



The climate in Copenhagen is for real action

Nick Rowley

December 2009

The world can come together in Copenhagen, act in enlightened, collective self-interest and embrace a low-emissions future

Through my role assisting the Copenhagen Climate Council, I have been fortunate enough to visit the city frequently in the past two years. Over this time it has become regarded as the place where agreement on the global effort to seriously reduce the emissions creating the climate problem will either be reached, or not.

Never will there be a perfect time, place, set of leaders or exactly the right political dynamics to agree on a more effective climate treaty that helps resolve what Ross Garnaut describes as this "diabolical" problem. But with a change of leadership in Washington, a real focus on reducing emissions in Beijing and the issue having moved from the responsibility of environment ministers to heads of state, the meeting in Copenhagen is possibly as close as one can get.

This week, the halls of the modern, soulless "Bella Centre" on the outskirts of the city (where the formal UN Framework Convention on Climate Change meeting takes place), every hotel and the streets of the Danish capital will be overrun by more than 15,000 campaigners, negotiators, journalists, business observers, lobbyists, delegates and politicians. For these annual UN climate change conferences have become rather like a mix of grand circus and trade show: thousands of people milling around keen to be more relevant than they are. Not an atmosphere conducive to serious work let alone the highly complex and tense job of negotiating an outcome critical to the future of the planet.

Yet as the conference begins, it is clear that Copenhagen could still fulfill its promise. Mainly because this is unlikely to be the usual UN climate change meeting. With more than 70 leaders committed to being in Copenhagen at the end of the second week of negotiations, the key decisions will be taken in private, away from the media spotlight.

Leaders have already made their grand speeches on the podium of the UN in New York at the two-day general assembly convened by Ban Ki-moon last September. None of them will travel to Copenhagen to agree to another bold communique: long on rhetoric and with a far-off emissions reduction target, yet no process, money or institutions to achieve it. Not only would that be viewed as failure on a grand scale, it is also something that no democratic politician will want to be associated with.

Heads of state also know that informed awareness of climate change is now guided by more than the science indicating future risk. Whether it is through flooding in China, the European heatwave in 2003, hurricane Katrina, the observed changes in our oceans or the Arctic sea ice, decision-makers in government no longer see the issue as something described on a graph that might be right or wrong.

When I worked in Whitehall, environmental groups were far less relevant than the evidence from the Defence Department and intelligence agencies on the geopolitical risks of a failure to reduce emissions.

As the author Ian McEwan has written: "The matter is passing from virtue, from idealism and sombre invitations to self-denial, which government, markets and the electorate distrust, to self-interest and necessity, for which they all have respect."

The chaotic politics of the carbon pollution reduction scheme and the recent cabaret in the Australian Liberal Party should not obscure that effective climate and energy policy has rapidly become regarded as an essential part of any domestic policy agenda - not only throughout Europe, but in the US at state and federal level, Japan, China and many of the rapidly developing economies previously disengaged or hostile to achieving emissions reduction.

And there should be no fear of countries moving "first" - either before or soon after Copenhagen - as some have suggested in Australia.

In truth, Australia has a lot of catching up to do. Most of the world's significant economies have been adopting and implementing progressive climate policies over the past decade. Just one statistic speaks volumes. South Africa, a far poorer economy and a society so long ravaged by political oppression and upheaval, generates more than 530 gigawatt hours of electricity from solar energy each year. Germany - a country not noted for its sun - generates more than 2200. Australia generates just over 30.

Global understanding of the climate problem and our experience of developing effective climate policy have also progressed enormously since agreement at Kyoto in 1997. The world is now a lot clearer about the policies and incentives that can reduce emissions, maintain economic growth and get our carbon cycle into greater balance. Twelve years ago no one could refer to our learning from an emission trading system in Europe, or the rapid move to renewable energy in Scandinavia, or - given the right incentives - the speed with which investment can be targeted at low emissions technology and infrastructure. Now we can.

Not everything will be achieved either at Copenhagen or through an international climate treaty. But with the parameters of a more effective treaty agreed to over the coming days, the detail of a legally enforceable treaty can be developed over the coming months.

Copenhagen this December may still be the moment when the world proves it can come together, act in enlightened, collective self-interest and embrace a low-emissions future. And in contrast to the crudity of our recent domestic politics, that will be an outcome we should, and history will, celebrate.

Nick Rowley is director of Kinesis, Sydney and strategic director of the Copenhagen Climate Council

This article was originally published in *The Age*