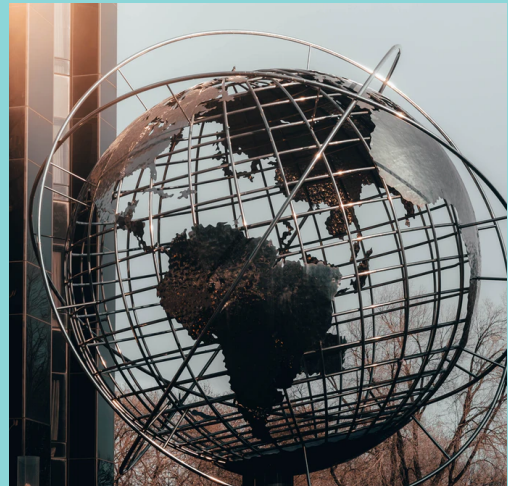


# INTERNATIONAL CLIMATE POLICY

## A BRIEF HISTORY

Scientists have been aware that carbon dioxide was building up in the atmosphere since the late 1950s. Although one or two were particularly concerned, on the whole there was a “let's wait and see what unfolds” approach. By the mid-1970s, however, a consensus started forming that CO<sub>2</sub> was going to be a major problem. In the early 80s, there were efforts, including by Al Gore, to get Congress and the Senate in the United States interested and there were similar rumblings in Germany, Australia and the UK. The key point is that in the mid-80s, the ozone hole- the thinning of patches of the ozone layer that surrounds the earth- became a cause celebre, or “a thing” as the young people used to say.



In 1985, an ozone treaty was agreed in Vienna but the US government was not happy that atmospheric scientists - as they perceived it - were dictating international policy. So after an important scientific meeting in Villach, Austria, the US Secretary of State George Shultz made sure that the United States was not “bounced” into a treaty on carbon dioxide as they had been on ozone.

In 1988, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was created. The word “governmental” is crucial here; it is not “international”. It is about governments being able to keep an eye on what's going on, and able to water down the “summaries for policymakers.” (The attacks on the actual science reports, assessment reports and Working Groups - that was left to the oil companies and outsiders). In the summer of 1988, climate change exploded onto the public policy agenda and public awareness, partly because there was a very severe drought in the American Midwest and the Mississippi River was at its lowest point, and there was an enormous heatwave in North America. And policy entrepreneurs managed to play a blinder. James Hansen's testimony on the 23rd of June is seen as a turning point. The outcome was that people like George Bush Senior and Margaret Thatcher started giving big public speeches, promising something would be done.

It took about a year until the middle of 1989 for the fight back by the oil and companies, the automobile manufacturers and the people who disliked the idea of environmentalism of limits to fight back, but they did. So you could argue that the founding of the Global Climate Coalition, an international lobbyist group representing industry interests, marks the beginning of that fight back. Obviously there are finer details which we cannot delve into in this handbook.

In 1990, the first assessment report of the IPCC was released. The delayed negotiations for an international treaty about climate change only began in January of 1991. And nothing much happened until close to the end of the negotiating period.

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## INTERNATIONAL CLIMATE POLICY (CONTINUED)

It's worth highlighting the position of countries in the Global South, who rightly pointed out that they did not cause this problem because they didn't burn enormous amounts of oil, coal and gas. And yet they were going to suffer the consequences for it in terms of sea level rise, heatwaves, changes to agriculture, etc. Basically, the Global North had caused the problem, and they had to do something about it. You can imagine that the Australians and the British, and the French and Americans were not pleased or enthused.

But the real standoff came between the Americans and the French. The French said, "Well, this is a serious issue. So the treaty that we all will sign in Rio, in June of 1992 has to have targets and timetables for emissions reductions by industrial countries." The Americans replied, "We didn't just win the Cold War to be tied down by international agreements. And if you keep targets and timetables in the treaty, we ain't coming to Rio, and we ain't signing your treaty. And your precious document will languish, useless, just like the International Law of the Sea." So it was a staring contest. And the French blinked.

This means that ever since 1992, when the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was signed and then ratified by individual nations, the problem of deciding who will reduce emissions, by how much and by when has persisted. All these different agreements ensued: the Berlin Mandate, the Kyoto Protocol, the Montreal process, the Bali Roadmap, the Copenhagen agreement, and the most recent Paris Agreement. None of them has been able to overcome the fact that back in 1992, the French blinked.

Meanwhile we are still deluding ourselves with technological fantasies about carbon capture and storage, or biosequestration or whatever. Meanwhile, emissions of greenhouse gases from human activity have gone UP sharply, rather than down.

So that was not a "short explanation" of the International framework. But it's a hidden history. It's a forgotten history, because many of the shiny-faced people now running around producing shiny reports were three years old when Rio was signed, and were never taught this stuff. And anyway, they are reluctant to talk about naked political power because they're technocrats, and they get nervous when they have to talk about the facts of life. If you want to know more, check out the longer version of the article [here](#).

Marc Hudson, another core group member of Climate Emergency Manchester, has had two articles published on The Conversation which might be of interest:

[IPCC: the dirty tricks climate scientists faced in three decades since first report](#)

[Don't bet on the UN to fix climate change – it's failed for 30 years](#)

### INTERNATIONAL POLICY: QUICK SUMMARY

- Scientists have been aware of the effects of CO<sub>2</sub> since the 1950s, but not much was politically considered until the mid '80s.
- The IPCC was formed in 1988, and public policy agenda began heavily featuring climate change the same year.
- UNFCCC signed in 1992, and a many different climate change agreements have ensued.
- The citizens of countries in these agreements are repeatedly told about advanced technological fantasies that will solve climate change, whilst at the same time greenhouse gas emissions continue to climb.