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Bush trashed the climate talks. But look what Gore did.

By George Monbiot. Published in the Guardian 17th December 2007

“After eleven days of negotiations, governments have come up with a compromise deal that could ... even lead to emission increases. ... The highly compromised political deal ... is largely attributable to the position of the United States which was heavily influenced by fossil fuel and automobile industry interests. The failure to reach agreement led to the talks spilling over into an all night session ...”(1)

These are extracts from a press release by Friends of the Earth. So what? Well it was published on December 11th - I mean to say, December 11th 1997. The US had just put a wrecking ball through the Kyoto Protocol. George W Bush was innocent; he was busy executing prisoners in Texas. Its climate negotiators were led by Albert Arnold Gore. The European Union had asked for greenhouse gas cuts of 15% by 2010. Gore's team drove them down to 5.2% by 2012. Then it did something worse: it destroyed the whole agreement. Most of the other governments insisted that the cuts be made at home. But Gore demanded a series of loopholes big enough to drive a Hummer through. The rich nations, he said, should be allowed to buy their cuts from other countries(2). When he won, the protocol created an exuberant global market in fake emissions cuts. The western nations could buy “hot air” from the former Soviet Union. Because the cuts were made against emissions in 1990, and because industry in that bloc had subsequently collapsed, the FSU countries would pass well below the bar. Gore's scam allowed them to sell the gases they weren't producing to other nations. He also insisted that rich nations could buy nominal cuts from poor ones. Factories in India and China have made billions by raising their production of potent greenhouse gases, so that carbon traders in the rich world will pay to clean them up(3).

The result of this sabotage is that the market for low carbon technologies has remained moribund. Without an assured high value for carbon cuts, without any certainty that government policies will be sustained, companies have continued to invest in the safe commercial prospects offered by fossil fuels rather than gamble on a market without an obvious floor.

By ensuring that the rich nations would not make real cuts, Gore also guaranteed that the poor ones scoffed when we asked them to do as we don't. When George Bush announced, in 2001, that he would not ratify the protocol, the world cursed and stamped its feet. But his intransigence affected only the United States. Gore's team ruined it for everyone.

The destructive power of the US delegation is not the only thing that hasn't changed. After the Kyoto Protocol was agreed, the British environment secretary, John Prescott, announced that “this is a truly historic deal which will help curb the problems of climate change. For the first time it commits developed countries to make legally binding cuts in their emissions.”(4) Ten years later the current environment secretary, Hilary Benn, told us that “this is an historic breakthrough and a huge step forward. For the first time ever all the world's nations have agreed to negotiate on a deal to tackle dangerous climate change.”(5) Do these people have a chip inserted?

In both cases the United States demanded terms which appeared impossible for the other nations to accept. Before Kyoto, the other negotiators flatly rejected Gore's proposals for emissions trading. So his team threatened to sink the talks. The other nations capitulated, but the US still held out on technicalities until the very last moment, when it suddenly appeared to concede. In 1997 and in 2007 it got the best of both worlds: it wrecked the treaty and was praised for saving it.

Hilary Benn is an idiot. Our diplomats are suckers. United States negotiators have pulled the same trick twice and for the second time our governments have fallen for it.

There are still two years to go, but so far the new agreement is even worse than the Kyoto Protocol. It contains no targets and no dates. A new set of guidelines also agreed at Bali extend and strengthen the worst of Al Gore's trading scams, the clean development mechanism(6). Benn and the other dupes are cheering and waving their hats as the train leaves the station at last, having failed to notice that it is travelling in the wrong direction. Though Gore does a better job of governing now that he is out of office, he was no George Bush. He wanted a strong, binding and meaningful protocol, but US politics had made it impossible. In July 1997 the Senate had voted 95-0 to sink any treaty which failed to treat developing countries in the same way as it treated the rich ones(7). Though they knew this was impossible for developing countries to accept, all the Democrats lined up with all the Republicans. The Clinton administration had proposed a compromise: instead of binding

commitments for the developing nations, Gore would demand emissions trading(8). But even when he succeeded he announced that “we will not submit this agreement for ratification [in the Senate] until key developing nations participate”(9). Clinton could thus avoid an unwinnable war.

So why, regardless of the character of its leaders, does the United States act this way? Because, like several other modern democracies, it is subject to two great corrupting forces. I have written before about the role of the corporate media (particularly in the US) in downplaying the threat of climate change and demonising anyone who tries to address it(10). I won't bore you with it again, except to remark that at 3pm eastern standard time on Saturday there were 20 news items on the front page of the Fox News website. The climate deal came 20th, after “Bikini-wearing stewardesses sell calendar for charity” and “Florida store sells ‘Santa Hates You’ T-shirt”(11).

Let us consider instead the other great source of corruption: campaign finance. The Senate rejects effective action on climate change because its members are bought and bound by the companies which stand to lose. When you study the tables showing who gives what to whom, you are struck by two things(12).

One is the quantity. Since 1990, the energy and natural resources sector (mostly coal, oil, gas and electricity) has given \$418m to federal politicians in the US(13). Transport companies have given \$355m(14). The other is the width: the indiscriminating nature of this munificence. The big polluters favour the Republicans, but most of them also fund Democrats. During the 2000 presidential campaign, oil and gas companies lavished money on George Bush, but they also gave Al Gore \$142,000(15), while transport companies gave him \$347,000(16). The whole US political system is in hock to people who put their profits ahead of the biosphere. So don't believe all this nonsense about waiting for the next president to sort it out. This is a much bigger problem than George W Bush. Yes, he is viscerally opposed to tackling climate change. But viscera don't have much to do with it. Until the American people confront their political funding system, their politicians will keep speaking from the pocket, not the gut.
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