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Europe reneges on Kyoto reductions

A hastily assembled special negotiation of the Kyoto Protocol begins this week in Bonn, Germany, to try and define a future for a climate-change treaty that runs for five years (2008-2012) but already appears dead. This comes on the heels of European Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas coming to Washington with the message that Europe is leading on climate change and America could cheaply comply. The public deserves some candor about Kyoto's, and Europe's, actual failure and the radical changes necessary if Europe sincerely believes that American involvement is "critical" in any next steps. What we are witnessing instead is a growing European Union effort for a U.S. bailout from the political corner into which its leaders have painted themselves.

In Washington, Mr. Dimas repeated the ritual assessment of a "thawing" in U.S.-EU relations over climate change. These claims increase in frequency as Kyoto's failure becomes increasingly obvious to all but its most insulated advocates. Such pleas seek to create the inference of a Bush Administration gravitating toward agreement on Kyoto: Don't abandon ship, help is on the way.

Nothing could be further from the truth. That was reaffirmed the very week before Mr. Dimas spoke in a public speech overseas by the White House's own Council on Environmental Quality director.

In repeating the fable of a low-cost Kyoto, Mr. Dimas peddled a claim that has already proven spectacularly false back home. The specifics should surprise those familiar with Europe's righteous claims of a United States grossly out of step with the Kyoto-compliant world. In fact, Europe is not complying with Kyoto, and this failure will soon create significant internal political tension in the European Union to match that with the United States.

Almost to a nation, those few covered countries aren't complying. Under Kyoto, the EU-15 committed to collectively reduce "greenhouse gas" emissions to 8 percent below 1990 levels. Internally, however, a deal was struck under which many EU countries were permitted emission increases. These would presumably be covered by over-complying states Great Britain and Germany, due to the respective "one-off" political developments of shifting from coal to gas and shutting inefficient eastern production. This is Brussels's vaunted "burden sharing agreement."

However, those countries have since made clear they will not carry the rest of the EU-15 over the finish line of compliance. This is important for the simple reason that, regardless of any country's promise to Brussels, under the treaty each and every country among the EU-15 is stuck with an 8 percent-below-1990 commitment. As such, 12 of the EU-15 project egregious violation (by between 20 and 77 percent) of a treaty invoked by many in the European Union to demonstrate U.S. irresponsibility.

Consider the following projections for 2010 by member countries, as reported to Brussels, in relation to their now-operative Kyoto "Article 4" commitment of 8 percent below 1990: Portugal, over its promise by 77 percent, Spain by 61 percent, Greece by 51 percent, Ireland by 41 percent, Luxembourg by 31 percent, Finland by 27 percent, Denmark 26 percent, Italy by anywhere from 13 to 23 percent (following Italy's submission, the numbers discussed suddenly got worse), France by 19 percent, Austria by 18 percent, Belgium by 16 percent and the Netherlands by 10 percent.

Brussels masks these reported figures with clever rhetoric that does not withstand scrutiny nor crunching of the numbers that member states publicly submit, if with little fanfare. In early May, Spain became only the second EU country to (grudgingly) admit it will not comply.

These are not mere technicalities, but the reality behind the European Union's anti-U.S. rhetoric, and the stuff of political problems as talks presumptuously turn to a "second phase" of cuts. This is also why Italy has refused to consider the inane, operative EU posture of "Now that we have broken one promise, it is time to break an even bigger one!"

Europe's flagrant lack of adherence to Kyoto is wildly belied by the remarkable rhetoric aimed by official Europe at the United States. The EU claims the mantle of "leadership" on Kyoto while finding no apparent shame in the fact that the "rogue" United States, using the same baseline, would be tied with Ireland only for fourth-worst in Europe, at 41 percent over. Canada projects violation by 54 percent.

These facts should roil a debate dominated by scolding the United States for being so grossly out of step with the rest of the world, acting alone - with 155 others - by refusing to make an unrealistic promise.

In fact, the European Union can no longer credibly blame the United States about the current state of Kyoto. The question now is whether the European Union will accept Kyoto's failure, and its own, and accept a more practical rethinking of the issue for the future. If not, it only has itself to blame.

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