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We're faking and fibbing on Kyoto

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A case can be made, not a certain one but a strongly persuasive one, that Canada would have done a lot more good for the cause of global climate control by not signing the Kyoto treaty, which comes into effect in just four weeks.

Having signed on (and having endlessly congratulated ourselves for doing more than those selfish, rapacious Americans), our government finds itself in the embarrassing position that there's quite obviously no way we can fulfill the Kyoto commitments we've taken on.

The government can't admit this, of course. So it's going to spend most of the time to 2012 (when the target of a 5.2 per cent reduction in greenhouse gases is supposed to be met) by faking it, by cheating and by fibbing — to us and to others.

This last is the real rub. We pride ourselves on being "model world citizens." Quite a few countries actually sort-of believe this about us. If the good guy cheats, why shouldn't everyone else?

This is why our contribution to reducing global warming is more likely to be an actual minus than just a zero. This unpleasant truth is just starting to break into public view.

Outsiders know it well. At a U.N. conference on climate change in Buenos Aires last month, the Japanese representative remarked, casually, as if it were self-evident, that when the Kyoto treaty comes up for renewal in 2012, Japan, Russia and Canada will all withdraw.

Back here, our own insiders know it equally well. A document prepared for cabinet by senior officials that's just been leaked to the press declares that under current policy and programs, "Canada is still going to be significantly off the Kyoto target."

Unstated in this document is that faking and fibbing are already key parts of our current policy and programs. Canada intends to claim as a reduction in our greenhouse gas output any increase in natural gas sales to the U.S. on the grounds these substitute for more polluting oil sales.

This proposition is patently rubbish. Kyoto or no Kyoto, we'll be selling all the natural gas we can to make more money, not to make less carbon dioxide.

But, comes the rebuttal, by signing on we're taking part in a great multilateral exercise that, for all its faults, does represent a first step.

This is a fair, and an important, point. Kyoto critics keep complaining that developing nations are exempt from the treaty. (China and India are now the second- and third-largest global polluters). The U.N., though, has put the role of developing countries in global warming on the agenda of its next Kyoto conference in May.

And a rebuttal to the rebuttal exists south of the border. President George W. Bush is indifferent to global warming. But a lot of Americans aren't. A number of states, led by California and New York (both, incidentally, with Republican governors), have enacted far stricter limits on emissions from power stations than Canada envisages, and are planning similar limits on automobiles, an action we haven't even started to think of.

And capitalists can occasionally be caring. Dow Chemical has reduced its greenhouse gas output by an astonishing 65 per cent (and saved money). No Canadian corporation has been as visionary. Similarly, none of our oil companies has begun to match the pollution reductions already implemented by Shell.

Our signing of Kyoto has been an exercise in political opportunism. Mostly, it enables us to do precious little while reassuring Canadians we're better than those awful Americans.

There are signs of improvement. Environment Minister Stéphane Dion is off this week to learn what to do. Where's he going? California.

Richard Gwyn's column appears on Wednesday. gwynR@sympatico.ca

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