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Warming Trends

Ever since George Bush renounced the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on global warming two years ago, the industrialized world has been waiting patiently for signs that Americans are ready to focus on the pressing issue of climate change. Lately some American politicians have begun to take the matter more seriously, even if Mr. Bush has not.

Last week Senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman extracted a pledge from their colleagues to hold a floor vote later this year on a promising and, by Senate standards, adventurous proposal for mandatory controls on industrial emissions of carbon dioxide, the main global warming gas. Meanwhile, 10 Northeastern governors agreed to devise a regional strategy to reduce these same emissions, regardless of what Washington does.

Perhaps the era of policy paralysis on global warming is giving way to a period of serious debate and, perhaps, action. That is certainly our hope, although there is no cause for celebration yet. Mr. Bush remains in denial, stubbornly positioned at the rear of a parade he ought to be leading, begging for voluntary steps from industries that have no incentives to take them. When all else fails, he asks — as he did two weeks ago — for new research into issues that have long been settled.

Congress is similarly unwilling to lead. On Thursday, in a desperate and almost vaudevillian effort to do something before the August recess, the Senate junked a dreadful energy bill it was working on in favor of another measure it approved last year. The replacement bill is only slightly less offensive, its useful provisions buried under an avalanche of subsidies for the traditional producers of the very fossil fuels that contribute most heavily to global warming: oil, gas and coal.

Sadder still is the fact that neither this bill nor a companion measure in the House offers anything in the way of imaginative ideas to slow the warming trend, limit our dependence on foreign oil and generally propel the country into a more enlightened energy future. The bills do not require meaningful increases in fuel economy standards for automobiles or S.U.V.'s. Nor do they put any serious money behind new technologies that could clean up the fuels we already have. Mr. Bush's Energy Department, for example, is engaged in an experimental effort to build a new generation of power plants that will continue to run on coal — the world's cheapest, most abundant fuel — but emit no global warming gases. Congress seems completely uninterested in giving this (or any other breakthrough idea) the money it needs.

The best that can be said of the Senate's pathetic effort is that it included the promised vote on the McCain-Lieberman bill. This bill, a modest and inexpensive version of the Kyoto framework, would require industry to stabilize and then reduce carbon dioxide emissions. It would also set up innovative market mechanisms to ease the costs of compliance. This is essentially the same model approved by the Northeastern governors, who hope to have a detailed plan in place in a year.

McCain-Lieberman is not likely to pass, absent an unexpected conversion on the issue by Mr. Bush and senior Republicans. But every senator will now be required to take a stand one way or the other on an

issue of great public concern, an issue on which the world has spoken clearly but Congress has remained irresponsibly silent for too long.

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