

A GRIM OUTLOOK FOR EMISSIONS AS CLIMATE TALKS LIMP FORWARD¹

Fred Pearce©

In the wake of the failed Copenhagen summit, prospects for cutting global CO₂ emissions are worse than they've been in years. With talk of mandated cuts now fading and with countries exploiting loopholes, the world appears headed toward a flawed agreement based not on science but on politics. Those who thought the failed Copenhagen climate talks last December were a diplomatic nadir, from which only recovery was possible, are in for a shock. Since then, efforts to refloat the talks have seen a lot of ballast thrown overboard — including most of the scientific underpinnings of a deal to protect the world from dangerous warming. If a deal is finally done, probably in South Africa at the end of 2011, it may prove a diplomatic success but a climatic catastrophe.

In his time as the UN's chief climate negotiator, Yvo de Boer has had a simple take on his job. It is to cajole 192 nations into agreeing to a successor to the Kyoto Protocol that will deliver what those countries say they want — a world in which global warming is kept below 2 degrees Celsius. That is what scientists say is necessary to prevent dangerous climate change. It requires, as a down-payment, that industrialized countries cut their emissions of greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, by 25 to 40 percent from 1990 levels within the next decade and that by 2020 global emissions will have also peaked and begun to decline.

But in the final weeks before he gives up the job at the end of June, de Boer is pessimistic that it will happen. The failure of talks in Copenhagen last December leaves him concluding that nations are unwilling to make the necessary sacrifices to achieve their stated goal. "As things stand now, we will not be able to halt the increase in global greenhouse gas emissions in the next 10 years," he told delegates during resumed negotiations in Bonn early this month. The dapper Dutch diplomat — who has a passion for his cause that left him shedding tears on stage three years ago in Bali — said in Bonn: "The 2-degree world is in danger." His successor, Costa Rican ambassador Christiana Figueres, is a cooler customer. In low-profile briefings in Bonn, she declared: "It is not my mandate to set objectives. There is a process underway of rebuilding trust."

The contrasting characters — one the advocate in a diplomat's suit, the other a handbag-wielding conciliator — personify an important change going on in the climate talks after Copenhagen. Alarmed by the divides that opened up in the Danish capital, the talk now among climate negotiators is of healing rifts and finding common ground. Healing the climate is suddenly taking second place. For three years negotiators tried to draw up a deal to replace the Kyoto Protocol, which expires at the end of 2012. They wanted to combine new, tougher targets that finally included the U.S. with the legally binding language of the Kyoto deal. That was the task they set themselves in Bali in 2007 and expected to conclude in Copenhagen.

But, after the Copenhagen failure, that is all unraveling. What looks likely to emerge at talks in South Africa at the end of 2011 — the new target date for a completed deal — is a consensual accord. One with promises of emissions cuts rather than fixed enforceable commitments. And one, as de Boer tirelessly pointed out in Bonn, shorn of its scientific umbilical cord. Rather than the 25 to 40 percent cut that science says is necessary, developed nations have

¹ environment 360, Yale University, June 21, 2010

pledged cuts that work out, according to de Boer's secretariat, at a total of 12 to 19 percent – less than half as much. “Copenhagen has created conditions which make it probable its own target will not be met,” says Alex Evans of the Center on International Cooperation at New York University, author of an upcoming history of the geopolitics of climate negotiations.

The only visible outcome of the Copenhagen talks was the Copenhagen Accord. This hastily-created agreement between 25 leading nations, headed by the U.S. and China, brought uproar to the end of the Copenhagen conference. Intended to break a negotiating logjam, it only created further bad feeling. Its inadequacies are plain. While it promised to deliver a maximum warming of 2 degrees, it did not include the means, since it simply invited nations to submit non-binding commitments. While including long-term goals for cutting emissions in 40 years, it avoided a commitment to peaking global emissions before 2020. Writing in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* about the economics of a post-Copenhagen environment, Yale economist William Nordhaus says: “It is unlikely that the Copenhagen temperature goal will be attained even if countries meet their ambitious stated objectives under the Copenhagen Accord.”

Nonetheless, the terms of the accord are now being written into a new UN negotiating text that will form the basis of negotiations over the next 18 months. Some, particularly European governments, hoped at the time that the accord could eventually be adopted with legally binding teeth. But even that now looks unlikely, say negotiators. In talks in Bonn this month, the European Union was the only group actively supporting legally binding targets. As one of EU delegate told me: “We are still in favor of a new Kyoto Protocol, but we cannot do it alone.”

