



# Big players, a positive Accord

Anthony Giddens

Jan 2010

**The new Copenhagen Accord recognises core geopolitical realities, and works with rather than against them**

Even if they degenerated into squabbling, the climate change meetings held at Copenhagen in December formed one of the signal events of 2009. They were supposed to establish a “global deal” to which all participant countries would sign up. It didn’t happen. The “Copenhagen Accord” - a brief statement of principles and commitments, produced by a small cluster of states - was the sole tangible output of the negotiations. Two main responses came from commentators in the immediate aftermath. Some argued along the lines of: “Well, it falls far short of what we hoped for, but we have to look for the positives and make the best of a bad job.” Others – the large majority - declared the outcome a catastrophe.

My reaction is different from each of these. It is that the world might have inadvertently stumbled upon the most hopeful way of actually starting to counter climate change rather than just endlessly talking about doing so. It is not a route that will necessarily command general approval and the UN to some extent is sidelined. Yet it is one that carries promise, because it recognises core geopolitical realities, and works with rather than against them. The countries that met to establish the Accord were the United States, China, India, Brazil and South Africa. Leaving aside South Africa, take a look at the others. They are the three of the biggest beasts of the developing world in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, plus the most polluting industrialised country, the US. A diversity of other states has indicated a willingness to come on board.

We have to innovate in international relations at this point if we are successfully to come to terms with climate change and hold the global average temperature increase to 2 degrees Celsius. The Accord is only a beginning, but it is one that can be built upon and in principle far more rapidly than would have been possible with the cumbersome scenario envisaged at Cop 15. If the agreement can be a given a robust form, and in short order, it could help break the existing log-jam, where each nation or group of nations is waiting for others to take the lead.

Much will depend upon how solid and practical are the proposals that, according to the terms of the Accord, the industrial countries will present by January 31 for cutting their rates of emissions. The plans must be plausible and robust, not just a wish-list. For all their rhetoric, most have accomplished rather little so far – the rest of the world is right to be unimpressed. At the same date, developing countries wishing to accept the Accord will be required to flesh out their plans for cutting their own emissions. For the first time, some sort of sanctioning mechanism will be established. Proposed action in developing countries funded by money coming from the richer ones will be internationally monitored.

What kind of framework might emerge from all this in the short- and medium-term? Will it mean that the smaller, and the poorer, countries of the world will suffer as the larger ones progress on their own? I don't think it necessarily will, at least if the overall architecture is right, and if they organise to represent their specific concerns. What happened with the World Trade Organization, which has followed something of a parallel track, can provide some very useful hints. Anticipating what would happen at Copenhagen, I developed a series of proposals along these lines in my book *"The Politics of Climate Change"*, published nine months ago. Failure to conclude a universal set of trading agreements has spawned a variety of new measures and organisations. The very diversity of groups and regions involved has proved as much a source of strength as of weakness. The same could be true in the case of climate change.

If successfully elaborated over the next few months, the Accord can provide an anchoring agreement but we will need in addition a diversity of bilateral and regional agreements and – yes – "coalitions of the willing." The United States and China must continue to negotiate bilaterally, whatever more general agreements they commit themselves to. Let's suppose that 190 countries had reached a binding consensus in Copenhagen, but that the two left out were the United States and China. The agreed-upon framework wouldn't have been of much value, since these states between them contribute well over 40% of total greenhouse gas emissions. Much better, as it were, to start with these two nations, together with the other big emitters, and ensure that they are prepared to work with one-another in a serious and committed way.

There should be a G3 as well. The EU found itself sidelined at Copenhagen – a consequence of its age-old problem that it does not speak with one voice, and could not deliver the very rapid decision-making that had to take place late on in the negotiations to get anything from them at all. Yet with 550 million citizens it has to have a key and hopefully vanguard role. The initiators of the Accord bypassed the unhealthy divide that has arisen between the developed and the developing countries, in which each is seen as a homogeneous bloc – this emphasis must continue. The twenty largest polluters (which include several large developing nations) have contributed almost 90% of total emissions since the start of the industrial age – they should be getting together on a regular basis too. Plenty of other new departures could be thought of. There are obvious dangers in an approach that does not focus any on getting all nations to sign up to a common template. Yet at this point there is in any case no alternative. Such an emphasis does not signal the demise of multilateralism, since many forms of cooperation will need to be initiated and furthered.

Anthony Giddens is a member of the House of Lords. His most recent book is [\*The Politics of Climate Change\*](#)

He will be speaking at the Policy Network seminar "[Democracy, climate change and global governance](#)" on 12 January