ON THIN ICE?

Climate change: emissions rise detracts from ozone 'success'

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In May 1985, the discovery by scientists of a 'hole' in the surface of the ozone layer over Antarctica alarmed the international community. It brought to light to an unprecedented scale the level of degradation humans were causing the planet – and would continue to cause until something was changed. Although the resultant strategy implemented by the 1987 Montreal Protocol has been seen as a marker of environmental success, the mixed messages surrounding climate change which we receive today indicate that it is a far more complex issue than previously thought. In September 2014, it was reported that the ozone layer was 'showing signs of recovery', prompting another wave of praise for the international cooperation of the UN at the Montreal Protocol. Yet only the day before, the biggest rise in greenhouse gas levels since 1984 was widely reported. In the midst of such apparent contradictory messages, is it surprising to see debate on climate change appear so persistently? Looking at the *Chatham House Online Archive*, it can be seen that such deep discussion – and resultant confusion – is nothing new.

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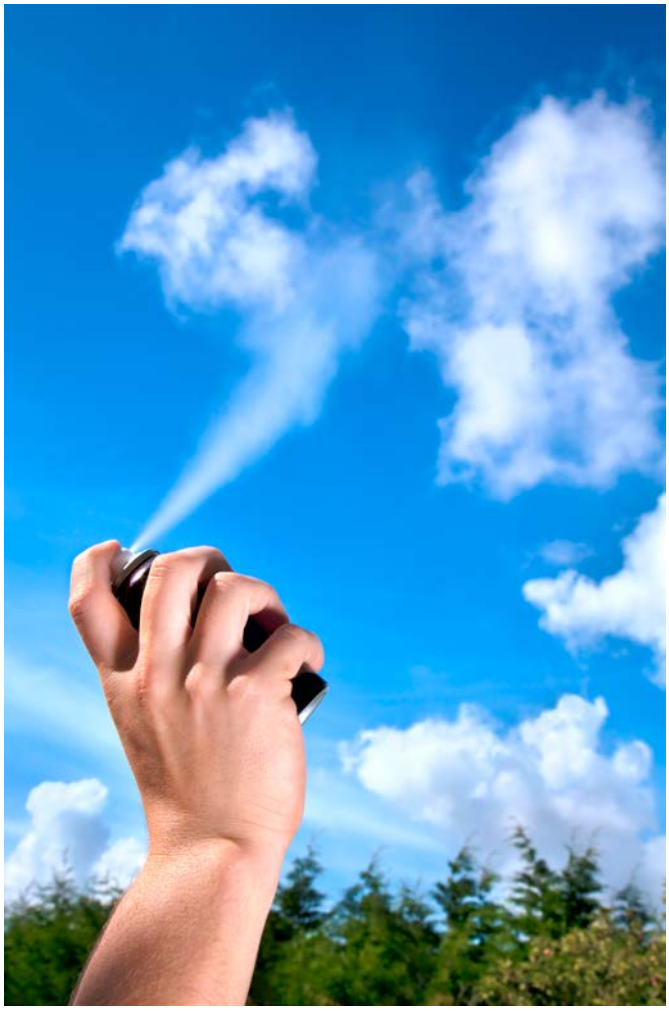
In the years following its implementation, the strategy of the Montreal Protocol (to drastically reduce, and eventually ban, the use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) found in many household items by 2000) seemed heavily praised. In her work *The Environment in*



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International Relations, which can be accessed in full on the *Chatham House Online Archive*, Caroline Thomas saw the unity of the UN countries at the Montreal Protocol as a hasty yet worthy effort to stop environmental demise. This is deemed especially credible in the face of scientific uncertainty. This uncertainty is, in fact, worthy of attention given the apparent simplicity of the causal relationship between human usage of CFCs and ozone depletion which she appears to support. For Thomas' claim that it is 'certain' that the ozone hole 'is caused primarily by man-made CFC emissions' seems remarkably confident in light of such ambiguity.

Upon further investigation, this uncertainty is a recurring theme on discussions of ozone depletion – and

of climate change more generally. Three years before Thomas' book was published, head of Environment and Energy at Chatham House Dr Michael Grubb wrote of the complexity of monitoring ozone and the difficulty of measuring the impact of methods to control it. In contrast to Thomas, he argued that limiting CFC usage was but one part of the problem, with more wide-reaching targets required to reduce greenhouse gas emissions more widely.

Reducing the issue of ozone layer depletion to a single cause is evidently unwise, supporting the argument offered by John Porritt in his Chatham House speech, where he labelled the Montreal Protocol a 'very limited achievement indeed'.

Underlying the views of Grubb and Porritt is the unavoidable, yet perhaps difficult, truth that many replacements for CFCs are also greenhouse gases. This includes the chief replacement for CFCs as declared at Montreal; hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs). This may explain the pessimistic sentiment of Grubb and Matthew Patterson in their 1992 chapter in the journal *International Affairs*, where they argue that there has been little advancement in climate change discussion. Here we can begin to appreciate the complexity of addressing climate change, and of crediting the outcome of a conference which has ultimately done little to prevent the wider rise of greenhouse gas emissions.

More broadly, much can be learnt from this formative phase of combatting climate change. It reveals some of the contradictions inherent in the process, supporting Beverley Darkin's opinion in 2005 that no clear end to discussions on the issue was likely for the foreseeable future. Viewed from today's perspective, amidst the appearance of two contrasting articles, Darkin's conclusion appears particularly sound. While the ozone hole may be recovering, there are clearly deeper issues which must be addressed before we can label our strategies for dealing with climate change a success – and before the issue takes a less prevalent role on the international agenda. **GALE**

Read and view extracts from referenced *Chatham House Online Archive* articles

"Chapter 6 Ozone Depletion." *The Environment in International Relations*. London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1992

Grubb, Michael. "*The Greenhouse Effect : Negotiating Targets*." 1st ed. The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1989

Porritt, Jonathon. "*Global Approaches to Environmental Problems*." RIIA/8/4893. Chatham House, London. 08 Mar. 1989

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