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Copenhagen Reflections: was anything accomplished?

Elizabeth May

The post-COP15 perspectives and analyses have been grim and negative. It could hardly be otherwise. Much of the media has been focussed on finding blame. The Guardian ran free-lancer Mark Lynas' assessment: How do I know China wrecked the Copenhagen deal? I was in the room, www.guardian.co.uk/profile/marklynas (December 22, 2009). But being 'in the room' in the bizarre, last minute, non-UN process to force a deal does not give the full picture. There is more than enough blame to go around.

One starts with the host government. Much was at stake, but Denmark's diplomatic efforts contributed to failure. The poisoning of the negotiating climate began on Day 2 with the leaked draft Danish text—a rich countries' agreement to kill the Kyoto Protocol. Further problems were the bizarre logistics and security mess. It was egregious enough to accredit 40,000 participants for a space that accommodated 15,000 (and the UN Climate secretariat must answer for much of this mess), but when security barred members of country delegations from the building, the negotiating climate worsened. China's head of delegation was reported to have been denied access for the first few days. At times, Brazil's senior negotiator was unable to get in the room.

As soon as the High Level segment began and Prime Minister Rasmussen took over chairing duties from Environment Minister Connie Hedegaard, things went from bad to worse. The negotiators had worked all night agreeing to a new text on the Kyoto Protocol. As Minister Hedegaard left the chair, she noted a new text would be circulated soon from the Presidency. The question hanging in the room was 'where is the text we negotiated all night?' As she retreated, Prime Minister Rasmussen refused to allow the question to be answered, so keen was he on keeping the set speeches to take centre stage and run on time. In this brief public display the extent of the hostilities was clear. The head of the Chinese delegation spoke of the issue being a 'matter of trust with the host country.' Brazil and India agreed, the head of the Indian delegation still being quite flustered by the problems he encountered getting through security. South Africa and the Sudan, speaking for the group of 130 developing countries, also spoke of a lack of transparency in denying the primacy of the

negotiated text in favour of some new text from the chair. Prime Minister Rasmussen ploughed ahead, ignoring the flag of Venezuela, cutting off none other than Hugo Chavez who had already joined his negotiators in the room.

The diplomatic gaffes continued the next night as leaders from around the world were invited to attend dinner with the Queen of Denmark. In an effort to get key leaders in the room for an informal chat, Prime Minister Rasmussen invited what he considered were the most important countries. Rumour has it he forgot to invite China. So, I do not doubt that what Mark Lynas saw looked like China wrecking a deal, but the wrecking started with a bizarre number of affronts to China before the world leaders arrived.

Blame also goes to Canada. In spring 2006 when Environment Minister Rona Ambrose was President of the COP, post Montreal's hosting of COP11, Canada made itself the 'bad boy' of climate talks. With Canada actually chairing the negotiations, Ambrose announced Canada was not going to even attempt to reach our Kyoto target. Ever since, Canada has expanded the space for bad behaviour. Countries could be very uncooperative and counter-productive and still not be as bad as Canada. At the same time, in negotiation after negotiation, we laid down our square brackets (in international negotiations, applying square brackets to a draft text indicates disagreement with a phrase or section), blocking consensus on multiple issues. The reason Canada kept winning the Fossil of the Day award in negotiations, at COP 12, 13, 14 and 15, was that we were actively obstructing progress. And we continued being counter-productive right through the COP15 talks, winning, once again, the Colossal Fossil of the Year award.

On top of that, the US let everyone down. If there had been any hope, it was that President Obama would bring some flexibility to negotiations. Instead, he delivered a speech that had elements of Gary Cooper in 'High Noon.' It led to a forced, back-room effort to achieve something that could be used to appease a domestic US audience. So too was the United Nations hijacked to the US Senate and Obama's desire to pass the Waxman-Markey bill.

What now? Thanks to the round of all-night negotiations after the leaders had climbed on their jets for home, the so-

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Island Tides, Box 55, Pender Island, BC, Canada.
Email: islandtides@islandtides.com.

