



Guest Column / Elizabeth May

## The Achievement of the Paris Agreement

It is Sunday in Paris, the day after the tumultuous conclusion of the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP21) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

In many ways, it was not the conclusion of a two-week conference, nor even of the four-year Durban Process that emerged from the ashes of the disastrous 2009 Copenhagen COP. It was the first substantial step toward meeting the goals of the 1992 UNFCCC since Kyoto in 1997.

It is easy to lay the failure of previous efforts on the structure of the agreements themselves. In other words, Kyoto gets blamed for Kyoto. But the architecture of the Kyoto Protocol was identical to that of the Montreal Protocol, the successful environmental treaty that saved the ozone layer. The emergence of the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities”—that industrialized countries should go first—was born in Montreal.

The United States under George W. Bush managed to demonize the idea as unfair to the US, then the source of 25 per cent of all GHG pollution. Canada under Jean Chrétien battled to save Kyoto globally, delaying action domestically. By the time Paul Martin’s government brought in a reasonable climate plan, it was 2005 and Canada was about to be plunged into nearly 10 years under a prime minister who opposed the idea of global action to confront climate change altogether.

Had Kyoto been honoured globally, we would be in a far less dangerous world today.

What was achieved in Paris can be viewed through a number of lenses. At the

level of multilateralism, COP21 was an unqualified success. The United Nations has proven that we can still talk to each other. As the world pitches more dangerously toward a hot war in Syria, it is nearly a miracle that Iran, Turkey, Russia and the US can all negotiate in polite terms over the removal of square brackets around disputed sub-clauses.

At the intersection of climate science and politics, the meeting was also a success. The final text benefits from including real numbers—it specifies a global emissions figure for 2030 (55 Gt.). And in a major advance over what was expected, the world accepted that a 1.5 degrees Celsius global average temperature increase was a far safer level of increase to avoid than the 2-degree level that has been accepted since Copenhagen.

Another innovation that bodes well for the Paris Agreement is that it will be legally binding on the United States without the requirement to be ratified in the US Congress. If any one thing was the undoing of Kyoto, it was that the Clinton administration realized it did not have the required votes to gain two-thirds Senate approval and never tried to obtain ratification. The George W. Bush Administration then announced it had no intention of ever trying. The Paris Agreement has been carefully negotiated to avoid any triggers to require US ratification. The White House will legally accede to it as an extension of existing commitments of the UNFCCC, already ratified under the first President George Bush.

Unlike Kyoto, it does not make specific pledges to reduce by X amount by year Y. While that is seen by many as a weakness, everyone agrees that it would spell catastrophe if the current

weak pledges were cast in stone. The aggregate of current promises, if kept, would take the world to anywhere from 2.7 to 3.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels.

Instead, the pledges are housed in a public registry at the secretariat for the UNFCCC. Countries can replace their promises any time with promises to do more. So far, 188 countries have made pledges (known as INDCs—intended nationally determined contributions. France was the first country to commit that its existing INDC would be revamped and improved. Canada’s INDC is the one left behind by the previous government. Obviously, it must be replaced quickly through the process Prime Minister Trudeau has promised within 90 days of the end of COP21.

The hope of the Paris agreement lies in its system of “pledge and review.” On a regular schedule of every five years, all nations’ targets, their collective progress and the impact in terms of emissions and temperature will be collectively and publicly assessed under the terms of the agreement. A core principle in the Paris Agreement is of “no backsliding.” Targets must be continually ratcheted up.

It is urgent that the process start. Having regained our international reputation in Paris, Canada needs to do much more. When the UN hosts a high-level signing ceremony for the Paris agreement on April 22, 2016—Earth Day—let’s hope our provincial and federal collaboration allows the Prime Minister to deliver to the world Canada’s new and more aggressive plan to do our fair share. **P**

*Elizabeth May is leader of the Green Party of Canada. [elizabeth.may@parl.gc.ca](mailto:elizabeth.may@parl.gc.ca)*