

Leadership Failure in Madrid

By Don Sutherland

In 1987, humanity was confronted with a growing ozone hole over the Southern Hemisphere and the implication of an inevitable and dramatic rise in skin cancer cases. The world's leaders at that time, even while taking on an existential Cold War struggle, came together in Montreal to adopt a solution to address the problem. A binding commitment to completely phase out the use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and halons was agreed. That treaty was universally ratified. Since then, much progress has been made in replenishing Antarctic ozone.

On October 21, 2019, NASA [revealed](#):

Thirty-two years ago, the international community signed the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer. This agreement regulated the consumption and production of ozone-depleting compounds. Atmospheric levels of man-made ozone depleting substances increased up to the year 2000. Since then, they have slowly declined but remain high enough to produce significant ozone loss. The ozone hole over Antarctica is expected to gradually become less severe as chlorofluorocarbons—banned chlorine-containing synthetic compounds that were once frequently used as coolants—continue to decline. Scientists expect the Antarctic ozone to recover back to the 1980 level around 2070.

Then, science carried the day. Political leaders made the kind of decisions that fall with leadership responsibility. They made no excuses. They embraced no defeatist conclusions that addressing the problem would be economically harmful, much less fatalistic notions that nothing could be done. They did not descend into "denialism" or conspiracy theories aimed at alleviating responsibility to act from their shoulders. Instead, they acted with conviction. They put the world on a better path.

Just three decades later, when confronted by another great global challenge—that of anthropogenic climate change--the world's leaders abdicated their responsibility at the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP25) at Madrid. They proved unable to summon the courage, foresight, and leadership to tackle the global challenge of the contemporary era. They chose timidity at a time when no great struggle comparable to the Cold War is raging.

Put simply, they failed the test of leadership. They demonstrated that although they hold positions of authority, they lack the capacity and qualities necessary to lead. Instead, they chose to remain passive bystanders to history.

They failed as leaders. They failed as people.

In their enormous failure to lead, they have substantially magnified the burden they have already left to today's youth, along with future generations to come. In doing so, they have defined their generation as perhaps the most short-sighted one in modern history.