

The Oxford Left Review

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THE SCIENCE OF COPENHAGEN

KAIHSU TAI

In the last few months the media reported intensively on the Copenhagen summit on climate change, corresponding to the intense civil-society attention given to it over the whole of 2009. This briefing sets out (from the limited vantage point of its author) the science underlying the negotiations at COP15, and an assessment of its outcome. It concludes that despite the generally disappointing and despondent tone after the summit, there are a few signs of hope for the persistent campaigners.

The first half of December 2009 saw the Copenhagen summit on climate change. Officially, this was the 15th session of the Conference of Parties (COP15)¹ to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)², a process which started in 1992. An earlier UNFCCC attempt to coordinate the worldwide actions against climate change on an intergovernmental level was the Kyoto Protocol of 1997. COP15 aimed to reach agreement on what is to come after the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012. Because its high profile attracted the attendance of many heads of governments, COP15 was often reported in the media as the Copenhagen summit.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)³ is a group of scientists set up by the governments to advise on the science of climate change. Reading the latest assessment report of 2007 from the IPCC, augmented with other trusted sources for updates, I understand that to limit the most dangerous effects of climate change (such as large sea-level rise and more-intense extreme weather events), the global average temperature rise needs to be limited to within 2°C from pre-industrial levels. This in turn requires controlling the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere to within 350 parts per million carbon dioxide equivalent (at the moment it is a bit above 380 ppm). These numbers we cannot directly control. What we can control are the emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. These we can reduce, mainly by cutting down the use of fossil fuels (coal, oil, and natural gas), but also by other methods of mitigation, such as slowing down deforestation.

In the UNFCCC, the governments of the world, taking into account the world history of industrialization and differing levels of development, recognized that all countries have “common but differentiated responsibilities” in facing the challenge of climate change. From this, the expectation is for rich countries to cut emissions more drastically than poorer countries. Also, financial help would be available to help poor countries leapfrog over carbon-intensive modes of development. Finally, vulnerable countries already seeing effects of climate change (such as Tuvalu, Kiribati, and Bangladesh, now losing land to the rising sea) would have funding to adapt to the new situation.

1 <http://en.cop15.dk/>

2 <http://unfccc.int/>

3 <http://www.ipcc.ch/>

Most participants entered Copenhagen hoping for an ambitious, fair, and legally-binding agreement to come out of COP15. This never happened. The European Union offered to increase its emissions cut from 20 % to 30 % by 2020 from 1990 levels if a deal could be reached, but appeared to have held this card high up its sleeve. Perhaps the United States of America offered too many billions of dollars but too little a cut (only 4 % by 2020 on 1990 baseline; the numbers sounded bigger with baseline massaged). Perhaps vulnerable countries like the Maldives overplayed their hands by demanding that 1.5°C rather than 2°C be the target. China definitely drove a hard bargain. Denmark was not the best moderator, and excluded civil-society groups from the discussion halfway through the conference. But finger-pointing aside, the outcome was that there was no legally-binding deal. Instead there was a political agreement, the Copenhagen Accord; and the world is left to try again at COP16 in Mexico, November/December 2010.

What next? There is no deal at Copenhagen, so any emissions cuts will have to be unilateral for the moment. Appendix I of the Copenhagen Accord invites each nation to enter its emissions cut target for 2020. The deadline to fill out this form was 31 January 2010. During COP15, the Maldives and Costa Rica offered 100 % cuts: they aim to be zero-emissions countries by the end of the decade. Closer to home, on one (devolved) hand we have Scotland committing itself to a legally-binding 42 % cut by 2020⁴; on the other (supranational) hand, the European Union takes the absence of a global pact as an excuse to retreat to a feeble 20 % cut by 2020. The UK-wide Climate Change Act 2008 provides for a target of 80 % cut by 2050 in section 1(1); the interim target for 2020 is yet to be decided.

Since the end of the Copenhagen summit, I have written to climate and energy minister Ed Miliband, asking him to write down “40 % cut by 2020, with no overseas carbon offsets” next to Britain’s name, and to ask other EU countries to do the same. I have also written similarly to my MP, my Members of the European Parliament, and some peers in the House of Lords. I thought I was alone when presenter Stephen Sackur of BBC Radio 4’s *Listeners Look Ahead* dismissed my suggestion as politically unlikely.

I was wrong. A week later, Lord (Anthony) Giddens replied: “those of us concerned with climate change are working hard to influence the government in the direction you mention for the proposals they will enter for the end of January in the follow up to Copenhagen.” Another week thereafter, Stop Climate Chaos Coalition started a Twitter petition addressed to the Prime Minister with this same aim.⁵ Commitments now to ambitious unilateral cuts offer us the best hope for a legally-binding agreement in Mexico by the end of the year. Remember, this is about the survival of the human species. Thus we might keep hope alive.

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4 Section 2(1) *Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009*

5 <http://act.ly/1lw>

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