Climate: Game Over

WITH RESPECT TO CLIMATE CHANGE, WE HAVE ABRUPTLY PASSED THE TIPPING POINT IN what until recently has been a tense political controversy. Why? Industry leaders, nongovernmental organizations, Al Gore, and public attention have all played a role. At the core, however, it’s about the relentless progress of science. As data accumulate, denialists retreat to the safety of the Wall Street Journal op-ed page or seek social relaxation with old pals from the tobacco lobby from whom they first learned to “teach the controversy.” Meanwhile, political judgments are in, and the game is over. Indeed, on this page last week, a member of Parliament described how the European Union and his British colleagues are moving toward setting hard targets for greenhouse gas reductions.

Now that the scientific consensus is clear, it’s time to ask what the U.S. Congress is doing to keep pace with this new reality. The Senate has a recurring strong cap-and-trade bill, sponsored by John McCain (R-AZ) and Joe Lieberman (I-CT). The first time around, it got enough votes to constitute a moral victory for those supporting mitigation, but the next year it missed passage by a wider margin, and no one thinks the votes are there now. Talk of other initiatives abounds, but this area is a two-ring circus: First there’s climate, and then there’s energy.

You can’t really separate these two, but of course there’s a committee structure. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) established a new entity to work on climate change issues under the chairmanship of Ed Markey (D-MA), but as a Select Committee, it lacks real authority. Its impotence was a concession to John Dingell (D-MI), the congressman from Ford and Chevy, who heads the powerful Energy and Commerce Committee and wanted no threat to its authority. Dingell later proposed, with Rick Boucher (D-VA), a measure that would have stripped away the right of states (such as California and a dozen others) to set vehicle emissions standards of their own. Speaker Pelosi and Chairman Henry Waxman (D-CA) of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, in a startling exercise of leadership, took Big John to the woodshed and killed that effort.

There are so many loci for action that it’s hard to keep track of them all. The energy bill completed in the Senate includes corporate average fuel economy (CAFE) standards for the first time in many years. It will have to confront Dingell’s House committee, so it’s probably time to ponder the old Hill mantra that the House usually wins conferences. Pelosi has pushed the Energy and Commerce Committee to develop an energy bill with fuel efficiency features and research incentives for renewables, and a climate bill with tighter greenhouse gas emissions standards. But it is not clear that much will happen beyond marginal tweaking of the incentive structure for research. What the climate change scientists and the environmental community are looking for is a tough, big-target, emissions reduction plan.

How serious the prospects are for that is suggested by Dingell’s response to the notion. He has promised to introduce a bill that amounts to a carbon tax, resembling, if you recall, the Clinton “BTU tax” that failed so miserably. Dingell knows that this is political theater; the tax will go nowhere, and he’ll use this to argue that the system just isn’t politically ready for proposals that cost consumers money, any more than it’s ready for fuel consumption limits on their SUVs.

The bill voted most probable is the one introduced on 10 July by Senators Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) and Arlen Specter (R-PA). It will be a cap-and-trade system setting 2006 emissions levels for 2020 and 1990 levels for 2030. Permits will be distributed (not, alas, auctioned) initially, and emitters may buy additional ones for $12 per ton, increasing by 5% annually. That’s insurance: If the going gets tough in the trading system, you can buy yourself out with a modest carbon tax. Some say it doesn’t go far enough, but many believe it’s a way to get there; if not this year, then the next.

On the main energy and climate front, buckle yourself in and watch the fur fly. Dingell versus Waxman and Pelosi? It’s a political junkie’s dream.

– Donald Kennedy