



Does the Copenhagen conference matter?

Web exclusive

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James Lovelock, Bjorn Lomborg, Zac Goldsmith and other scientists, politicians and negotiators argue about why the climate change summit is important



“We are as incapable of saving the planet as a goat is of being a gardener”

James Lovelock, scientist

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Copenhagen is not far from Munich. Let us not make a greater mistake than was made 71 years ago. We suspect that dangerous climate change may soon be due, but with no more confidence than we had in 1938 about the second world war. A few lone voices, like that of James Hansen, warn that CO2 is 390ppm and rising, which places the earth in unexplored territory, something that is unprecedented in over 2m years of history.

Copenhagen will be infested by ideologues and political and commercial lobbies aiming for short-term profit; it will be tempting to assume that a green yet profitable environmental business policy is all we need. This could not be more wrong: human survival itself is at risk.

There may be little that we can do but adapt to climate change; we are as incapable of “saving the planet” as a goat is of being a gardener. But, through our nascent intelligence and communication, we are a valued evolutionary step for the Earth; our emergence could be compared in significance with that of those tiny organisms who used sunlight to make oxygen. It has taken Gaia 3.5bn years to evolve humans. It would be sad for her to lose us through our own stupidity.

“We need to get serious about smarter technological solutions, not cuts”

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Bjorn Lomborg, author of "The Skeptical Environmentalist"

Copenhagen does matter. Climate is a public good, and we all have a stake in a sensible outcome. Unfortunately, politicians are focusing on promising drastic carbon cuts. Kyoto showed that these promises will go unfulfilled because cutting carbon without a viable replacement is incredibly challenging. When it is feasible, it is a hugely expensive way of doing a tiny amount of good. Look at Germany, which pays €120bn (£110bn) in subsidies for solar panels that will postpone warming by one hour in 2100. We need to get serious about smarter solutions: researching into climate engineering (as a low-cost way of buying more time) and green energy (vital if we are going to shift away from fossil fuels sustainably). Unless policymakers make these central to Copenhagen, any deal will be a failure and our efforts will only have wasted another decade.

"Leaders need to focus on the international dimension"

Zac Goldsmith, environmentalist and politician

All rational people know that without a major shift, we are going to hit a wall, and yet, still, that terrifying truth has almost no bearing on actual policy decisions. Sooner or later, this is going to have to change and Copenhagen gives world leaders that chance.

I want to see tough targets for emissions reductions, mechanisms for helping poorer countries adapt and, crucially, a formula for putting real value on the services provided by forests so that they are worth more standing than destroyed.

Clearly it will be for individual countries to find their own ways of doing these things, and each may choose a different course. It will be for citizens and national campaign groups to maintain huge domestic pressure. But for now, we must focus on the international dimension. If leaders fail to do this, the effect will be crushing.

Zac Goldsmith's book, "The Constant Economy," is published by Atlantic

"What should an American climate deal look like?"

Michael Shellenberger & Ted Nordhaus, The Breakthrough Institute, Washington DC

The US senate will not pass climate legislation this year, maybe not even next. President Obama's climate tsar, Carol Browne, has bleakly declared: "We will go to Copenhagen and manage with whatever we have." This means moving away from unenforceable emissions targets towards shared investments in low-carbon technologies. The failure of some Kyoto-ratifying countries to cut their emissions gives the US a case for switching the focus from pollution regulation to technology investment.

China is already poised to massively out-spend and out-compete the US in everything from solar panels to nuclear reactors, and so a new treaty should include, rather than exclude, China and other large developing nations. Technology has the potential to bring nations together. After the second world war, the European Coal and Steel Community did just that: it was so successful that it is today simply the European Union. It's the EU—not national air pollution laws—that should be the inspiration for a new agreement in Copenhagen.

"Obama won't save us—it's up to China"

Philip Ball, science writer and Prospect contributing editor

Copenhagen will provide another opportunity to gauge the political climate on global warming. That's about as far as it goes. I'm pessimistic about the likely outcome, partly because not enough groundwork has been done in advance and partly because the current economic crisis will make it even harder for nations to commit funds for engineering change, or accept any slowdown in growth. But on past experience, we'd have no reason for optimism even if times were good. It's just not clear any longer that international agreements on emissions targets are going to be the way forward. I anticipate what some have called a "greenwash": pious acknowledgement of the problem, accompanied by the announcement of plans that nations have already decided anyway. Obama won't save us here; in the end, it may be what China decides that really matters.

Philip Ball's book "The Music Instinct" (Bodley Head) will be published in spring 2010

"Britain needs an ambitious new government to deliver change"

Greg Barker MP, shadow minister for climate change

It is vital that an equitable and effective global deal is reached at Copenhagen. That means making sure that the world's poorest people are treated fairly. It means ensuring



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means making sure that the world's poorest people are treated fairly. It means securing the protection of the world's rainforests. But most of all, it means that any agreement on carbon pollution must be capable of limiting global warming to two degrees.

