

# Escaping the Trap: Climate Cooperation that Works

*An urgent alternative to 30 years of inadequacy*

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Climate action is becoming harder to defend, not easier. The costs land at home – on energy bills, on industry, on voters – while the benefits disperse invisibly across the globe. Commitments have been made, political capital spent, and global emissions have continued to rise. Other nations talk, delay, and free-ride. And the question that is increasingly difficult to avoid is whether ambitious unilateral climate policy is politically sustainable.

This is not a failure of ambition. It is a structural trap. Climate change is a global problem, and no national policy – however bold – can solve an international problem alone. The costs of acting fall locally, while the benefits are shared globally, including by those who do little. But this trap is not inevitable. It dissolves the moment nations stop making unilateral pledges and start making conditional ones – I will if you will.

*Themis* is a concrete mechanism built on exactly this principle. Rather than asking nations to pledge independently and hope others follow, Themis asks nations to commit to a common minimum carbon price through reciprocal commitments – each nation’s pledge conditional on others doing the same. The political argument that has made unilateral carbon pricing so difficult – that ambitious action damages competitiveness – simply disappears. Nations are no longer going first. They are moving together.

Member nations partially redistribute carbon revenues between themselves in proportion to population – so nations with below-average per capita emissions receive net transfers, and nations with above-average emissions make net contributions. The price is determined not by negotiation but by simple preference elicitation. No nation goes first, no nation is undercut, and no nation bears costs that others do not share.

This is not a call for altruism. Themis does not depend on goodwill or blind trust – it is built on self-interest, structured so that acting in your own interest and acting for the collective good are aligned. Almost every nation faces severe economic consequences from unmitigated climate change – disrupted agriculture, rising sea levels, infrastructure costs, migration pressure.

Joining Themis is rational self-protection. The mechanism exists to make collective action possible. Joining is how a nation ensures that collective action actually happens.

International climate negotiations have become a byword for delay. Nations arrive with red lines, spend years haggling over legal language, and leave with commitments vague enough to be acceptable and therefore too vague to be effective. This is not inevitable – it is a consequence of the negotiating format. When showing your hand too early becomes dangerous, ambiguity becomes rational. Themis replaces this with something radically different: a structured process in which nations simply express their honest price preference on reciprocal terms. No posturing, no red lines, no strategic ambiguity. And crucially, the process is designed so that honesty is always in your self-interest. You cannot be outmanoeuvred by telling the truth.

What does engaging with Themis require? At the first stage, nothing more than stating your preferred price – no negotiation, no bilateral haggling, no legal exposure. Only once all preferences are expressed and the resulting parameters are known does the question of joining arise. The terms are fully specified, fully transparent. There is no possibility of surprises.

Carbon pricing has been proposed before – but never in a reciprocal form capable of commanding broad consent. That is precisely why it has struggled to gain political traction. Themis is different: the price is common to all members on reciprocal terms, which removes the competitive distortion that has made every previous attempt so politically costly. The only risk is the one that already exists – the risk of a world in which climate cooperation never happens.

Themis is a new proposal, but the problem it addresses is not. For 30 years, international climate negotiations have operated on the same flawed assumption – that nations will act ambitiously if asked nicely enough. They won't, and the emissions data shows it. What has been missing is not ambition but architecture: a framework in which acting in your own interest and acting for the collective good are aligned. We have treated climate change as a scientific and technological challenge – and the science and technology have delivered. The missing piece isn't the science or the engineering. It's in understanding ourselves: how humans cooperate, how incentives work, how to design agreements that make honesty the rational choice. Cooperation is not an idealistic aspiration – it is a practical human capability, one we exercise constantly in other domains. Themis applies it to climate. The full proposal is available at [mlg.eng.cam.ac.uk/car1/climate/themis.pdf](http://mlg.eng.cam.ac.uk/car1/climate/themis.pdf).