

Greenhouse emission protocols a lot of hot air

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WHEN Australia signed the Kyoto Protocols on Greenhouse Emissions in 1997 it undertook to hold its output, mainly of carbon dioxide, to an annual average from 2008 to 2012 of 108 per cent of 1990 levels. Then take them down.

Doing this seems against the national interest.

A homely example: the aluminium smelter at Portland, Victoria, dependent on cheap electricity from the La Trobe Valley brown coal-fuelled power stations, would probably fold by 2012. That would put some 3500 people out of work in the Portland district.

A small price to pay for saving the world? I don't live in Portland, so yes, I guess so.

But suppose the world doesn't need to be saved — not, at least, from greenhouse emissions? Even if it were, suppose that Australia altering its 1.5 to 2 per cent of the world's emissions didn't matter a damn? Suppose, further, that the Kyoto proposals for radical global restructuring of national economies is not politically possible?

The last is a point made forcefully last week by Alan Oxley, a former Australian delegate to general agreement on trade and tariffs conferences.

"Nothing on this scale has ever been attempted," he said. "Consider the difficulties of trying to reach agreement on a common world currency, then multiply the difficulty of that by 100-fold. Why would anybody try?"

Oxley was speaking in Melbourne at an inaugural conference of upper-level businessmen, with a sprinkling of scientists and political figures, chaired by former finance minister Peter Walsh.

A trifle recklessly, this nascent assembly of lobbyists calls itself the Lavoisier Group. Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier is considered the founder of modern chemistry, but went to the guillotine during the French Revolution for counter-revolutionary activity.

The Melbourne conference included a

good deal of science. Generally conceded was the existence of a consensus among scientists that the Earth's surface is warming.

But why? The greenhouse effect was presented as no more likely a cause than the fact of our emerging from "the little ice age," lasting from approximately 1300 to 1900.

Also mentioned were satellite observations indicating that the lower atmosphere is not warming significantly. Was this compatible with greenhouse theory, based on the sun's heat being reflected from the Earth's surface but then trapped by pollution?

There was a consensus of alarm and derision about the 1992 assertion by Ros Kelly, then Labor's environment minister, that "there's been enough research".

However, the Lavoisiers were attentive to advice from Gary Gray, former national secretary of the ALP, that any campaign against ratification of the Kyoto protocols based on denying greenhouse was doomed to failure.

Gray said greenhouse was an article of faith, almost never questioned, for Australians under 21, and was accepted by a strong majority of those under 40, especially women. This sounded rather authoritatively like a product of Gray's memory of Labor public opinion research.

Gray also won close attention when he said that, in government circles, greenhouse had initially been looked upon as a costless issue, or as something whose costs could be deferred for the attention of

following generations. Plant 1 million trees and we will be right, had been the attitude.

This has been more or less apparent through the 1988 Toronto conference on global warming, the 1992 Rio assembly — ironically hailed in Melbourne by Tony Staley, former Liberal Party national president, as the green movement's finest hour — to the brink of and, for some, beyond Kyoto.

SCIENCE has been subsumed by the politics of the matter. (One hardly hears mention of the decline of the Toronto prediction for global warming of 0.8 degrees Centigrade per decade to a present 0.2.)

Now the Kyoto protocols, about which there has been virtually no public discussion — particularly of its economic effects — since 1997, are to be "finalised" in November.

Developing countries may volunteer to reduce intermissions if they care to. China and India won't have a bar of it. The US Senate has voted 95-0 against ratifying the protocol without the partici-

pation of developing countries, responsible for 50 per cent of global emissions and estimated to account for 80 per cent of short-term increase.

"Even if you count on the US coming to the party," Oxley commented, "ratifying these protocols is like trying to create OPEC without Saudi Arabia."

Continuing at its present level of cheap fossil fuel use, the key factor in our competitive advantage in world trade, would result in Australia's 2008 greenhouse emissions rising to 116 per cent of 1990 levels. Cutting them to 108 per cent would have harsh, if not disastrous, consequences for power generation and fossil fuel exports, and for such industries as automobile making and agriculture.

Future development — such as manufacturing industries based on the vast natural gas resources of the North West Shelf — would be out of the question.

The Government seems to be developing divisions over how far to the front Australia should leap in advancing Kyoto proposals. That's good.