

China's Greenhouse Response

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In a few days the 6th Conference of the Parties to the Framework Convention on Climate Change will reconvene, after it collapsed last November. It will attempt to get at least 55 countries, which are responsible for at least 55% of the industrialised world's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, to agree to ratify the Kyoto Protocol.

The principal reason given by US President George Bush for withdrawing from the Kyoto Protocol is that developing countries such as China are not Parties. Australia's Foreign Affairs and Industry Ministers have echoed that position.

However, these politicians must all be aware that the Convention is based on the recognition that the developed countries are responsible for the majority of GHG emissions to date and are by far the largest per capita emitters. For this reason, China and other developing countries are not required meet emission reduction targets.

Recently, separate data collections by the Energy Information Administration of the US Department of Energy and by BP have revealed that China's GHG emissions from burning and flaring fossil fuels have dropped steadily for the past three consecutive years. Yet, throughout the 1990s, China's economic growth has ranged between 7 and 11 per cent per annum. In contrast, Australia's GHG emissions from fossil fuels have increased steadily throughout the 1990s.

It appears that China's emission reductions are being achieved without fanfare as a by-product of its goals of reducing air pollution, making industry more efficient, and controlling population growth. Specifically:

- o Several major cities are replacing coal with natural gas as a fuel for domestic space heating and hot water.
- o Energy conservation laws, enacted in 1997, are being applied rigorously to industry. As a result efficient, energy-using equipment and industrial processes are gradually being introduced, although, as in Australia, there is still a huge potential for cost-effective improvements.
- o Subsidies to the production and use of fossil fuels are being phased out.

Infrastructure and institutions are now being implemented which will allow emission reductions to continue over the next decade. New underground railway track is being constructed in several major cities, notably Shanghai, Beijing, and shortly Chengdu. Shanghai will also build a Maglev (a very fast magnetic levitation train) to join the new Pudong international airport to the subway system, and several light rail lines on existing

streets. In addition, mandatory improvements in the fuel efficiency of motor vehicles are being planned.

In my view the above technological, economic and institutional improvements give China the capacity to reduce GHG emissions to below its 1990 level before 2008, while continuing to grow rapidly in economic terms. If it continues in this path, China will soon have a far more efficient industrial sector and better, more livable cities, than in 1990.

However, it must be acknowledged that there is a countervailing trend, which appears to arise from the massive impact on China of advertising and mass media promoting the consumption society, American style.

Car ownership is growing at about 15% p.a. in major Chinese cities and car use is being encouraged by the construction of concentric rings of urban freeways and by allowing cars to park in bicycle lanes. Cyclists, particularly vulnerable at intersections, are said to be suffering increasing deaths and injuries.

The development of new urban areas, such as Pudong in Shanghai, is beginning to foster a kind of urban sprawl. While all except the rich will continue to live in high-rise apartment buildings, many such buildings in the new areas on the urban fringes are now separated from work, educational institutes and shopping centres by distances too great for cycling.

China is poised on a knife-edge, between the contradictory goals of sustainable development and American-style consumption patterns. The long-term outcome could well be decided by the examples it receives from western countries. The failure of the USA and (so far) Australia to ratify the Kyoto Protocol are sending China and other rapidly developing countries entirely the wrong message.

Both Australia and China have potentially much to learn from each other with regard to reducing GHG emissions. In preparing its bid for the 2008 Olympics, Beijing is building on the environmental innovations of Sydney 2000. Australia could potentially expand greatly its exports of renewable energy systems to China. Now that China is beginning to reduce air pollution, solar hot water and solar electricity are once more becoming options.

The factor limiting enhanced cooperation with China for mutual benefit in sustainable development is, I believe, Australia's loss of international credibility in the Kyoto Protocol negotiations. Like the USA, Australia is widely seen as making special pleading to protect its fossil fuel and aluminium industries, against the global common good.