The extent of the climb-down now underway is evident in the pledges made in Copenhagen. China, for instance, said it would reduce the “carbon intensity” of its economy by 40 to 45 percent below 2005 levels by 2020. It sounds impressive. But China has one of the most carbon-intensive economies on the planet – and the improvement amounts to nothing more than business as usual. It has been making improvements at a similar rate since 2005.

In the U.S., the Obama administration's emissions promises depend on legislation. Passing a climate bill was a top priority for Obama in his early days. He wanted completion in time for Copenhagen. But legislation remains mired on Capitol Hill, and even optimists do not expect any outcome before 2012. Nordhaus says: “Continued delay in adoption of climate-change policies by the United States may lead to a domino effect in which other countries follow the U.S. inaction.”

In any event, the U.S., which never signed on to the Kyoto Protocol, has irritated those countries that did sign on by wanting to have a baseline of 2005 for its own emissions in any new deal – effectively writing off its 16 percent emissions growth between 1990 and 2005. And Canada, which did sign on to Kyoto but has taken few steps to meet its targets, says what is good enough for the U.S. has to be good enough for Canada, too. Many say it will be impossible to hold any country to account for failing to meet its Kyoto targets. The European Union, which has always seen itself in the vanguard of action on climate change, is also back-peddling. It recently announced that even though new analysis suggested that it would be cheaper than anticipated to cut its emissions by 30 percent by 2020, its plans to do so had been put on hold.

And there is worse. Many of the pledges currently on offer are likely to be undermined by huge loopholes in existing and proposed rules for industrialized countries. Three topics loom large: “hot air,” international transport, and carbon emissions from forests. “Hot air” is insider jargon for the emissions permits handed over to former Soviet nations that did not need them because

their industries collapsed after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The majority are owned by Russia and the Ukraine, who are likely to hold unused permits to emit up to 10 billion tons of CO₂ at the end of 2012. They want to bank them — and sell them to other nations to offset their own emissions in subsequent years. If the countries of the European Union bought those permits, they would be enough to achieve the entire 20 percent emissions reductions the EU has promised, right through to 2020.

Then there are loopholes that allow emissions from forestry to escape carbon accounting. Again, they are huge. New Zealand has met its Kyoto targets by planting commercial forests and claiming them as a carbon sink. Fair enough. But under current rules, according to Simon Terry of the Sustainability Council of New Zealand, the country will not have to account for the 90 million tons of carbon emissions that will be produced when those forests are logged in the 2020s. Russia says it will reduce its commitment to cuts from 25 percent to 15 percent if a loophole concerning how it accounts for its forest carbon is removed. Canada and Austria have similar issues for partial carbon accounting.

Talks on bringing emissions from international shipping and aircraft within the rules, deemed essential before Copenhagen, formed no part of the Copenhagen Accord and seem no nearer to resolution than in Kyoto 13 years ago. Under de Boer, such loopholes were to be closed. In the new diplomacy, they seem positively to be encouraged as a way of easing negotiating deadlocks. Russia, for instance, is likely to get its way. Together, the loopholes could reduce the promised cuts in developed countries' emissions from 12 to 19 percent to somewhere between a 2 percent cut and a 2 percent increase, according to a European Union study published in March.

How will this play out for the planet? Nordhaus has looked at the implications of five possible scenarios. They range from business as usual, through various versions of a deal based on the Copenhagen Accord, to a policy based on a strict 2 degree C limit on warming. Business as usual sees atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide at almost three times pre-industrial levels by 2100, putting the world on a path to peak warming of a terrifying 6.7 degrees C — 12 degrees F. The existing Copenhagen Accord proposals would see eventual warming of more than 4 degrees C, while a deal in which developing countries eventually adopted Western-style emissions limits would still likely cap warming at nearer 3 degrees C than two.

As the diplomatic dance over a deal on climate blunders on — looking ever more like the protracted Doha talks over a world trade deal — the chances of meeting the 2-degree challenge posed by scientists look increasingly remote. Talks in Bonn ended early so delegates could head off to their hotel rooms to watch the World Cup. In the language of soccer, the result in Bonn was: Diplomats 3, Climate nil.