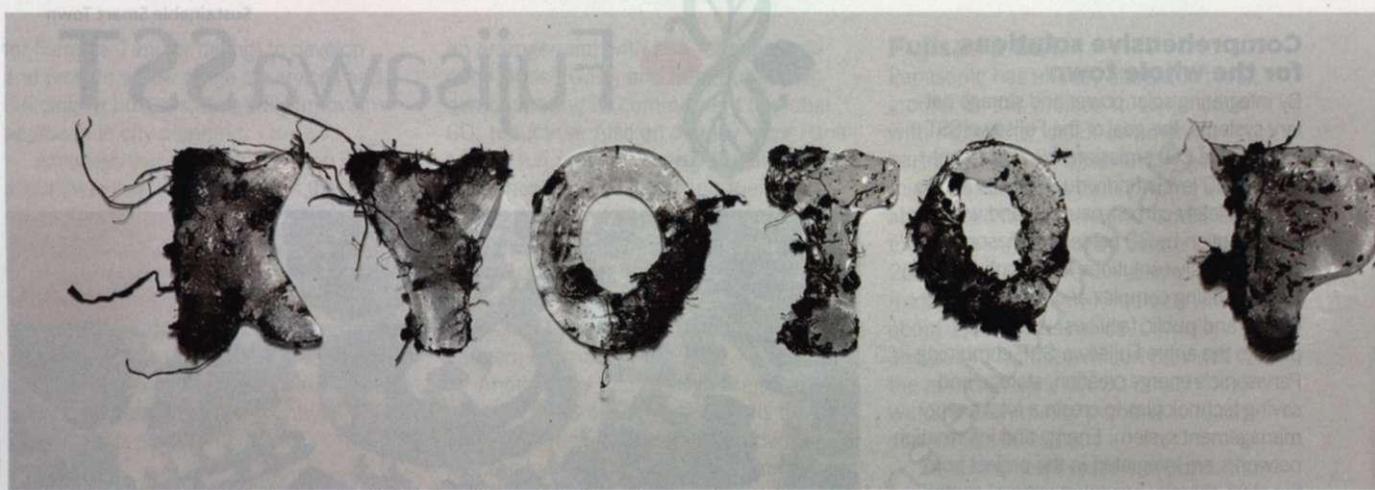


# Opening Remarks



## Dead Letters

The inability of the world's leaders to reach a deal on climate change may prove to be a blessing in disguise.

By Charles Kenny

The 17th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change took place this month in Durban, South Africa. Two things to note: First, climate change shows no sign of abating; second, it's the 17th meeting. This was also the Seventh Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol, the only international agreement that legally binds some countries to agreed reductions in their greenhouse-gas emissions. The flaw in Kyoto is that it binds none of the world's three largest polluters, which are responsible for nearly half of all emissions. The U.S. never signed the protocol, and India and China were exempted from emissions caps on the grounds that rich countries had done the majority of combusting, excreting, or otherwise expelling the gases causing the atmosphere such heartburn to date.

Remember UN climate meeting No. 15? That was in Copenhagen a couple of years ago, when President Barack Obama and fellow leaders stayed up half the night, seemingly hours away from a binding climate deal covering coun-

tries rich and poor. Today we seem not hours but years away from such a deal. The Kyoto Protocol expires next year—and the Durban meeting didn't even seriously discuss a replacement. You might call this a glacial rate of progress, except we're going backward (and glaciers are melting quite fast nowadays).

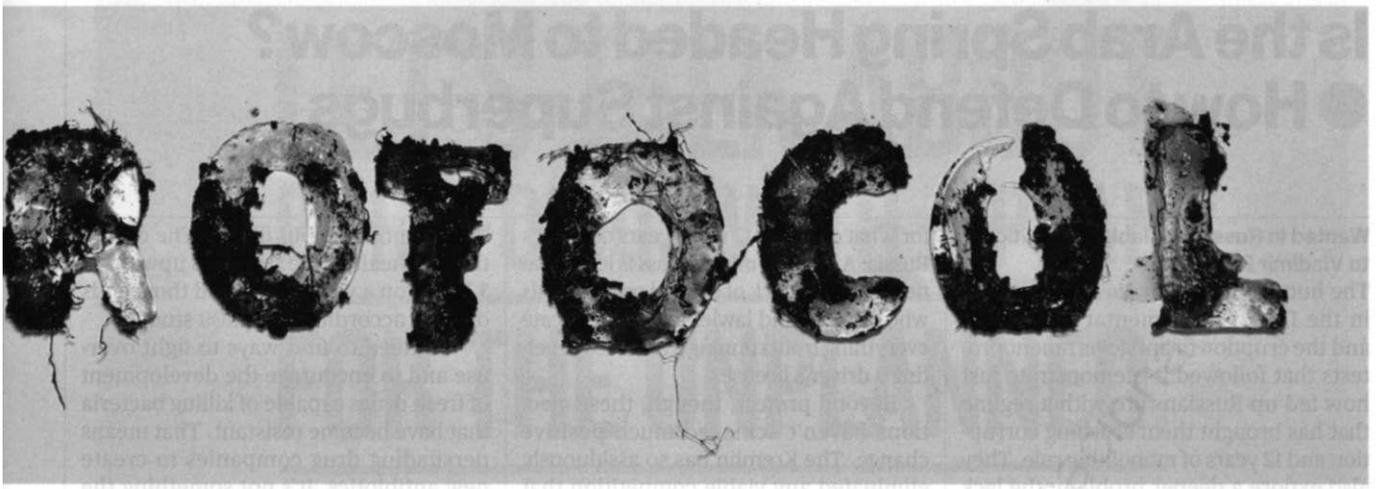
Disappointment at Durban will give environmentalists one more reason to gripe at the state of global leadership. They'll have a point. The planet's politicians have missed an opportunity to unite to confront the greatest global challenge of the new century. Yet at the same time, progress against global warming is being made at the individual country and regional level—which is good news, because for the foreseeable future that's the only approach likely to work.

