

-Bush Blinks; The U.S. now at the climate change table- Dion's conference leadership impresses; renewed enthusiasm sweeps the climate change policy community

By John Drexhage and David Runnalls

After two weeks of full days and late nights at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Montreal, one would expect negotiators, observers and officials to be spent. Exhausted. Not willing to talk about the weather for a while. That's often the case after a Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). But not this time.

The COP ended at 6:00 AM on Saturday, December 10, but as the sun rose on the day, a group of 30 experts from around the world, representing governments, industry, civil society and financial institutions, were already back at work. Not even three hours after the final gavel closed the Montreal Conference, this Task Force, focusing on finding a stronger market niche for projects that deliver significant emission reductions and development benefits in developing countries, was figuring out how to best implement the new decisions about the Clean Development Mechanism, one of the market mechanisms of the Kyoto Protocol.

It's apparent that there is renewed energy about taking on the immense challenge to address the growing threat of climate change. Canada's leadership at the COP under Environment Minister Stéphane Dion was a key factor. He was focused, results-driven and inclusive. So inclusive, in fact, that he was able to create an environment where the previously recalcitrant United States was willing to assume a seat at the UN's climate change table.

The U.S.'s decision to take part in discussions about what post-Kyoto negotiations might look like is a watershed moment—potentially critical in the evolution of international climate change policy efforts.

To be clear, though, the U.S. hasn't ratified the Kyoto Protocol, and made no major promises in Montreal about reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

But by agreeing to

sit at the table as

the discussions

move forward,

George W. Bush

has blinked. By

agreeing to take

part in discus-

sions on what the climate regime should look like

after the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012, the United

States is in essence recognizing the credibility and

validity of the UN process on climate change. This,

much to the surprise and delight of international

observers.

Why the change south of the border? The American willingness to talk about climate at the UN level is probably due to a number of factors. Perhaps Vice-President Dick Cheney's grip on energy policy is loosening. Perhaps it's because Bush's approval rating is so low, the White House didn't want to risk further negative press. Perhaps it's because there is a growing number of Americans—Democrats and Republicans alike—who are serious about address-

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ing the climate change issue.

Whatever the domestic U.S. drivers, it's clear that Dion and the Canadian delegation played a key role in building the sense of community and consensus that will allow the process to move forward constructively. As Richard Kinley, the acting head of the United Nations Climate Change Secretariat, said, "This has been one of the most productive UN Climate Change Conferences ever."

While the climate change community looks back at Montreal with a sense of accomplishment about the 40-plus decisions that were made at the COP, and celebrates the U.S. return to international climate talks, we must not lose sight of the challenges ahead.

What happened in Montreal did not stop the Arctic permafrost from melting. It didn't reverse coastal degradation of small island developing states. And it didn't free the planet of droughts and floods. What it did do was provide the international community with hope and the will to keep working on climate change issues.

Our role as Canadians is not only to reduce our own personal greenhouse gas emissions and ecological footprints, but also to encourage our governments and leaders to continue to lead as they work with the international community to address global climate change. Just like they did in Montreal.

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