

# Light at the end of the tunnel

An emphatic and clear status report on global warming opens the way for action — presenting new risks.

The release of the 2007 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) last Friday marks an important milestone (see pages 578–585 and 595–598). Following the scientific consensus that has been apparent for some time, a solid political consensus that acknowledges the problem finally seems to be within reach. But achieving this outcome brings its own risks.

Until quite recently (perhaps even until last week), the general global narrative of the great climate-change debate has been deceptively straightforward. The climate-science community, together with the entire environmental movement and a broad alliance of opinion leaders ranging from Greenpeace and Ralph Nader to Senator John McCain and many US evangelical Christians, has been advocating meaningful action to curtail greenhouse-gas emissions. This requirement has been disputed by a collection of money-men and some isolated scientists, in alliance with the current president of the United States and a handful of like-minded ideologues such as Australia's prime minister John Howard.

The IPCC report, released in Paris, has served a useful purpose in removing the last ground from under the climate-change sceptics' feet, leaving them looking marooned and ridiculous. However, this predicament was already clear enough. Opinion in business circles, in particular, has moved on. A report released on 19 January by Citigroup, *Climatic Consequences* — the sort of eloquently written, big-picture stuff that the well-informed chief executive reads on a Sunday afternoon — states even more firmly than the IPCC that anthropogenic climate change is a fact that world governments are moving to confront. It leaves no question at all that large businesses need to get to grips with this situation — something that many of them are already doing.

## Tough choices

So then, the enemy is vanquished and the victors can rejoice? Hardly. In fact, the pending retreat from the stage of the president of the United States and his allies leaves those who do acknowledge the severity of the problem facing an even greater challenge than before. The world now broadly accepts that we have a problem, if not a crisis. So what is to be done?

The policy choices that lie ahead are more daunting than political leaders (or the media) have thus far been ready to acknowledge. In a sense, twenty years of frustrating trench-warfare with the sceptics has prevented a rational discussion about what needs to be done from even taking place.

At present, the political response to the situation is, in large part, incongruous. We need to restrict emissions in the developed world, and some steps are being undertaken to do just that, chiefly through the much-maligned Kyoto Protocol. We need to develop clean energy sources, and these are being pushed ahead quite rapidly, although each one — nuclear power, biofuels, wind power and hydropower, for example — creates its own environmental battlefield. Steps are

also being taken to build systems for large-scale carbon capture and storage, and to improve the efficiency with which energy is used (see pages 586–591).

The trouble is, none of this is even close to being sufficient to meet the challenge. Hybrid cars are being purchased (and often allow their lucky drivers special access to empty highway lanes). David Cameron, the leader of Britain's Conservative Party, has sought planning permission to erect a wind turbine in his back garden. And Pink Floyd and Pearl Jam have declared that their most recent world tours would be 'carbon neutral'. But we are all vaguely aware that all of this is nowhere near enough.

## Economic sacrifice

Even the most progressive governments continue to put the issue of climate change on the back seat behind their fundamental commitment to strong economic growth, which is needed to ensure political survival (in developed countries) and to enable human dignity (in developing countries). So in a typical European nation, for example, governments are calling for strenuous emissions cuts while also planning airport expansions that anticipate a further tripling over the next twenty years of air travel — the fastest-growing source of emissions, and one not capped by the Kyoto Protocol.

The fundamental difficulty here is that it has been politically impossible to accept that fighting global warming may involve some economic sacrifice, at least while the sceptics were in the picture. As these are vanquished, it becomes possible — and indeed necessary — to start the discussion.

Similarly, it has been hard to talk about actions that need to be taken to mitigate the damage already certain to be caused by climate change and associated rises in the sea level, as such steps were regarded as a capitulation to those who just want to keep emitting greenhouse gases. This is no longer the case (see page 597). Mitigation, which can take many forms ranging from the Thames Barrier in London to the introduction of drought-resistant crop strains in the Sahel and the establishment of a proposed climate-change adaptation fund, needs to be squarely on the agenda, alongside emissions cuts.

A similar relaxation arises with regard to revised negotiations for the second stage of the Kyoto Protocol. There is a case for opening the second phase beyond a simple extension of the cap-and-trade proposals that made up the core of the first. US President George W. Bush will remain a participant in such negotiations until the end of 2008. But even before then, talks should include all the options open to a planet that is now ready, at last, to acknowledge the fix it is in. ■

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