

THIS WEEK



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Climate negotiations soldier on

As the Warsaw conference on the climate wraps up this week, there is reason for hope despite several well-publicized setbacks.

One could be forgiven for feeling gloomy about the political prospects for action on global warming this week. On 15 November, as the United Nations climate-change conference rounded out its first week in Warsaw, Japan announced a drastic scaling back of its climate commitments. On Monday of this week, just as the talks kicked into high gear, Poland's environment ministry opened its doors for a conference predicated on the idea that burning coal more efficiently will reduce greenhouse-gas emissions. And on Thursday, as the negotiations head into their final hours, Australia's House of Representatives is expected to vote on a proposal to repeal the country's carbon tax.

Nobody was expecting grand things from this year's talks in Warsaw. And in truth, it requires a certain leap of faith to hope that something truly significant will come of the next big climate summit, in Paris in 2015. But one could expect that countries would not simply give up and throw in the towel.

Japan's announcement was not entirely surprising, given the shutdown of its nuclear industry following the 2011 tsunami and the resulting nuclear disaster at Fukushima. At times it has been a struggle to keep the lights on. Regardless of the course that Japan ultimately takes with regard to nuclear power, however, the country cannot simply abdicate from its climate responsibilities. Whereas Japan had previously committed to reduce emissions to 25% below 1990 levels by 2020, its new commitment would allow emissions to rise by 3.1%. An analysis by an international team of scientists that produces the Climate Action Tracker suggests that Japan could still reduce emissions by at least 17% below 1990 levels if it simply replaced all the missing nuclear power with its current blend of fossil fuels. By this measure, Fukushima is more an excuse than a justification.

In Australia, newly elected Prime Minister Tony Abbott has promised to repeal the country's carbon tax with a nebulous new 'Direct Action Plan' that will focus on incentives rather than regulations. Australians have to wait to see Abbott's alternative plan to reduce emissions, but for now the prime minister is more concerned with ridding the country of a "toxic tax".

One of Abbott's claims is that a carbon tax would put Australia's economy at a disadvantage internationally, which would be true if nobody else acts. To avoid that is, of course, the purpose of the UN conference. Collective action is needed, both to reduce global emissions and to reassure individual countries that their pain will not be in vain.

Unfortunately, the political backdrop in Warsaw this week was no more inspiring. The Polish government hosted a parallel coal conference and has put its stamp on the 'Warsaw Communiqué', which calls for the rapid advancement of "high-efficiency low-emissions coal combustion technologies" in the battle against global warming. It should go without saying that an expansion of coal-fired power, regardless of efficiency, will not protect the climate unless coupled

with — currently unavailable — technologies that enable carbon to be economically captured and buried.

Each of these cases reflects the serious challenges ahead, but there is also reason for hope. Carbon emissions fell in the United States and Europe again last year, and the rate of growth in China dropped sharply as well. Globally, carbon emissions increased by just 1.1% in 2012 compared with an average annual growth of nearly 3% over the past decade. Researchers at the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency in

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The Hague, who compiled the numbers, argue that this might be the first sign of a levelling off. Although the current commitments fall well short of what will probably be needed, it is also true that most countries have stepped forward with climate plans of some sort. And whereas the focus was once solely on rich countries, which are responsible for the bulk of the historical emissions but cannot halt global

warming on their own, developing nations are now putting forward mitigation plans.

In light of the dismal record over the past two decades, this represents a kind of progress. Reducing emissions will be neither easy nor free, particularly given the need to expand basic energy services in poor countries. As the climate talks in Warsaw wrap up this week, countries must seek a framework that encourages everybody to increase their ambitions and ensures that those commitments are kept. The temptation to abandon the effort and drift back into business-as-usual will always be there. The goal for Warsaw this week is not an agreement, but a viable roadmap to an agreement. Surely that much can be achieved. ■

The new zoo

Changes to the international zoological code are to be welcomed, despite continuing dissent.

The change last year that allowed zoologists to name new species in online-only academic journals was a long time coming, so it should come as no surprise that dissent continues to rumble. Publishers of journals, including this one, are keenly aware of the complexities of nomenclature, just as they are alive to the possibilities, problems and pitfalls that might have a bearing on nomenclature in a period of rapid change. The current flight from print to electronic media might (although it is too early to say) have an effect on the dissemination of information as profound as that caused by the invention of the printing press, so it is understandable that those wedded to more