tell us when it was time to stop or slow down and redirect us to another planet.

We listened with the new ears of **postkyotan being** to the planet’s complex language and understood just enough to realise brittle abstractions and limited vocabulary of price signals missed much of the story. The market could not register the soft sound of melting ice, the softer sound still of rain not falling, of dry earth crumbling and birds falling silent as they did in Rachel Carson’s forlorn spring. But now it was worse: not just birds, but spring itself and the rhythmic beat of ordered seasons were becoming indistinct too.

We began to realise that there were points at which human enterprise had to defer unconditionally to the planet, to its biophysical and ecological limits. We realised that signs needed to be erected saying: “Do not go here” or “Do not venture beyond this point”. And then, because there were enough of us, the idea of political order and authority recovered sufficiently after several decades of surrender to market madness. Someone had to work out where signs were needed, then erect and police them and that was work that could not be privatised. It all become a bit easier later when children were taught to listen to the language of the earth at school, life skills were redefined and **postkyotan** became common second language. That’s the happy scenario.

In the unhappy scenario, these things do not happen. We have been seriously disabled by the brutally simple idioms of the market and its language of price signals. Not enough of us hear or understand the planet’s distress. Hardly anyone speaks **postkyotan**. So we don’t stop and nor do we manage to resuscitate the democratic state, re-positioning it where we need it most: between human life and devastating market failure. When we begin to see markets fail we create more markets to fix them because, lacking all the senses we need, our repertoire of problem-solving responses is sorely diminished as well. A round of applause for neo-liberals and new labour. Both sides worked hard at this paralysis and both deserve credit equally. Their leaders, speaking only the blunt semaphore of price signals, bring short-lived unequal pleasures but otherwise only flood and fire, dust and drought and disordered seasons. What else is there to say?

Only that the names “Australia” and the “US” will figure prominently in this story as trend setters. Both give new meaning to or, should we say restore the old meaning

of “philistine”. Has anyone seen a photo or film clip of Senator Hill cheering when he successfully extracted concessions at Kyoto at the expense of both a fragile planet and the fragile but historic showing of international solidarity at the conference? How he and his team must have glowed with pride and triumph: “Fuck the world, and Fuck the planet.... Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oi, Oi Oi”.



A part of something bigger ...

Postmodern or postkyotan

In a not too distant future in which we are giving thanks, expressing our exhausted and last regrets, or something in between, we might, as suggested above, talk about our world and times as “**postkyotan**”. The **Kyoto Protocol**, as we look back on it, will, very likely, represent the world’s most important attempt to preserve a hospitable global climate and relatively civilised social order. In a few decades, perhaps less, we will know how successful that bid spanning some 15 years across the turn of millennium has been. Hopefully, very successful and hopefully the term postkyotan will apply to a world of long thanks giving rather than exhausted regret – whether short or long. We searched **Google** and found no matches for it. So we want to claim it and christen, not just this part of our website, but the epoch the world has just entered. **Postkyotan**.

It would be good, too, if the term took its place in our philosophical as well as historical lexicon along side so many other “posts” and, more specifically, as a rival for **postmodern** and for the cultural mood of indulgent disorientation that term conjures up. If we are lucky, **postkyotan** will affirm a different transition from the modern and a different destination. That is to say, the transition to a **postkyotan** world also takes us beyond modernity, beyond its complacent humanism, its grand enlightenment and, above all, perhaps, beyond its ambitious engineering. But it does not take us to the incoherently self-denying, subject-free yet somehow idiotically libertarian, zone of **postmodernity**. Rather, **postkyotan** refers to a world that knows itself to be lost, to have outreached itself and to have very nearly used up its last chance. And it is humbled by that fact. **Postkyoto** is downbeat in all of these ways: it is not a loss that celebrates itself, monumentalises its own disorientation by styling itself a fashionable critical philosophy and the criticism of all criticism.

For **postkyotans** it is more a question of recalibrating modernity – downsizing rather than radically denying the claims of reason. In a more extended argument I have said that it is, in part, a matter of returning abstract humans to their bodies. Enlightenment and human purpose survive in the **postkyotan** world but on a more modest scale and perhaps also in a chastened mood: this is a world able to say, “we were too clever by half” or “we thought too much of ourselves and too little of everything else”. But, crucially, it remains a world of thinking and acting subjects – fallible, fragile and emergent this time. Limited purpose, limited freedom and limited capacity to forge destiny. The stars had to be aligned or, rather, planetary climate conditions had to be right first.

In the **postkyotan** world humans come to understand they are something - not everything as modernity might have it and not nothing as postmodern critique often implies. **Postkyotans** understand themselves as a part of something, a part even of everything, but always just a part and an anchored, embodied part at that. And, in that world, engineering, whether civil, chemical, electrical or genetic, is less ambitious, too. The new ***homo faber***, or tool maker, expresses gratitude for the world as it is given – for his or her deep immersion in air and water and earth – before rushing to improve on it. The human world is, as we speak, rethinking its part and place and negotiating with itself about its direction. And the choice has become pretty stark: something that works or something that doesn't. **Postkyoto** is the space of that working out and, at www.citizenonline.org, we want to do more than watch.