

# Escaping the Trap: Climate Cooperation that Works

*A proposal for policy makers*

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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 an international 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 – conditionally, knowing that others are committing to the same. The playing field is level by design: no member is undercut, no nation bears costs that others do not share. 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.

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, given that others are willing to commit too. 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 actually require? At the first stage, nothing more than stating your nation's honest price preference – what carbon price your nation could accept, given that others commit to the same. No negotiation, no bilateral haggling, no legal exposure. You are simply saying, openly and honestly, what you would be willing to do if others did the same. Only once the preferences of all participating nations have been expressed, and only once the resulting price and redistribution parameters are known, does the question of joining arise. At that point, the choice is simple: the terms are fully specified, fully transparent, and you either join or you don't. 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 and conditional on others committing too, 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.

This is not lobbying. There is no commercial interest here, no organisation to join, no campaign to fund. This proposal comes from someone with no stake in its adoption beyond the one that every alive person on earth shares – an interest in a liveable future for family and community. Most people in public life know that addressing the climate crisis is the right thing to do. What has been missing is not the will, but a credible and concrete way to do it together. New ideas are hard to grasp before they become obvious. Those who make the difference are not the ones who recognise a good idea after it has won – but those with the foresight and courage to see it early, and the influence to bring it into the conversation before it is too late. 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). If this resonates, please share it with colleagues and peers – and be in touch.