Phone: 250-629-3660. Fax: 250-629-3838.
Website: <http://www.islandtides.com>

called Copenhagen Accord was not the decision of COP15. Through the UN fudge of saying COP15 'took note' of the five country deal, the commitments by China to allow verification of its reductions, and the financial commitments of wealthy countries, have been preserved as somehow meaningful. At the same time, the COP15 process did not allow the back-room accord to kill the Kyoto Protocol.

Copenhagen was a disaster, but it was not an unmitigated one. The negotiations continue. Civil society has found its champions, in the small low-lying island states, in African nations that argued that 2 degrees was too much in global

temperature rise. We have a hellish hard task ahead to achieve the real carbon cuts that are urgently needed. Copenhagen was supposed to be the end of the road. Instead, it was a nasty pot hole. ☞

This report was previously published in Embassy Magazine, who have kindly granted permission for its inclusion in Island Tides.

Elizabeth May, OC, is the author of Losing Confidence—Power, Politics and the Crisis in Canadian Democracy (McClelland and Stewart, 2009) and is the federal leader of the Green Party of Canada. She lives in Sidney, BC.

Communities for Climate Change

Some fifty Pender people gathered at the Driftwood Centre on the evening of December 12 to show their support for a successful conclusion to the climate change negotiations then underway in Copenhagen, Denmark. Standing in a large circle, faces illuminated only by candles, they joined similar gatherings worldwide in their hope that the 192 nations and some 40,000 people gathered in the Danish capital would make real progress toward an international consensus,



resulting in national commitments to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

It was a quiet, but emotional moment. The Pender gathering illustrated that while nations and governments dither and jockey for economic position, people the world over want action.

The Islands Trust has proposed that each Island's Official Community Plan include amendments encouraging reduction of GHG emissions. These will be discussed at a North Pender LTC meeting January 23, 1pm at the Community Hall, and a South Pender LTC meeting February 6, 1pm at the South Pender firehall.

Between these meetings, an Open Community Meeting will be held on the Saturday, January 30, from 1-4pm at the Anglican Parish Hall, 4703 Canal Road, North Pender. This meeting will discuss the Transition Town model (see www.transitionculture.org), peak oil, climate change, Pender vulnerabilities, and staying engaged with the rest of the world. According to organizer Zorah Starr (250-629-3825, cmzs@shaw.ca) there are opportunities to transition into an even better future for Island communities. ☞

The latest figures Commentary ~ Peter Carter

Imagine you are staring at a blank lined page. That is literally the resulting document of the most important decision-making meeting in human history—the United Nations Copenhagen Climate Conference in December 2009. The Copenhagen Accord is the result of negotiations and international meetings over the past two years. It is an agreement to take no measures whatsoever to prevent catastrophic global climate change. If the accord is left to stand, that empty page (the appendix that is supposed to list the substantive decisions on targets and limits, etc) is the future of humanity. Blank.

That makes this New Year like no other. The five years from 2007 to 2012 will be the defining period for all humanity because of the impacts of still-increasing global industrial

greenhouse gas pollution. We are running out of time. Yet incredibly, the worse the research data gets, the less becomes the interest.

What follows is the most important news of 2009, or indeed of all time. It is the latest global climate data, which shows that we are all now in peril. That is because of what is happening in the Arctic and because we have no plan to stop the catastrophic climate trends. The climate deniers are spreading reassuring propaganda to keep us burning fossil fuels, but if we love today's children, the data is truly terrifying.

Carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from the burning of fossil fuels increased by two per cent from 2007 to 2008, by 29 per cent between 2000 and 2008, and by 41 per cent between 1990

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and 2008. The rate of increase of CO₂ emissions from the burning of fossil fuels has tripled—increased at an average annual rate of 3.4 per cent between 2000 and 2008, compared with one per cent per year in the 1990s (International Global Carbon Project 2009).

Levels of most greenhouse gases continue to increase. In 2008, global concentrations of carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide, which are the main long-lived greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, have reached the highest levels recorded since pre-industrial times. Since 1990, the overall increase in radiative forcing caused by all long-lived greenhouse gases is 26% (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), December 2009).

