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The Kyoto Protocol: A Guide and Assessment

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The Kyoto Protocol and the events leading to it are important for all those interested in global climate change and international environmental regulation. Grubb has been actively involved in the process, including having been one of the lead authors of chapters 2, 3, 8, and 10 of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report on socio-economic aspects (Bruce, Hoesung and Haites, 1996). Perhaps there should then be no surprise that this book regards the Protocol as possibly 'the most profound and important global agreement of the late twentieth century' (xxxiii). However, this general optimism should be tempered by some of the material presented, and some which is absent.

On opening the book President Kennedy is quoted extolling the virtues of realising the planet is small, future generations are to be cherished and we are but mortals. During the technocentric optimism of the 1950s and early 1960s a common belief was that humans would be able to overcome the vagaries of Nature such as weather. As Patterson (1996: 24) notes, President Kennedy addressed the UN General Assembly in 1961 proposing international co-operation to eventually achieve 'weather control'. Apparently, 'geoengineering' our climate remains part of the American dream with serious consideration being given to 'smart mirrors' in space and seeding the oceans with iron to sequester carbon (Nordhaus, 1994: 80–81). The Kyoto Protocol may, like political speeches, prove to be double-sided.

The authors highlight the role of the US. As the major per capita carbon source, the US has proven influential in the climate change debate and has been responsible for a general weakening of international commitments. US industry was opposed to the whole process and 'threw probably up to \$100 million into fighting it' (p. 112). Before negotiations on the Framework Convention on Climate Change were into full swing the general call was for reductions of carbon dioxide by 20 to 30 per cent from levels in the early 1980s. After a decade of negotiation the stated aim of the Kyoto Protocol is for an aggregate reduction of 5% in CO₂ equivalent emissions over 1990 levels by Annex I countries (i.e. industrialised countries undertaking the commitment) at sometime between 2008 and 2012. The US achieved its main policy objective of flexibility and 'got virtually everything it wanted' (p. 112).

The authors link this desire for flexibility directly to general equilibrium models that focus upon economic efficiency as achieving least cost control. This should then have been tied into the overview provided on the failings of economic models. Unfortunately this overview is relegated to an appendix in small font, at the back of the book, sandwiched between the full text of the Protocol and a technical discussion on international trade. The appendix covers a range of key economic debates which, given Grubb's contribution to the IPCC report, has added significance. For example, here is a brief discussion of the high profile conflict over reporting the monetary value of lives lost as differentiated by income. This resulted in one American or European life equalling fifteen Chinese or Indian lives. The political outfall from this incident may mean the complete avoidance of monetary benefit assessment in the IPCC third assessment report, although this may not result in any

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greater balance in coverage. The neglect of 'social dimensions' in the Working Group III report of the second assessment was blatant because mainstream economists dominated. A greater and more explicit exploration of these issues seems important given the central role of economics in both the US position and the favoured control mechanism (tradable permits).

As the authors state 'the deeper one digs, the more searching are the questions that arise about the most basic assumptions embodied in conventional economic analysis' (p. 323). Yet, that the Kyoto Protocol is placed to promote economic instruments founded upon that same theory is something the authors never explore. In fact they see one of the fundamental achievements of the Protocol as advancing the debate on economic instruments, from whether to adopt them to how they should be implemented (xliv).

The specific commitments of the Protocol are noted by the authors to be modest in terms of both environmental and economic impacts. They show these will neither halt global emissions growth, nor have a discernible impact on economic growth. Yet even this moderate proposal may fail because the Protocol will be unsustainable without US participation between 2000–2004 (p. 276), and this is far from certain given business opposition, internal political divisions (e.g., Senate vs. White House), and Presidential elections. Achieving the modest Kyoto commitments will be difficult for many countries because of the lack of positive action being planned. As the Director of long-term co-operation and policy analysis for the International Energy Agency has stated: 'Our projection indicates that unless substantial new policies to promote climate-friendly technologies are adopted to reduce CO₂ emissions, the Kyoto commitments will not be met by OECD countries in the period 2008 to 2012' (Bourdair, 1999: 37). So the general air of great achievement and optimism expressed by the authors must largely be based upon the prospect that this is the first step, and, if all goes well, some decades down the road, this may prove a useful control mechanism.

Overall this book is a useful guide to a complex treaty and how it might work. Inevitably discussing the details of achieving the Protocol means the text is rather dry in places, and, presumably because of the proximity of the lead author to the process, there is also an over-optimistic tone to the discussion. Ignoring these aspects of the presentation the book provides a considerable amount of information on the process of argument amongst vested interest groups and nations, and will be useful as a source for those interested in political science and/or political economy. The book is informative and a useful reference point.

Clearly, a decade of negotiation has achieved a legal and economic system which is difficult to interpret and as a result where it may take us is hard to predict. According to the authors, if it fails to be ratified or effectively enforced this will destroy foreseeable chances of controlling greenhouse gas emissions. Unfortunately, if it succeeds the prospects for preventing extreme climate change look only marginally better as each decade of delay in stabilising atmospheric concentrations has been estimated to add 0.5°C to average long-term global temperature. Rather than reducing the stock of atmospheric gases a decade has been spent on deciding how to stabilise the growth in emission. For many the change in the rhetoric of international commitment from Toronto to Kyoto is nothing to celebrate.

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