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Reprint from Volume 21 Number 22

Nov 5, 2009

Countdown to Copenhagen - Elizabeth May

From December 7–18 in Copenhagen, Denmark, the United Nations will be holding the most significant climate negotiation since 1992 when the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was negotiated and signed at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro.

In those days, Canada was in the lead. We had hosted the first international scientific meeting on the threat of climate change. As Senior Policy Advisor to Canada's Environment Minister, I was privileged to help organize that meeting, held the last week of June, 1988, and called 'Our Changing Atmosphere: Implications for Global Security.'

The opening sentence of the scientists' statement from the Toronto conference was memorable: 'Humanity is conducting an unintended, uncontrolled globally pervasive experiment whose ultimate consequences could be second only to a global nuclear war.'

The consensus statement went on to call for an immediate, first step to protect the atmosphere was to cut greenhouse gas (GHG) 20% below 1988 levels by 2005.

For those who really remember their climate trivia, you may recall that target was a commitment in the 1993 election and Chretien's first 'Red Book'. Once in power, the Liberals ignored it and we saw emissions rise to 26% above 1990 levels by 2006.

Under Mulroney, we were the first industrialized country to both sign and ratify the UNFCCC, which committed over 180 countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions such that their levels would be stabilized before becoming 'dangerous.' That framework treaty led to the Kyoto Protocol, which was sabotaged once George W Bush became president in the US and Stephen Harper became prime minister in Canada.

With the first phase for Kyoto's reduction targets being 2008-2012, negotiations for a replacement treaty began in Montreal in 2005 (technically called the 11th Conference of the Parties, or COP). That conference launched negotiations for the next phase of actions starting January 1, 2013. At the Montreal meeting, the deadline for a successor agreement was identified as the 15th COP to be held in 2009.

No wonder the world media (with less attention in Canada) is now focused on the likelihood of success in December in Copenhagen. That looming deadline led to the global citizen mobilization on October 24, International Day of Climate

Action. For a dose of hope and inspiration, go to www.350.org for photos from the 181 countries around the world that held over 5,200 demonstrations calling for action. There you can find a glorious photo of Salt Spring Islanders with the imaginative snorkel protest (see page 1); as well as photos of thousands on Parliament Hill (where I spoke at the 'Fill the Hill' rally); Vancouver; Whitehorse; the pyramids of Giza; jungles of Amazonia; and even underwater shots from the Great Barrier Reef.

Despite the fact that Canada had more October 24 events than any other country, climate action day was largely ignored by the Canadian media. Likewise, the Canadian media fail to report the delay of the Climate Accountability Act, Bill C-311. That bill, first introduced in the last session of Parliament by NDP leader Jack Layton, received strong non-partisan support from the Dion Liberals and the Bloc. Sadly, when re-introduced into the House as C-311, Liberal support eroded.

The bill sets targets for GHG reductions along the lines demanded by science. It would allow Canadians in Copenhagen to tell the world that the majority of Canadians and majority of MPs favoured meaningful cuts to hard targets. Tragically, it was delayed by a Conservative motion supported by the majority of Liberals, including Michael Ignatieff. Full marks, by the way, to Dr Keith Martin, Liberal MP from Esquimalt Juan de Fuca, for voting to get the bill back in the House for a vote before Copenhagen.

The vote to delay the climate bill would have received no media notice if not for a quite spontaneous development on the Monday following the October 24 Day of Action. About 120 young people who had been in Ottawa for the 'Fill the Hill' rally attended Question Period that day. I was in my usual spot in the Diplomatic Gallery sitting with Pender Island writer Bill Deverell, directly facing the public gallery where the youth were seated. While the unruly lot in Question Period below us, occupied with far less significant issues, bellowed their typical jabs and hoots of derision, one young man in the gallery stood and shouted out 'C-311, sign it!' As he was led out by security, another young person called out for the climate bill to be passed. Ultimately, all the youth were cleared from the gallery.

Environment minister Jim Prentice called it an 'NDP publicity stunt,' but there was nothing partisan about those

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This article was published (Nov 5, 2009) in 'Island Tides'. 'Island Tides' is an independent, regional newspaper distributing 17,500 print copies throughout the Gulf Islands and the Canadian Strait of Georgia from Victoria to Campbell River to Howe Sound.

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young people. They were expressing what we all should be feeling. They are fighting for their future.

As Copenhagen approaches, the negotiations are deadlocked. The head of the UN negotiations said last week that full success in Copenhagen is now 'impossible.'

'It is physically impossible under any scenario to complete every detail of a treaty in Copenhagen,' said Yvo de Boer, executive director of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, 'but Copenhagen can and must agree to the political essentials that will make a long-term response to climate change clear, possible, realistic and well defined.'

To our collective shame, Canada has been part of the problem, demanding special treatment and expansion of the tar sands. The warnings of the scientific community are clear. GHG levels must stop rising and level off by 2016. They must begin to fall from there. If not, we could well be locking the atmosphere and climate system into a rapid accelerating process called 'runaway global warming' in which case nothing we do in 2020 or 2030 can reverse catastrophic trends.

Is it any wonder our children cry out? ☹

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