Despite the warnings of climate catastrophe, we must chart a positive course. Transforming to a global low-carbon economy is a chance to strengthen our economy, help guarantee energy security as well as protect our planet for future generations. There is a growing consensus on this type of approach in Britain, as the left realises that new markets and business innovation are as much a part of the answer as decisive action by governments; but sharing rhetoric is not enough. Britain must lead by example.

As yet, we don't have sufficiently ambitious policies in place to even begin to build the dynamic low carbon economy, politicians are fond of evoking. We aren't even on the starting blocks. Business can respond, trillions of dollars of investment can flow, new markets can grow and new technology can come forth if governments give a clear lead and set a firm, long-term policy framework. At Copenhagen we must help chart that course, then, here in Britain, we will need an ambitious new government to deliver that change.

"Copenhagen is a do-or-die mission"
Graciela Chichilnisky, Kyoto architect

The 1997 Kyoto Protocol was the first of its kind: an agreement to limit global carbon emissions and, within these limits, a new market that I created, based on trading user rights to the global atmospheric commons. Kyoto is not perfect, but it contains the building blocks to a more sustainable future. Yet it expires in 2012. Copenhagen is our last chance to complete the process, a "do or die" mission to avert global warming.

To achieve this we must first diffuse the impasse on emissions between China and the US, reach a binding global agreement on emissions post 2012, and find a way to assist developing nations in achieving cleaner industrialisation. I propose a modest innovation of the carbon market and a modest expansion of existing law to incorporate "negative carbon" technologies and provide substantial funding for Africa, Latin America and small island states towards this goal.

We must bring the US into the Kyoto Protocol or its successor; a significant reduction of global emissions targets, and offering financial and technical assistance to developing nations so they can reduce emissions now and in the future.

Graciela Chichilnisky worked extensively for Kyoto, creating and designing the carbon market that became international law in 2005 and acted as a lead author on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which received the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize. She is the author of Saving Kyoto (New Holland, £8.99).

"Not enough progress has been made for a proper agreement"
Henry Derwent, president of the International Emissions Trading Association (IETA)

Copenhagen ought to matter very much. The need to agree a new set of emissions reduction targets is urgent. And the need to seal that agreement in the global forum that only the UN bodies can provide is obvious. But for many reasons, not enough progress has been made to create the basis for a detailed agreement that fills in all the necessary numbers. Broad consensus and clear instructions from ministers to the negotiators is probably the most we can hope for. Even that will be hard without seriously addressing the needs and expectations of poorer countries for funding the de-carbonisation of their development and for adaptation. Fortunately, domestic action, including the use of cost-effective emissions trading, is now accelerating around the world. That is not dependent on a Copenhagen agreement, though it would move further and faster if there were one.

"Deforestation is costing the world's economy €1.3 to 3.4 trillion every year"
Tristram Stuart, author of "Waste: Uncovering the Global Food Scandal"

Deforestation creates roughly 20 percent of all global emissions, so it clearly has to be included in any meaningful attempt to curb climate change. But there are dangerous pitfalls to be avoided. It would be counterproductive merely to allow forested developing countries to accrue carbon credits for "avoiding" deforestation, and then sell those credits to rich countries eager to offset their own emissions. This would introduce such a flood of carbon credits that the price of carbon would be devalued, and disincentivise efforts to reduce fossil-fuel emissions through green technologies, for example.

The effectiveness of reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD) depends on the EU and other rich countries depositing money into a multilateral forest fund. It must be sufficiently well-endowed to make it more profitable for a developing world country to leave its forest intact rather than to replace it with palm oil

America made his film debut this summer. His big-screen appearance reveals the US's new unease



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plantations, fields of soya, or cattle ranches. The fund must also be created immediately after this year's Copenhagen summit—not in 2013 by which time a further 40m hectares of forest will have been vaporised. Deforestation and forest degradation is costing the world's economy €1.3 to 3.4 trillion every year. In October 2008, the European Commission estimated that halving tropical deforestation by 2020 would cost between €15 and €25bn. But halving is not enough. It must be stopped. We have a chance, and our political leaders must seize it, for our own good, the good of our children, for the indigenous peoples who depend on the forests, and for the good of all the other wonderful species we will otherwise wipe off the face of the earth.

“To fail in Copenhagen is to invite chaos into our lives as a permanent guest”
Tom Burke, founding director of sustainable development company E3G

History is punctuated by the names of places where order was restored after chaos prevailed: Westphalia, Versailles, San Francisco. What happens—or does not—in Copenhagen in December will do more to shape human destiny, for longer, than any of them. Terrible though the consequences of war and recession are, they pass. Climate change is forever. To fail in Copenhagen is to invite chaos into our lives as a permanent guest.

