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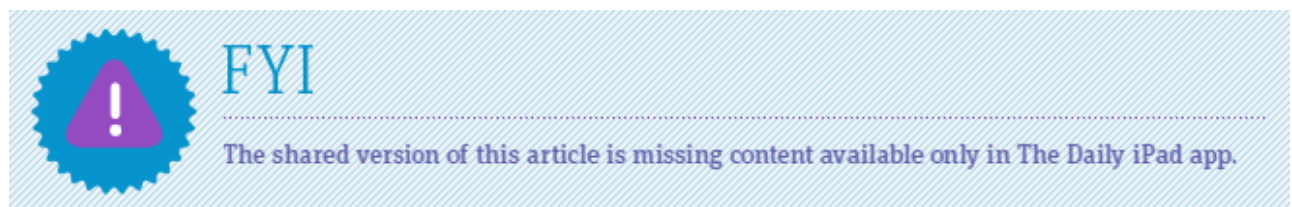
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Cooling-off period

Why the carbon-capping frenzy has died down

Bjorn Lomborg Thursday, February 3, 2011



In just a few years, climate change has gone from the hottest issue on the global political agenda to one that top leaders barely acknowledge.

Whatever happened to President Obama's ambitious vow to "act boldly and decisively," former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown's urgent intention to hammer out "a comprehensive and global agreement" on carbon cuts, or United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's belief that the world was creating "a very concrete foundation for a legally binding treaty"? These days, U.N. climate conferences come and go without even the participation of any top leaders, let alone any serious global agreement.

Global warming has slipped from the politicians' agenda for several reasons, one of which is the simple reality that when economic problems arise, it's human nature to care less about far-off environmental challenges.

The silence of politicians is, no doubt, also driven by voters' growing doubts and apathy about global warming.

Campaigners and environmentalists have tried to scare the socks off people with end-of-the-world rhetoric. We have become desensitized, requiring ever more outrageous scenarios to move us. As the scary stories have grown more exaggerated, the public has tuned out.

But the prime reason politicians have distanced themselves from carbon-cut initiatives is the embarrassing reality that after 19 long years, they are no closer to making any real difference when it comes to rising temperatures.

Meeting in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, politicians from wealthy countries first promised to cut emissions by 2000.

They didn't. In Kyoto in 1997, leaders promised even stricter reductions by 2010. Emissions kept increasing unabated. The leaders couldn't even agree on a binding treaty when they met in Copenhagen in 2009. So last year, they steered clear of a climate change summit in Cancun, and left the talking to bureaucrats, who proved just as incapable as their bosses of coming up with a meaningful plan.

Why have all these attempts to rein in climate change been so fruitless? Some environmentalists would argue it is a failure of will. If we had the requisite backbone, they insist, we'd simply stop pumping millions of tons of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere each year.

But the reason we continue to use fossil fuels is not because we're weak or just enjoy annoying Al Gore. It's a matter of basic economics. Fossil fuels are much cheaper and more efficient than any of the green alternatives, such as solar or wind power.

This is why developing nations like China and India are so resistant to the idea of drastically cutting their carbon emissions. Without cheap energy, there is no way they can continue to lift billions of their citizens out of poverty.

And it's why the developed world has found it impossible to live up to the grand carbon-cutting rhetoric of the last two decades. Fully implementing the Kyoto Protocol — the last actual comprehensive carbon treaty — would have cost hundreds of billions every year in lost economic growth. And even if it had been fully implemented across the century, it would only have reduced temperatures by less than one-third of one degree Fahrenheit in 100 years.

There is a smarter response to global warming. Instead of trying to make fossil fuels cost more, why not concentrate on making the green alternatives cost less? We must make the likes of solar and wind energy technologies competitive with coal and oil.

We didn't promote the digital revolution that produced the iPad you're holding by making slide rules and typewriters more expensive. Rather, it was the result of massive investments in research and development in areas such as solid-state physics and computer science. Why aren't we doing the same with green energy technologies?

Taken as a whole, the nations of the world spend a paltry \$2 billion a year on green energy R&D. These technologies are progressing at a snail's pace. We can and should do better. But it will take a real commitment — something on the order of \$100 billion a year (roughly 0.2 percent of global gross domestic product) to produce the kind of game-changing breakthroughs that are needed.

The world's political leaders can't continue to be missing in action on climate change. It is time to admit that the road we have taken for 19 years has led us nowhere. It's time to get smarter about our response to global warming.

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