

Gorbachov urges Australia, US to sign Kyoto Protocol, avoid nuclear power

Gorbachov has gone green in his dotage.

MBC News
July 31, 2006

Gorbachev has urged Australia and the US to sign the Kyoto Protocol while cautioning the Australian government not to go down the path of nuclear power.

Speaking through an interpreter at Brisbane's Earth Dialogues conference this week, the 75-year-old head of the environmental group Green Cross International described his country's tragic history with nuclear power and weighed into the current debate in Australia over the environmental benefits of investing in nuclear power.

"In our country, we have seen the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and this changed our attitude towards nuclear power," he said to reporters.

"I believe, given there is a deficit of energy and the power situation in the world is very difficult, that nuclear power stations may be needed, but only as a lesser evil, and only in extreme need should such stations be built."

The Green Cross chairman also lamented the lack of resources directed to develop alternative forms of energy.

"I believe that alternative sources are not available precisely because not enough investment is being made into those new sources of energy, into creating conditions for the use of new power sources," he said

"...for the Iraq war, very quickly \$100 billion was found to execute or prosecute that war, whereas we need just \$50 billion over 10 years for research into solar power."

Credited with implementing the policies that ended the totalitarian rule of the Communist party in the Soviet Union, Gorbachev attended the Earth Dialogues summit as co-chairman and key speaker, in his capacity as head of the environmental organisation Green Cross International.

The group, founded by Gorbachev in 1993, provides assistance to groups affected by environmental degradation and aims to promote "changes in the values, actions and attitudes of government, the private sector and civil society, necessary to build a sustainable future," according to the Geneva-based organisation's website.

In this position, Gorbachev has championed the Kyoto Protocol – an agreement signed by most nations in 1997 in Kyoto, Japan to reduce environmentally damaging carbon emissions – and used his appearance at the summit to berate Australia and the US for their refusal to endorse the agreement.

"Our reservoir of life is shrinking. Before it is too late I think we need to put our environmental house in order." Gorbachev said. He also accused the United States of behaving like a "stubborn animal" over its refusal to ratify the protocol and urged the Australian government to use its influence with the Bush administration to change its mind.

The Howard government has though has largely ignored Gorbachev's advice. In an address to the Queensland government's Climate Change summit, days after Gorbachev's speech, federal Environment Minister Senator Ian Campbell questioned the efficacy of the Kyoto Protocol.

"Unfortunately [Kyoto] ignored almost totally around 70 per cent of the world's emissions. Under Kyoto if everyone meets their targets, the world's greenhouse gas emissions will, in fact, go up between 1990 and the year 2012 by around 41 per cent," he said.

Seeming to resent Gorbachev's advice Campbell went on to say,

"...we do get lectured from time to time here in Queensland, in Australia, by Europeans and others that we should've signed Kyoto as some sort of magic silver bullet. But we have been working very hard with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to design something that's...far more effective," he said.

The Australian government, like its US counterpart, has steadfastly refused to entertain the idea of ratifying the Kyoto protocol saying that to commit to targets for a reduction in carbon emissions would wreck the country's coal-based energy sector and throw the Australian economy into recession.

However using his closing address on Monday to warn the audience that immediate emergency action was necessary, Gorbachev said the global environmental crisis amounts to a "five minutes to midnight" warning for the world.

"When we speak of the environment, we say that the situation is five minutes to midnight," he said.

"We are already in a global environmental crisis. The atmosphere has been polluted and it has had an impact on the global climate."

"We see the shrinking of arable land, deforestation...the pollution of the ocean, this is already affecting our lives in a very bad way. We have very little time to act," he added.

Citing the failures of previous environmental summits, Gorbachev urged the world's leaders to act now to save the environment.

"If we don't, then I think that the coming generations will look at us and will say that we failed," he said.