Our political leaders told us in July that a rise in temperature of more than two degrees celsius is dangerous. Our scientists tell us that greenhouse gas emissions must peak globally before 2020 to have any chance of staying below two degrees. If what is agreed in Copenhagen does not put us unequivocally on track for two degrees it will have failed. Ignore the spin. Count the commitments. It's the numbers, stupid.

“Capitalism is the root cause of climate problems”
Paul Kingsnorth

Copenhagen will fail, either because no deal will be done or—more likely—because targets will be set lower than the science demands, and will not then be met in any case. I hope this failure will cause the environmental movement to re-evaluate its approach and its strategy. In future, rather than pressing heads of government to prevent a problem that is now beyond preventing, I hope the greens will focus more honestly on the root cause of both climate change and the world's other environmental threats: capitalism.

At present, environmentalists are in denial about this, at least in public. But the leaders they petition to prevent emissions are the same people whose avowed public mission is to promote ceaseless growth. The circle cannot be squared as things stand.

Copenhagen may prove to be the moment when the dam bursts.

Paul Kingsnorth is the author of “Real England” and co-founder of [The Dark Mountain project](#)

“We won't get what we need in December—but Copenhagen could still be a huge success”
Chris Rapley, Science Museum

The need to peak human carbon emissions and shift to a “decarbonised” global economy has been apparent for a long time—certainly since the Rio conference in 1992. If we had taken effective action back then, the task would have been much easier: the necessary rate of reduction would have been significantly less (1 per cent per year relative to 3 per cent per year now, or 6 per cent per year if the peak occurs later than 2015).

I picture Copenhagen as if the 192 nations present were sitting around the remaining pile of 500 thousand million tons carbon equivalent of coal, oil and gas, deciding who gets what when and for what purpose. For the sake of world stability, part of the remaining fuel must be used to achieve greater equity worldwide, while part is essential for “keeping the wheels on society”—after all, we are all utterly dependent on our energy flow to survive. The rest must be invested in developing new technologies. It can still be done, but it gets harder every day, because we are burning carbon in ever greater quantities.

I am hoping for an historic step forward—but this may be elusive this December. Nevertheless, Copenhagen could still be a huge success if it resulted in a clear and legally binding process to arrive at such commitments, say, within a further year. Ultimately, history will decide whether it's a success or a failure. I will be satisfied if there is a Science museum in South Kensington in 100 years time to explain how success was

implemented.



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COMMENTS (4):

John Sulman says:

OCTOBER 23, 2009 AT 4:31 PM

Unease is turning to hysteria in the approach to the Copenhagen summit on global warming, which is not at all helpful. All talk is of carbon emissions, but none about the cycle of natural release and absorption.

Atmospheric CO₂ is dissolved in water vapour as it condenses into cloud and, when deposited in rainfall on soil and vegetation, the gas is absorbed as part of an organic cycle. When falling on the polar ice caps, though, it will be retained in ice crystals where it could accumulate for thousands of years but be released over decades when the ice cap melts, to become a major source of the present excess in the same way as methane is released from the melting permafrost.

This will abate as all the ice melts allowing the accumulation to start all over again as temperatures drop to previous levels, taking with it much carbon from both industrial and agricultural output. This is not to say that clean air should not be promoted as an end in itself along with non-polluting modes of power generation.

Let not participants at the Copenhagen summit be stampeded into spending vast sums following a false trail. Nature will take its course regardless.

Climate Change: December feels cold in Copenhagen | European
Alternatives says:

NOVEMBER 9, 2009 AT 6:12 PM

[...] leaders will be able to live up to the expectations. James Lovelock fears that the summit will be infested by ideologues and political and commercial lobbies aiming for short-term profit, but we must [...]

Rosa says:

NOVEMBER 16, 2009 AT 3:40 AM

The fact is that a goat is a better gardener than what we are, no doubt, it eats the grass or whatever, digests it, and puts it back where it belongs, back to the Earth, so that more grass and plants can grow and other animals can feed on them too. In the meantime, part of that grass and sunshine turns into milk, cheese and meat too, so that we can grow our egos, or lack thereof.

So, as the story goes, human hubris and ignorance can be cut short one inch or two or hundred, so that goats come up and show what they really are.

TIMOTHY_ROBERTS says:

NOVEMBER 25, 2009 AT 12:05 PM

But see – destruction of the environment by feral goats:

<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/determinations/FeralGoatsKtp.htm> . Nature is red in tooth and claw – we need to keep an eye on it.

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