With the lack of progress on climate change in recent years, some environmentalists have been reduced to pinning their hopes on either the exhaustion of natural resources or the complete collapse of global capitalism to take care of the problem. But neither higher oil prices nor financial crises have significantly slowed the release of greenhouse gases. Because of new fossil fuel discoveries and new technologies that allow their extraction from deep seabeds or out of shale rock, global peak oil extraction won't arrive until some time after Denver becomes a seaside resort. The

global economic slowdown, meanwhile, has brought the silver filigree of temporarily holding down emissions in the developed world (2008 and 2009 actually saw declining greenhouse gas output in the U.S.). But a study released on Dec. 4 by the Global Carbon Project, an association of scientists, found that global emissions rose again in 2010 by 5.9 percent, the largest increase since 2003.

That trend is likely to continue. With China and India—the world's largest and third-largest emitters—posting 10 percent growth rates last year, even prolonged Western stagnation won't help the climate all that much. Regardless, a planet-wide halt to the generation of new wealth hardly seems the most sensible approach to tackle global warming.

So what would be? While the international climate negotiators in Durban were busy trying to make the U.S. congressional budget supercommittee look good, a small ray of hope emerged, courtesy of Andreas Schmitter of Oregon State University. In a recent paper in *Science*, Schmitter suggested that the atmosphere might be a little less sensitive to rising greenhouse gases than previously thought. A doubling of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere would raise global temperatures by 2.3 degrees Celsius (4 degrees Fahrenheit), rather than the previous consensus position of 3 degrees or more. While still an alarming figure, that means we may have slightly



more time before Atlanta in summer takes on the charm of an Easy-Bake oven and Venice Beach is renamed Venice Levee. And every little bit counts.

However remote it appears now, a meaningful and coordinated response to climate change may eventually materialize. A couple decades ago, we lived under the fear that spray bottles of suntan lotion were releasing chlorofluorocarbons that would destroy the ozone layer, which in turn would give us all lethal cases of sunburn (oh, the irony). A global agreement signed in Montreal in 1987 dealt with that problem quite successfully, and atmospheric chlorofluorocarbon concentrations are already 10 percent lower than they were in the mid-1990s.

It's just as important to remember, however, that international treaties are far from a certain and rapid cure for global problems. To cite one case, it has been a half century since the great majority of the planet signed on to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It might be fair to say that we aren't quite all the way to worldwide respect for civil and political freedoms.

A big, complex global treaty like a follow-up to Kyoto isn't the only way to deal with a big, complex global problem like climate change. Other approaches might work better. Action by a small number of countries on behalf of the common good, rather than their selfish interests, may baffle economists and international relations theorists. But to date it has actually driven most of the progress the world has seen in tackling the most difficult issues.

Never doubt that a single country, or a small group of like-minded countries,

can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that usually does. Think of the great voyages of discovery across the Atlantic, bankrolled by the Spanish crown; the U.S. Defense Dept. creating the Internet; the European states' financing particle physics at CERN. In the 19th century, the British campaign to wipe out the Atlantic slave trade was a vital step toward the global abolition of that evil institution. The U.S.'s funding of smallpox eradication around the world saved hundreds of millions of lives. Today, we have the informal alliance of countries that have come together to protect global sea lanes from piracy. For all of the concerns that some nations will "free-ride"-benefiting from the costs that other states pay to improve global outcomes-it's often far more effective for one or a few countries to undertake big tasks in loose collaboration than it is to fashion a binding international agreement involving the 193 member states of the UN.

A similar process may be under way in response to climate change. Caps on greenhouse gas emissions have contributed to a notable slowing of carbon dioxide output across Europe. European Union carbon dioxide emissions fell 6 percent from 1991 to 2007. Meanwhile, developing countries are already spending more than rich countries on new renewable energy capacity-\$72 billion in 2010. Although it hasn't signed on to a binding international treaty, India has an-

**A big, complex treaty isn't the only way to deal with a big, complex problem like climate change**

nounced plans to generate 15 percent of its energy as early as 2020 from renewable sources that don't emit carbon, primarily from solar power plants.

Even the U.S.-a pariah in the Durban talks, ritually condemned for foiling progress toward a global agreement-has taken some stumbling steps in the right direction. The Supreme Court has ruled that the Environmental Protection Agency has the right to regulate greenhouse gases. Washington has set fuel economy standards that will increase the average energy efficiency of America's automobiles by about one-half by 2025. And California is under an executive order to cut greenhouse gas emissions to 80 percent below their 1990 level by 2050. That matters, because (at market exchange rates) California's economy is larger than Russia's or India's. It is also home to considerable research capacity. If California creates demand for low-carbon technologies, cleantech development will follow.

It's true the hundreds of flowers that have bloomed to date in the effort against climate change are not yet nearly enough to stop global warming. All the pledges made by various countries to cut greenhouse gas emissions amount to less than half of what climate scientists claim is needed to avert ecological devastation. In an ideal world, our leaders would show actual leadership by agreeing to a binding global treaty. But that's not the world we live in. Smaller-scale initiatives to fight climate change at least offer the promise of measurable progress. That is better than waiting on the illusory prospect of an agreement that may never arrive. ©