The 2009 average for atmospheric CO₂ is 387 parts per million (ppm), and its rate of increase since 2000 continued to accelerate.

Atmospheric methane is now at 1810 parts per billion (ppb), leveling out after having jumped from 1785 ppb in 2005. Its post-industrial increase is a huge 150%.

Nitrous oxide, at 323.5 ppb, maintains its steady increase since 2000 (NOAA data).

The fraction of total CO₂ emissions remaining in the atmosphere has likely increased from 40 to 45 per cent since 1959. This means the planet is not absorbing as much of the extra carbon being emitted (Global Carbon Project).

The current ranking of 2009 places it as the fifth-warmest year since temperature record-keeping began. The decade of the 2000s (2000–2009) was warmer than the decade spanning the 1990s (1990–1999), which in turn was warmer than the 1980s (1980–1989) (World Meteorological Organization, December 2009).

The Arctic has always been the region to watch because it is Arctic methane emissions that would cause runaway global heating and the end of our world. Research published in 2008 from the Siberian Arctic (East Siberian Sea) showed methane gas from frozen solid subsea methane hydrate being released from the ocean bed and emitting into the atmosphere. The Russian researchers concluded the following: ‘We consider release of up to 50 billion tons of hydrate storage as highly possible for abrupt release at any time. That may cause a 12-times increase of modern atmospheric methane burden with consequent catastrophic greenhouse warming.’

In May 2009, another research paper from the Norwegian Arctic (West Spitsbergen continental margin) on methane hydrate showed that methane gas is bubbling from the ocean floor. This paper concluded: ‘If this process becomes widespread along Arctic continental margins, tens of teragrams of methane per year could be released into the ocean.’ (One teragram is equal to a million metric tons.)

The jump in atmospheric methane since 2006 was at least partially due to the addition of Arctic methane emissions from the rapidly warming Arctic regions (NOAA). For 20 years after

its emission, methane has 70 times the heating effect of CO₂. So we are all now living in peril.

The Arctic sea ice is rapidly thinning. The total multiyear ice volume in the winter experienced a net loss of more than 40% in the four years since 2005. The extent of the 2009 summer sea ice cover was the third lowest value of the satellite record (beginning in 1979) and more than 25% below the 1979–2000 average.

Permafrost temperature has increased by 1 to 2°C in northern Russia during the last 30 to 35 years. This observed increase is very similar in magnitude and timing to what has been observed in Alaska. An especially noticeable permafrost temperature increase in the Russian Arctic was observed during the last two years.

Record-setting summer temperatures around Greenland, combined with an intense melt season (particularly across the northern ice sheet), led the 2008 Greenland climate to be marked by continued ice sheet mass deficit and marine-terminating ice disintegration (NOAA 2009).

The loss of the Arctic summer sea ice ‘air conditioner’ or cooling effect would increase the rate of methane being released from the Arctic permafrost and subsea methane hydrate. It would change the climate of the northern hemisphere with implications for both agriculture and regional and world security.

Will we resolve in 2010 to rescue today's children from a planet with no future and leave them to develop the age of perpetual, nonpolluting energy? That is the question of all time, and one which no one is posing.

Here are the simple undeniable facts (based on the laws of physics and ecology) that are being generally denied:

- If we do not stop emitting global warming greenhouse gases, the planet must heat up beyond the capacity of humans to tolerate.
- If we continue emitting carbon dioxide, the oceans will heat and acidify beyond the capacity to sustain most marine life.
- If the Arctic keeps warming, it will keep releasing more methane, which could end almost all life through runaway heating of the planet.
- Fossil fuels are running out and will become more expensive, with more profit for fossil fuel corporations—for a few more years.

We have no future with fossil fuels.

The December 2009 United Nations Copenhagen Climate Conference formalized the denial of the fact that we are all living in a dire state of global climate emergency while committing us all to remain dependent on fossil fuels for energy.

The insane rule of economic market forces is a global death sentence. The changes that have to be made for our survival are so urgent, great and wide ranging that only a revolution in our civilization can save our civilization. ✍

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