

## Comments from COP-10

Thursday, December 16, 2004 – 3:00 pm (Buenos Aires)

With the onset of the ministerial (high-level) segment of COP-10 which began yesterday, the character of the COP has changed markedly. Both the number and the seniority of national delegates has increased, accompanied by much more security, and many more “suits” seeking access to them (and watching their statements). From outward appearances, the ministerial segment is arguably a waste of time; officials putting forth already well known party lines with little if anything new or substantive. Participants are left typically trying to read between the lines for new and different meaning. In at least a couple of cases yesterday, however, no one had to struggle to discern meaning, even if the substance wasn't surprising.

First, Argentina's President Nestor Kirchner spoke to the plenary, and didn't mince many words. In what was even viewed here as a “harsh” speech, Kirchner cited the “double standard” applied by developed nations, contrasting their sense of responsibility for the repayment of financial debts with their historical greenhouse gas emissions responsibility, “They are implacable with the commitments of their debtors, but not quite so much with their own environmental debts.” In a telling, but much less substantive instance, Germany's minister opened his plenary panel remarks by congratulating Russia for making possible the Kyoto Protocol's entry into force. The plenary interrupted with applause affirming this sentiment. U.S. Undersecretary for Global Affairs Paula Dobriansky, on stage as part of the same panel, was not among those clapping.

Others besides senior ministers have also arrived, including U.S. Senators Craig and Thomas, and Rep. Joe Barton. The latter may be striving to outdo Sen. Inhofe's actions at COP-9 (where he autographed a poster showing him with his “climate change is a hoax” comment), suggesting that the U.S. should probably stop coming to these meetings. Fortunately, Craig, Thomas, and Dobriansky have been cleaning up after him. Although Rep. Kucinich is here as well, and plans to offer a dissenting view at a press conference this afternoon, the Democratic U.S. presence is quite light.

The side events for COP-10 reflect both the better science, greater expertise, and attention to detail that has developed over the last decade. Many are effectively mini-courses about various issues and elements associated with climate change. The Climate Group had an excellent event yesterday, highlighting reductions made – along with savings achieved – by several businesses and municipalities. Notable too was the fact that some actors have already spun off side businesses, indicating that the entrepreneurial dynamics of early stage markets are really starting to happen on carbon. Most of this activity, unfortunately but not surprisingly, is occurring in Europe. Speaking of municipalities, Salt Lake City Mayor Rocky Anderson was among those presenting at the side event put on by the International Council of Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI). With his outlook, and his closeness to Utah's governor, I wonder whether the West Coast Governors Global Warming Initiative might soon entertain adding another state!

As is their custom, the UK's Hadley Centre put on a superb side event showing its latest climate modeling progress. DEFRA Minister Margaret Beckett opened the event, indicating such great regard for the importance of the Hadley Centre's work that she had secured a budget increase for it going forward. This year, the Centre has strived to address the issue of uncertainty in climate change modeling. It has done so by creating 50+ models with contrasting assumptions, running them, and then looking at the probability distribution of their collective results. In doing so, the model results tend to center around 4°C as the effect of a doubling of carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere. Given that ice ages have hinged on lesser changes, this is sobering.

The highlight for me yesterday was meeting with the European Parliament's Environment Committee. Working through staff that had seen NESCAUM's work at COP-9, the Environment Committee had requested this meeting, and we sat down for an hour in mid-afternoon. About half our time was spent reviewing what U.S. states were doing in terms of climate actions, and the other half on issues relating to the RGGI cap-and-trade effort, the EU Emission Trading Scheme, and the potential to someday link the two. I indicated several areas where the states could use help from the EU, but also listed several issues where the states could potentially assist the EU (e.g., in breaking the ice in terms of auctioning a portion of allowances, dealing effectively with offsets, and gaining economies of scale as both systems someday expand to include greenhouse gases other than CO<sub>2</sub>). Asked what was most important for them to do, I replied simply that they needed to stay the course on their groundbreaking effort, to prove its workability.

Today's personal efforts centered around a side event put on by the Climate Action Network, in which I joined Alden Meyer from the Union of Concerned Scientists, Tom Jacob from Dupont, Chris Miller of the Senate Environment & Public Works Committee, and Jeff Fiedler of the Natural Resources Defense Council. My segment was about state actions, Tom's about business action, and the others about the outlook for federal progress. Again the side event was quite packed and went the full time available, and I was intrigued by how many questions centered on the idea of the states' legal authority to do anything jointly with the EU in terms of GHG trading. I suspect that this interest was seeded by Rep. Barton's comments yesterday to the effect that states will have to come to Congress for permission for anything they want to do. As you know, this is not necessarily the case as long as such programs are implemented through standard commercial transaction approaches rather than an effort to develop a treaty or compact with a foreign government (which would violate the Constitution's compact clause).

I leave Buenos Aires this afternoon, before the final COP-10 results will be determined tomorrow (or perhaps Saturday), but the general outlines seem reasonably evident. This is one of the COPs where a lot of grunt work gets done, but little in the way of major policy leaps forward. It won't go down in history by name, certainly, but some crucially important changes and recognitions have surfaced here. First is the relative emphasis on adaptation. Many have seen focusing on adaptation as a capitulation to the difficulty of mitigating greenhouse gas emissions, but in truth both are necessary and they are far from mutually exclusive. Although overdue, adaptation is beginning to take its rightful place in the UNFCCC process.

Second, there has been significant recognition here at COP-10 that the Kyoto Protocol is finite. Quiet discussions have pervaded COP-10 about how best to move forward after 2012 concerning the longer term impacts of a changing climate. Not least of these is the “meaningful participation” of developing nations, and if, how, and when the U.S. and Australia come back into the fold. Regrettably, the U.S. is intransigent on even holding these discussions, its position widely characterized as “Hear no evil; see no evil; speak no evil.”

Third, the environmental community is starting to accept that technology development will be a critical path forward. They remain correct that it can’t be the only path forward, but are increasingly recognizing the key role technology will have to play, particularly in creating a less carbon intensive development path for rapidly industrializing countries like China and India.

Finally, the vital regulatory refinement role served by the COP has also progressed on a host of fronts, bringing greater clarity to the rules and procedures necessary to actually operationalize the statutory analogue, the Kyoto Protocol.

Even though I return to a much colder climate, I look forward to getting home, particularly from the perspective of air quality, primarily much lower emissions from motor vehicles!

Best regards,  
-- Ken Colburn