

Holding Our Breath for Kyoto



by **LARRY
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Who would have thought that saving the planet would be a bad thing? But judging from the Klein government's overheated anti-Kyoto rhetoric, the prospect of the world burning up in its orbit pales in comparison to the economic calamity awaiting us if we try to do something about it.

If you've navigated the premier's take on target levels, emission credits and carbon sinks—the latter sounding like something found in Home Depot—you might conclude that the Kyoto Protocol is a sham. It is not. Trouble is, 10 years after the world's leading scientists sounded the alarm over rising world temperatures, and four years after major industrialized nations agreed to tackle the problem, we still know precious little about how the international treaty on greenhouse gas reductions will affect our lives. It will cost Canada 450,000 jobs over the next 10 years. Or not. It will drain billions of dollars from our economy. Or it won't. It will push the price of gasoline to \$1.10 a litre and double our electrical bills. But then again, maybe it won't. No one knows all the facts. Not industry. Not the experts. Not government.

If anything, governments are more interested in adding to the confusion than clearing the air. Premier Ralph Klein turned the fog machine up a notch with his own ecological rescue plan, a lightened version of Kyoto which falls far short of the original plan's clean-air objectives. Its first flaw is that it's driven by economics rather than concern for the environment. The second is that it's a made-in-Canada plan that isn't. It's not even made-in-Alberta. It's more like a made-in-Houston plan.

But its greatest shortcoming is that the Conservatives don't believe in it themselves. It addresses a problem they claim doesn't exist. When backed into a corner, Klein grudgingly accepts scientific evidence that climate change is man-made, but he makes wisecracks about global warming being caused by dinosaur flatulence. His environment minister Lorne Taylor, a PhD and former psychology professor at the University of Saskatchewan, rejects the science. And Energy Minister Murray Smith says the greatest cause of greenhouse gas is people exhaling. If we all hold our breaths until 2012, we can reach our Kyoto targets of emitting 6 per cent less heat-trapping carbon dioxide than we did in 1990. Why not? It makes almost as much sense as the rest of Alberta's Kyoto Lite, which allows polluters to increase greenhouse gas emissions in the hope that technology which doesn't yet exist will bring us to Kyoto target levels in 50 years.

If we had succumbed to inertia some 30 years ago, we would still be driving two-tonne monster cars getting 10 miles to the gallon on leaded gasoline. The one hopeful sign from Kyoto Lite is its faith in new technology. If we could focus our efforts on technological advances aimed at meeting our Kyoto targets in 10 years rather than 50, we might be able to make some significant headway in turning down the global thermostat. Would anyone have guessed that electric/gasoline hybrid cars—capable of running for more than 60 miles on one gallon of gasoline—would be on the market today? Maybe some day we'll figure out how to make cars run on water.

That side of the argument has become lost in the Klein-induced fog. True, we don't know the economic impact of Kyoto. But no one is challenging the Conservative government's doomsday scenario, either.

Political debate requires a contest of opinions, which is sadly lacking.

Political scientist Jonathan W. Rose of Queen's University would blame the lack of debate on publicly financed media campaigns. In his book *Making Pictures in Our Heads*, he argues that government advertising budgets have sucked the life out of political debate by reducing complex issues to instant images. An example would be Klein's equating Kyoto to the National Energy Program, which is his default position on anything he doesn't like. Rose calls advertising "an impoverished channel of communication." He writes: "When governments use advertising they are implicitly arguing for a passive citizenry, unable to understand the nuances of public policy or incompetent to understand their implications."

One thing is certain. Global temperatures are rising, causing profound climate change that threatens our future. Alberta's lakes are shrinking, flows of our major rivers have decreased by as much as 40 per cent over the last century and we are experiencing droughts, forest fires, storms and other cataclysmic weather patterns at frequencies never before seen. By some calculations, glaciers will be gone by 2030.

Yet there is an alarming disconnect at official levels between last summer's drought in central Alberta and the burning of fossil fuels. Canadians make the connection, even if our politicians don't. Regardless of what public opinion polls might say on any given day, we know instinctively that we should burn less gasoline and home heating fuel, just as we know smoking and fatty foods are bad for us. We may not want to give up our SUVs, but we could be convinced to drive them less if it means saving the human race.

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