

PARIS CLIMATE AGREEMENT: TRIUMPH OR BETRAYAL?

“A major leap for mankind” - Observer

“Climate deal to change the world” – Sunday Times

“Agreed to limit the increase to 1.5C” - The Guardian

“To limit temperature rise to 1.5C is welcome ” - Bennett, Green Party

World leaders and the media have trumpeted the outcome of the COP21 climate talks in Paris as a world-saving triumph. This report attempts to tell the truth - which is rather different.

DEGREES v PLEDGES:

Much attention has, rightly, focussed on the different targets of a maximum 2C rise in average temperature or a more ambitious limit of a 1.5C rise. Both are against a baseline of “pre-industrial” average temperature. The British press has frequently misquoted 2C as a “safe limit” In fact a rise of 2C would cause massive disruption: drought, flood, storm, desertification, loss of species, disruption of the ocean, disease and huge population displacement. Clearly 1.5C would be a much better outcome, although even that would cause significant global problems.

So, isn't it great that our leaders have committed to a 1.5C limit? Well, it would be, but they haven't. To begin with, the agreement actually aims not for 1.5C but for “well below 2C” plus “pursue efforts to limit it to 1.5” *[ARTICLE 2 1 (a)]*

Far worse, the contributions to emissions reductions endorsed by the Paris talks come nowhere near even the 2C limit. The UN Climate Change Panel estimates that, to keep within the 2C limit, we need to keep the level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere to under 40 gigatonnes (carbon equivalent) by 2030. The total pledges at Paris are so inadequate they will lead to 55 gigatonnes in 2030. That's an overload of nearly 40%.

[DECISION II para 17]

We are not looking at a temperature rise of 1.5C. We are not looking at one of 2C. We can expect a catastrophic 3C, 4C or even higher. The Paris talks have produced lots of words, but the actions agreed mean the opposite of the words.

\$100bn FOR DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Vague statements [*ARTICLES 9 1, 9.3*] are the basis for the claim that rich countries will provide poorer countries with \$100 billion per year to help them fight and adapt to climate change. Unfortunately, it's not true.

Firstly, there is no figure set on the total to be provided now. There is only a "floor" figure starting in ten years' time, stated in the "Decision" part of the text. [*DECISION III 54*]

More importantly, there is no mechanism whatsoever by which this money will be provided. The \$100 billion per year is merely an aspiration. No country has committed to providing it. This is not an agreement to do it, it is just a hope that it might happen. [*DECISION IV 115*]

HISTORICAL RESPONSIBILITY

A key area of dispute has always been responsibility for climate change – and consequent responsibility for stopping it and for its effects. Historically it is, of course, developed countries that have generated the bulk of greenhouse gases and thus caused the climate change crisis. Logically, the developed countries should sort out their own mess. They should be bearing the primary responsibility for preventing climate change running out of control. They should be helping the poorer countries affected by climate change.

Oddly enough, the rich countries don't see things this way. Developed countries want to forget how we got here and simply talk about where we are, sharing the burden equally regardless of past responsibility. The Paris Agreement goes straight down the line of the rich countries, containing no references at all to historical responsibility. All it contains are a few sops – phrases that could, perhaps, if you really wanted to, be interpreted as oblique references to what should be a core principle. [*PREAMBLE, ARTICLE 2 2, ARTICLE 4 4*]

To make the lack of responsibility even clearer, there is a statement that the Agreement does not involve liability or compensation. [*DECISION III 5*]. If you live on an island that sinks beneath the waves because of global warming, that's just tough.

This is a hugely significant legal declaration and a massive step back-

wards. Arguably it is the most important outcome of COP21. A triumph of the rich countries over the poor.

NOT LEGALLY BINDING

A key weakness in the whole Agreement is that it is not legally binding. The text is feeble enough – full of “should”s, “would”s, “request”s, “urge”s and so on - but any country that finds it irksome can simply walk away from it without penalty.

The supposed substitute in the Agreement for being legally binding is the inclusion of a review mechanism every five years. This doesn't kick in until 2023. Worse still, it is all voluntary, even the review.

[ARTICLE 14 2]



NO JUSTICE

Until quite late on in the process, every draft of the Agreement included reference to a “just transition”. The trade unions, in particular, fought for this phrase. Likewise, many sought the inclusion of a reference to “climate justice”. The only reference to either comes in the form of a disgracefully patronising “note” in the preamble.

The thrust of the text of the Decision is that countries facing the need for adaptation should “cooperate regionally”. Presumably they should all try to drown together, tidily.

CARBON TRADING

Carbon Trading has been thoroughly discredited. It has, of course, been a great success for some. Rich individuals and corporations have made a fortune “trading” on “carbon exchanges”, often with free money from governments. But it has contributed not a jot towards reducing the emission of greenhouse gases.

That has not stopped it being squeezed into the agreement almost under the radar. Despite the circumlocutions (maybe no-one might notice, eh), the text provides both for carbon trading and for emissions trading between countries. [DECISION V 137, ARTICLE 6 2, ARTICLE 6 3]

GONE MISSING

Some large omissions are referred to above. There are more.

The oceans play a crucial role in global warming. Firstly, they act as a truly enormous heat sink, holding far more heat than the atmosphere. Without them we would already have fried. Unfortunately, we understand little about the mechanics of this process. Secondly, the nature of the oceans as an ecological system is being profoundly affected by warming and consequent acidification. Yet the oceans get one single word mention in the entire text.

Migration caused by environment problems, including global warming effects, is already happening on a significant scale. Haitians move to Brazil because of earthquake activity. Malians move to Europe because of desertification. If sea levels rise, tens or hundreds of millions will move or drown. Yet there is just one passing reference, in the Decision, to this.

AND BRITAIN

The British government's position is easily summarised: blatant hypocrisy.

The government has signed up to the agreement while in the process of actively undermining almost every aspect of the fight against global warming. They are selling off the Green Investment Bank so it becomes just any other investment bank. They are removing subsidies for onshore wind power. They have slashed the Feed-In Tariff that motivates the installation of small scale renewables. And so on. All the time continuing the huge subsidies to fossil fuels and nuclear.

British government policy is flood, storm, drought, and disease - and the devil take those on the low ground.

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