

On Tuesday, March 17, 2009, a full-page newspaper advertisement, run in reportedly all of Japan's dailies, sent shockwaves through the country's green community. The advertisement's message, co-sponsored by the Nippon Keidanren (English: the Japan Business Association) and 27 other business and industry federations, asks of the newspapers' readership if they will not think about "the costs we all have to bear".

The size 120 bold font headline is accompanied by a brief motto-like text: "Japan is the world's top low-carbon society. We intend to further raise the world's highest energy efficiency levels and proactively contribute to global emissions reductions. On the other hand, the question of the costs to society as a whole is also important."

The said reductions refer to Japan's mid-term target for emissions cuts under a treaty to succeed the Kyoto Protocol after 2012, when the latter expires. Japan announced last month a bewildering array of potential commitments for the 2012-2020 period, ranging from a 6% increase of emissions to a 25% decrease relative to the 1990 base year. The Prime Minister's office is to announce its final pick in June.

Even a modest -3% target would cost the equivalent of 1.05 million yen (approx EUR 8,000) per household, the group of 28 business associations informs the whole nation. The current Cabinet suffers already dismal approval ratings and 2009 is an election year. This stoking of negative public opinion clearly is meant to gnaw away at whatever shred of public support the government might have counted on to in order to impose an ambitious mid-term emissions reduction target. This cheap appeal to the public's concern about its wallet is doubly potent today given Japan's unprecedented GDP contraction stemming from the current global financial crisis.

The document is thoroughly propagandist in nature. Leaving aside the matter of economic advantages likely to accrue to those who develop enhanced energy-saving and emission-reducing technologies first, global warming is mentioned throughout the page only in passing: once as the focus of the worrisome government policies and once more as being unavoidable if others shirk their obligations. The words "climate change" did not find its way into the advertisement at all.

The text brings no new ideas. It essentially merely reiterates the same hackneyed tropes of the Japanese discussion on the Kyoto Protocol: Graphs proving outstanding Japanese energy efficiency, the unfair base year ignoring Japan's prior success in reducing its reliance on carbon, and the pointlessness of negotiating a new framework if countries such as the US, China and India do not participate – it is all there. However, the developments of the past year, such as Washington, Moscow and Beijing seemingly adopting a more constructive approach, are not mentioned at all.

What is new is the advertisement's scale. It is clear that Japanese Big Business has seen the writing on the wall: a consensus is forming that global emission levels need to be reduced drastically. Japan is running out of wiggle room and the government is likely going to throw its weight behind bringing emissions down – way down, given how far above its commitments Japan currently is. For decades businesses have kept meddlesome

government supervision at arm's length, but now it looks as if this may be just around the corner.

One is tempted to feel pity for Japan's corporations. The fact is that they have indeed achieved unparalleled advances in energy efficiency and it looks like they might be asked to do even more. Meanwhile, the real cause for bloated Japanese emissions is likely to go unaddressed. Since 1990 the emissions of the housing and transportation sector have ballooned, with next to no concrete steps being taken to rein them in.

Unfortunately, after Junichiro Koizumi's departure in 2006 the ruling Liberal Democratic Party has muddled rudderlessly from one ineffectual Prime Minister to another. The population is disenchanted with the LDP, which likely feels utterly unable to foist the policies and measures an effective climate change regime requires on a moody electorate. A new reformist Prime Minister, with a powerful popular base, is needed today to make the Japanese understand that sometimes there are costs that simply need to be born.