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New Players on Global Warming

Given the Bush administration's inert approach to global warming, the best hope for getting a start on the problem this year lies with the Senate. The prospect that something will actually happen there improved greatly this week with the introduction of a bipartisan bill bearing the signatures of two marquee sponsors, Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut and John McCain of Arizona.

The bill provides an economywide approach to cutting emissions of greenhouse gases, mainly carbon dioxide, that threaten to disrupt the earth's climate in environmentally destructive ways. It would require industrial sources to scale back emissions and would also establish a market-based system of emissions trading, modeled on the successful 1990 acid rain program, to encourage innovation and help polluting industries meet their targets at the lowest possible cost.

These targets are more modest than America's obligations under the Kyoto Protocol, the agreement on climate change signed by the Clinton administration in 1997 and rejected as too costly by President Bush. Kyoto has since been ratified by about 100 countries. But given the administration's hostility, even the most aggressive environmentalists in this country would be happy just to establish clear goals and provide incentives for all the big polluters to begin getting a grip on their emissions.

The McCain-Lieberman initiative is a good place to start. There are other measures on Capitol Hill that address global warming, including a strong bill sponsored by Senator James Jeffords of Vermont that would also impose new limits on other major pollutants that cause smog and acid rain. But these bills are aimed almost exclusively at the electric utilities, whereas McCain-Lieberman is widespread in its application. It also enjoys the support of the major advocacy groups on this issue, as well as that of dozens of progressive companies like Alcoa and British Petroleum that are making emissions reductions in advance of what they are certain will eventually be mandatory targets.

The bill's strongest feature, however, may be its authorship. Mr. Lieberman supported Kyoto and is committed to aggressive action. Mr. McCain is a relatively new ally to the cause, and an indispensable one. As the new chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee, where he commands a majority of like-minded Democrats and moderate Republicans, he has an excellent chance of bringing a useful bill to the Senate floor. The same cannot be said of the other bills like Mr. Jeffords's, which are lodged in the Environment and Public Works Committee, a panel now led by the archconservative James Inhofe of Oklahoma.

Though it's hard to predict how this will play out, there has clearly been a major attitudinal change, even among Republicans, since 1997, when the Senate approved a resolution expressing doubts about the direction the Kyoto talks were then taking. Many legislators are deeply troubled by reports of shrinking glaciers, dying coral reefs and other ecological changes linked to warming. And many of these same lawmakers — not least Robert Byrd of West Virginia, a co-sponsor of the 1997 resolution — have lost patience with Mr. Bush's let's-wait-for-more-research stance. The time for the McCain-Lieberman approach may well be at hand.

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