



ESCAPE FROM COPENHAGEN

Christopher Flavin
President

President Obama's speech in Copenhagen last Friday included a line that few who had spent the past two weeks listening to bickering negotiators would disagree with: "While the reality of climate change is not in doubt, I have to be honest, I think our ability to take collective action is in doubt right now and it hangs in the balance."

Also hanging in the balance is the habitability of the planet. The Copenhagen conference did not come close to setting the world on a path to stabilizing the climate—or even to keeping the temperature increase below 2 degrees C, which is one of the few actual numbers in the 12-paragraph "Copenhagen Accord."

Both in its ambition and in the weakness of its framework—an accord rather than a legally binding protocol—Copenhagen represented a significant step backward from the climate treaty process that began in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and was strengthened with the Kyoto Protocol which came into force earlier this decade. And because the accord was crafted by a handful of new and old economic powers, many saw it as a breakdown of the U.N. process and its need for consensus among 193 nations.

Given the intensity of the public and governmental build up to Copenhagen, the vitriol of many of the reactions is understandable. The Obama Administration is rightly criticized for waiting so late to be clear about its approach to the negotiations and for not having earlier and more productive discussions with the Europeans, Chinese, and others. The Chinese government also shares blame for its unwillingness to recognize its growing responsibility to take action and to allow international verification of its efforts.

The Europeans—the undisputed world leaders in climate policy—have meanwhile been in denial for most of the past year about the state of the negotiations and the need to directly engage the world's largest emitters on fundamental questions about the kind of agreement that was being crafted. And some of the poor countries most vulnerable to climate change—including the Sudanese chair of the bloc of developing countries—did not help matters with the kind of angry rhetoric that is sure to make it harder to build political support for strong climate policies in the largest emitters.

While it is tempting to respond to the near collapse in Copenhagen with a combination of anger and despair, neither will lead to the result that we and others believe is urgently needed: the transition to a low-carbon economy in the decades immediately ahead. Rather, it is time to practically and analytically assess where the world is on climate change in the aftermath of Copenhagen—and develop a new strategy for carrying the process forward.

And that starts with recognition that the U.N. climate negotiations went off track long before the breakdown in Copenhagen revealed what has been clear for some time. Now that the major emitting countries have made clear that they will only accept emissions targets that are developed internally—and submitted for international review voluntarily—attention will shift back to the national level.

While this can be seen as a step backward, it also reflects the reality of where these countries are politically. And there is a silver lining to this cloud. The United States, China, India, and Brazil have all made substantial progress in implementing important new energy and climate policies in the past two years, and it seems likely that the extraordinary personal engagement of their leaders in those national processes—and in the final bargaining in Copenhagen—will help drive further progress in the coming years.

One of the great ironies of Copenhagen is that the international politics of climate change turned to chaos just as the global economy appeared, finally, to be headed in a less carbon-intensive direction. With a big assist from higher oil prices as well as new national and state policies, energy efficiency and renewable energy are advancing more rapidly than ever before. Indeed, the more important competition between the U.S. and China is not over which will be able to take on the least ambitious climate obligations, but rather over who will lead the world in building and selling the low-carbon technologies that have recently become a \$100 billion-plus market.

The big emitters have a long way to go to get their emission trends onto a viable path; all are heavily dependent on the carbon intensive technologies of the past. But it is now clear that their success in that critical endeavor will be driven more by domestic economics and politics rather than the international negotiating process. In the coming months, attention will turn to the looming battle royale in the U.S. Senate and to less visible policy debates in China, India, Brazil, and South Africa. Successful legislation will depend on the ability to persuade domestic constituents that they will benefit economically as well as environmentally from an energy transition.

The United Nations climate process will go on, and the challenge now is to prevent it from turning into an angry, rhetorical talk shop. That can best be accomplished if it focuses on practical and critical goals that need to be accomplished: providing financial support for the world's poorest countries to mitigate and adapt to climate change;

accelerating international cooperation on technology; and mounting an international effort to protect the world's remaining forests.

Efforts over the next few years will determine whether Copenhagen was a fatal setback for efforts to combat climate change, or just a painful mid-course correction. This time, the negotiator across the table is the planet itself—and our human future.