A Climate for Change

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From a policy perspective, the global warming issue over the past decade has proven to be something of a sleeping giant that every so often threatens to stir. High-profile publications such as Science and Nature continue to showcase the latest scientific developments. An alphabet soup of domestic and international agencies grapple with the problem. Finally, a multilateral treaty, the subject of this book, is negotiated, adopted, and enters into force. But despite the greenhouse effect's entry into the global consciousness, meaningful reductions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases have yet to be implemented worldwide.

As suggested by its somewhat indeterminate title, Negotiating Climate Change can be read alternately as a catalog of international accomplishments, a litany of frustrations, or an explanation of the current state of international discourse on this social, political, economic, and environmental question.

The book consists of 12 essays by some of the more prominent individuals involved in the negotiation of the 1992 Rio de Janeiro climate convention. Among the contributors who played major roles in the negotiations are the chair of the negotiating process, the current executive director of the United Nations Environment Program, and the current EPA assistant administrator for international activities. The major constituencies in the negotiations are included, and representatives of business interests and nongovernmental environmental organizations have also contributed chapters.

The individual contributors tend to adopt a gritty, pragmatic, from-the-trenches view of the negotiations. For instance, several authors detail the very prominent division between industrialized and developing countries that characterized virtually every aspect of the negotiations. As several contributors note, differences and difficulties largely were papered over rather than resolved, which may explain the cumbersome and opaque drafting of the convention's text.

The work is an informative and useful tool for those unfamiliar with the nuances of multilateral negotiations. On a deeper level, anecdotal accounts of the participants engaged in the negotiations reflect the underlying dynamics. For example, Assistant EPA Administrator for International Activities William Nitze, then president of the nonprofit Alliance to Save Energy, offers a detailed critique of the United States' negotiating posture. Jean Ripert, the negotiating group's chair, describes closed-door deliberations among small groups of countries. Brazil's José Goldemberg relates revealing bilateral communications with the United States. Tariq Osman Hyder of Pakistan, coordinator of the G-77 group of developing countries, recounts the give-and-take within that group in attempting to reach common positions. A joint contribution by representatives of environmental groups from Europe and Bangladesh is especially effective in describing the parallel forces operating outside the formal sphere of government officials. These candid firsthand recollections from the various perspectives are the principal long-term contributions of the book.

The drawback to the multiple-author, first-person approach is the redundancy in much of the basic information concerning the history of the negotiations. Many of the authors recapitulate much of the same straightforward nuts-and-bolts history before providing their own interpretations. However, this is a small price to pay for the wealth of perspective and information in the book, and any frustrations are largely ameliorated by a very thorough index.

The editors adopt a highly congratulatory view. They characterize as strengths what many observers considered the convention's flaws. For instance, the convention's emphasis on process over product is presented as a virtue because it does not impose a set of environmental standards or policies that must be implemented unilaterally.

Although the authors acknowledge that the climate convention has long-term significance, it is difficult to discern common conclusions among the pieces. This is not surprising, for many of the supposed innovations in the convention's structure were prefigured by other instruments, most notably the Montreal Protocol, which regulates chlorofluorocarbons and other substances that deplete stratospheric ozone. Devices that were well known at the time of the convention's adoption in 1992 were assistance to developing countries, implementation of the agreement's obligations before entry into force, trades among pollutants, attenuated obligations for developing countries, periodic scientific reviews under the agreement, and institutional mechanisms to encourage compliance.

The climate convention is more plausibly characterized as incremental rather than radical institutional progress, an indicator of the "state of the art" in international environmental law and policy at the time of the Earth Summit. Even as such, however, the instrument represents a serious first step in grappling with a potentially serious global problem. Negotiating Climate Change no doubt is already the authoritative source on how the climate convention came to be.

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