

Global Warming II: The Meaning of Success

By Frank E. Loy and David B. Sandalow

WASHINGTON, D.C., JULY 2005

Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain was both right and gutsy to make global warming a priority for the Group of 8 summit meeting being held this week in Gleneagles, Scotland. Right, because our response to global warming will shape the world we leave our children. Gutsy, because President George W. Bush's resistance to meaningful measures to address this issue is longstanding and well known.

Still, Blair has a chance to make progress on global warming at the summit. The key is this: Blair must not declare success unless it is actually achieved.

If the G-8 leaders adopt a strong statement on global warming, that would be a genuine accomplishment. If they do not, and Blair honestly and forthrightly states that fact, the resulting publicity could help accelerate the growing political momentum toward reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the United States and around the world.

What would a strong statement look like? There are certain basics: The meeting's communiqué must acknowledge the growing scientific consensus on global warming. But a statement on the science would hardly be a cause for celebration. The last time Britain hosted G-8 leaders, in 1998, their communiqué declared that "the greatest environmental threat to our future prosperity remains climate change." A simple acknowledgment of this fact yet again would not be progress.

Instead, Blair should focus on what matters most: the development of meaningful domestic programs to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in each G-8 country. Some G-8 countries have made considerable progress in this regard in recent years, and could share their experiences. Others — including the United States — have made less.

As it happens, the U.S. Senate addressed this very topic last month, endorsing a resolution that calls for a "mandatory, market-based" domestic program to "slow, stop and reverse" the growth of greenhouse emissions. Given the history of climate change votes in the Senate, this is a significant development.

Here's a suggestion: Blair should incorporate the language of the recent Senate resolution on global warming into the G-8 leaders' statement. If all G-8 leaders agree to pursue domestic programs of the type endorsed by the Senate, Blair would be amply justified in declaring his summit meeting a success when it comes to global warming. If any of the leaders balk, Blair should candidly admit that — on this topic at least — the meeting has not achieved all he wanted.

Why are mandatory domestic programs so important? Because, as Britain has been demonstrating for several years, such programs are the key both to reducing emissions and to giving businesses the certainty they need for long-term planning. Many industrialized nations have pursued voluntary greenhouse gas programs now for years, but these have been ineffective. Mandatory programs provide powerful incentives to reduce emissions and develop the technologies needed to address global warming over the long term.

The presence of leaders from China, India, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa provides another opportunity for Blair this week. Each of these nations, whose emissions play a large and growing role in global warming, will need to find ways to control emissions in the years ahead, or we will all suffer the consequences. The summit provides an important chance to discuss with these leaders what can be done to keep emissions from reaching catastrophic levels.

The challenge for this week's summit is whether the G-8 can move beyond vague promises about global warming. The most obvious way is with specific pledges — actual funds committed to implementing clean energy projects in developing countries. Given the scale of the problem and the resources of the G-8, pledges will have to be in the multiple billions of dollars for Blair to declare success.

Blair will naturally be tempted to declare victory even if little has been achieved. But it would be far better to have news stories about the inability of the G-8 leaders to reach an agreement than to gild the lily by celebrating a weak accord.

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