



Need for Obama to take action

CHRISTIAN DOWNIE

Many are pinning their hopes on the new United States Administration at the international climate change negotiations taking place in Bonn, this week. However, a look back at the Clinton years suggests history may well repeat itself.

The inauguration of President Clinton in 1993 was met with great fanfare in the international environment community and rightly so. During his campaign, Clinton's team had denounced the former Bush administration for its "abdication of leadership" on climate change. It was hoped that a reassessment by the new president would lead to a major shift in the US position.

Fast forward to January 20, 2009, and the situation was almost identical. In November, in his first major speech on climate change since winning the election, then President-elect Barack Obama stated that, "few challenges facing America – and the world – are more urgent than combating climate change" and pledged to confront it.

The first weeks of President Obama's administration were positive. In February, he directed US federal regulators to move swiftly on an application by California and 13 other states to set strict limits on greenhouse gases from cars and trucks. Progressive Democrats in Congress, supported by the Administration, are also pushing for a cap-and-trade scheme for this year. Once again, many are hoping a major shift in position on climate change is on the cards.

And, why not? After the calamity that was George W Bush's administration, the stage is now

set for the new President to lead the world on climate change.

The state of the climate change debate has moved considerably since Clinton's presidency. In the early 1990s, the climate negotiations were characterised by scientific and economic uncertainties. In many nations, governments and popular opinion were sceptical of anthropogenic climate change. Most business groups were divided on the issue and developing countries did not want to participate in negotiations over an issue they viewed as a problem for developed countries.

Today the picture has changed. The science has shifted enormously. In 2007, The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concluded that there was a 90 per cent chance of climate change occurring and that humans were the main cause.

Growing scientific certainty has been followed by growing economic certainty. Several widely respected economic inquiries including, the British Government's Stern Review and the Australian Garnaut Review, have found the costs of doing nothing are much higher than the costs of acting now. Business groups are no longer divided as they were and developing countries are pushing for action.

However, take a closer look, and the controversies that plagued the climate negotiations in the early 1990s remain.

It seems likely the US will still demand countries such as China and India take "meaningful action" before it commits to significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. So far, developing countries are refusing.

Like in the Clinton years, developing countries insist that

they receive financial transfers and access to technologies before they undertake national measures.

The US and Europe have long asserted that transfers of the scale required be tied to specific conditions on how the money and technology are used. Fair enough, as they have seen a lot of money misused in the past.

On the other hand, developing countries continue to resist conditionality for fear they will be employed to interfere in their economic development. They too have a point. The IMF and the World Bank have not had the best record in many parts of the world.

If Obama wants to stop history repeating itself, he is going to have to find a way to move international climate negotiations out of this unproductive cycle. Despite his bright start this will not be easy.

On the international front there is the global financial crisis. Many Western governments are likely to have less inclination than they did a year ago to provide financial transfers to developing countries to deal with climate change, warranted though they are.

Further, as Clinton found, the toughest hurdles to climate action are likely to be on the home front. While Obama does not face the hostile Congress that Clinton did in 1994, senators from the Midwest have already voiced intentions to resist legislation countering the interests of their coal-dependent states.

Obama knew this wouldn't be easy. Making history is always more difficult than repeating it. If anyone should know, he should.

■ Christian Downie is a PhD Scholar at the Australian National University, researching the international climate negotiations.