



Comment

Opponents on thin ice

a global thaw on climate change

'According to a new UN report, the global warming outlook is much worse than originally predicted. Which is pretty bad when they originally predicted it would destroy the planet.' – Jay Leno

While climate change may still be grist for late-night comedians, this humour is starting to be replaced by more serious debate, dialogue and acceptance around the world. This is due, in no small part, to the unequivocal conclusion in the most recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that global warming is upon us and that it is caused, to a virtual certainty, by our use of fossil fuels.

The IPCC is not just another group of academics issuing a press release – the report was produced by some 1200 authors from 130 countries. The IPCC report follows the 700-page report by former chief World Bank economist Nicholas Stern, who cautioned that climate change could 'create risks of major disruption to economic and social activity'.

These major intellectual works coincide with a significant climate shift inside the United States and a continued proactive approach in Europe. Germany has made climate change a key theme for both its EU presidency and G8 presidency, and in January European Commission President José Manuel Barroso called for a new 'post-industrial revolution' to reduce CO₂ emissions. In the US, the new Democrat-controlled Congress has convened a number of hearings on the climate issue with competing legislative proposals in the works.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi wants to create a Select Committee on Global Warming and Energy Independence, in an effort to bypass institutional barriers to action. The Administration also seems to be warming up as President Bush mentioned the need 'to confront the serious challenge of global climate change' in his State of the Union message. In a speech where every word and phrase is carefully measured, this seemingly minimal mention of climate change speaks volumes. The Bush Administration even recently agreed to propose to list the polar bear as a threatened species

because of the potential loss of ice habitat. While the US has rejected the Kyoto mechanism, it did initiate the Asia Pacific Partnership (APP), an initiative focusing on GHG intensity reductions and technology transfer which even includes a task force on distributed generation. Major Asian players such as China, India and Japan are hedging their bets by supporting both Kyoto and the APP.

Big business also seems to be warming up to the reality. ExxonMobil, for example, seems to be re-thinking its public views on the issue based on the comments of a company executive in response to the IPCC report that 'there is no question that human activity is the source of carbon dioxide emissions.'

Because creating and delivering power is the leading contributor to global CO₂ emissions, any proposed solution must address the question of how to meet electricity demand. With commercial carbon capture and storage technology still many years off into the future, the real answer lies in efficiency improvements. DE offers an efficient suite of readily available technology that can provide the greatest 'bang per buck' for investments in reducing emissions. We need to change the current existing regulatory mechanisms which reward inefficiency and over-reliance on an outdated centralized generation model.

With things heating up on the climate issue, the glacial pace of progress will most certainly accelerate, with dialogue and debate leading to understanding, consensus and ultimately action. There is a saying that no legislation gets passed without a crisis or consensus. It looks like we are starting to have a little of both.

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