

GUEST COLUMN

The Montreal Protocol—A Really Big Idea

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With the challenges plaguing global treaties to stabilize greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, to avert levels of climate change that would exceed humanity's ability to adapt, it has become fashionable to blame the multi-lateral treaty making process itself. As greenhouse gas levels rise, in Canada and globally, it is common to hear a tone of derision when speaking of the Kyoto Protocol. And that contempt tends to bleed into the whole notion that any cumbersome process within the United Nations system can accomplish anything—especially if that “anything” is to save life on earth.

I know that cynicism is false and presents a dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy. And I know it is false because that same cumbersome process within the United Nations system has already saved life on earth. In 1987, Canada led the way to protect the ozone layer with a successful treaty called the Montreal Protocol.

But the Montreal Protocol, as pointed out in a recent article in *The Economist*, has done more than stop the increasing flow of ozone-depleting substances to the stratosphere. It has also contributed substantially to reducing global warming. Some, not all, ozone depleters regulated under the Montreal Protocol are also greenhouse gases. *The Economist* magazine conducted its

own study of the efficacy of measures to reduce greenhouse gases. The *Economist* editorial recently reported:

“CFCs are powerful greenhouse gases and the Montreal Protocol has reduced them by the equivalent of 135 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide (compared with doing nothing), making it by far the world's most effective action to tackle climate change. We have reviewed the carbon-cutting records of 20 policies which rein in greenhouse-gas emissions ... The protocol does almost as much as everything else on the list put together.”

Given the success of the Montreal Protocol, the *Economist* is calling for it to be expanded to include more ozone depleters with a global warming potential. As the world moves towards the deadline for a new climate treaty at the 21st Conference of the Parties set for Paris in December 2015, the *Economist* concludes, “the road to Paris should run through Montreal.”

In my new book, *Who We Are: Reflections on my Life and Canada* (Greystone, 2014), I share the story of the negotiations in Montreal in September 1987. The world was fortunate to have the kind of federal government that listened to scientists. Former prime minister Brian Mulroney was not drawn to the denier crowd about the threat to the ozone layer. Mulroney listened to scientists and accepted their advice. Meanwhile, US Secretary of the Interior Don Hodell tried to stop the Ronald Reagan White House from agreeing to limit CFCs. He famously maintained that all we needed was broad-brimmed hats and sunscreen. There are still Republicans in Congress who think the whole notion that the ozone layer is damaged—by the release of chlorine molecules in the stratosphere as CFCs, methyl bromide and other substances break down—is some sort of anti-capitalist plot.

The Montreal Protocol was so successful that the Kyoto Protocol was modeled on it. The Montreal Protocol pioneered the notion of “common, but differentiated responsibilities.” That is what allowed the developing countries to sign on to the agreement. They still wanted access to refrigerants to prevent food spoilage. So while wealthy industrialized countries agreed to cut ozone-depleters by 50 per cent, poorer nations were allowed to *increase* by 15 per cent. All nations agreed that as the science dictated deeper cuts, nations would do so. The same architecture is in Kyoto.

The primary difference between the Montreal and Kyoto Protocols is that Montreal had an effective enforcement mechanism in allowing trade sanctions against any country that failed to meet the terms of the agreement. Due to the creation of the World Trade Organization, pressure on Kyoto negotiators led to the removal of trade sanctions as an enforcement mechanism. Kyoto has no scheme of punishments for non-compliance.

Still, the major difference between the Montreal and Kyoto Protocols is that the countries that ratified the ozone agreement lived up to its terms. The countries that ratified Kyoto did less well, with Canada setting the disgraceful precedent of renouncing the terms of the treaty and then legally withdrawing—the only nation to do so.

But then again, the fate of the two treaties may be a lot simpler than all the analysis of treaty terms can reveal. Maybe it was the difference from having Canada led by a prime minister who respected the science, recognized a global threat and stuck to his word, versus one who does not. **P**

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