

No Plan B for planet if climate deal not agreed

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Opinion by John Sweeney, President of An Taisce

OPINION: The short-sightedness of nations acting in their own narrow self-interest is the biggest threat to any agreement at the Copenhagen climate conference, writes **JOHN SWEENEY**

NEVER WAS a global conference so hyped up as a make-or-break event as the UN climate summit due to take place next month in Copenhagen. As 15,000 participants, plus many more observers, made their travel arrangements, the stage seemed set for a historic agreement that would start the recovery for a world staring into the abyss of dangerous climate change.

Responsible groups throughout all 192 countries participating in the event had done their bit to sensitise those in authority as to the severity of the situation.

Put simply, if we are to avoid the world warming more than three degrees above pre-industrial levels we need to see global greenhouse gas emissions start to decline seriously in the next decade and fall by at least 50 per cent by mid-century. It is a big ask, but not beyond human ingenuity if the political will and leadership were present.

In Ireland, we were well sensitised to the magnitude of the climate problem and were ready to sign up to whatever the EU countries would agree as part of a global deal.

We had dragged our feet for many years but had at last shown signs of taking the problem seriously, thanks to the promptings of our children from their green schools, the inspiring activism displayed by coalitions of civil society groupings such as Stop Climate Chaos, and a political commitment which at last seemed to offer genuine progress in encouraging us, one of the top 10 emitters on a per capita basis in the world, to change our ways. We even had an embryonic climate change Bill prepared by an all-party Oireachtas subcommittee and a promise of another from the Government.

As recently as last week the Catholic bishops produced an impressive pastoral document exhorting our leaders to do the right thing for the sake of those that come after us and urging us to play our part in reducing national greenhouse gas emissions.

But has the disappointing comments of President Barack Obama in China killed off all the optimism that Copenhagen might deliver anything meaningful? Certainly the lessons learned with Kyoto have weighed heavily on the American negotiators. The Senate rejected Kyoto mainly because developing countries had not made any commitments to reduce emissions. This remains an issue as does denial of climate change itself.

Some 43 per cent of Americans now don't believe the Earth is getting warmer, though this is not an article of faith, but a scientific fact. The Kerry-Boxer Bill is moving only slowly through the senate, not being sold as a climate change Bill per se so much as one promoting greater energy independence and a green recovery. There is clearly an

intention to have the Senate enact legislation on the matter before its negotiators put emission reduction figures on the table at Copenhagen and Obama has found a willing ally to delay matters in China's President Hu Jintao.

European sensitivities simply don't appear to matter. Significantly, when European Commission president José Manuel Barroso visited the White House two weeks ago, his luncheon host was vice-president Joe Biden, and not Obama, perhaps a pointed reminder of the new world order.

And yet convergence between the US and EU positions has been occurring in many areas over the past two years. It agreed for example to the Bali "road map" albeit after being publicly told by the ambassador of New Guinea that "if it was not willing to lead, leave it to the rest of us; please get out of the way".

It now seems likely that the US will be scapegoated for any failure to get specific emission reductions agreed in Copenhagen and this will probably mark the end of Obama's honeymoon with the international community.

China and the US account for over 40 per cent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions and no agreement can be effective without them. But, more so, they are crucial in persuading groupings of countries to follow their lead. China and India are already suffering the effects of climate change as their Himalayan snowpack diminishes and their life-giving water supplies show worrying signs of fragility.

Together with the G77 group of developing countries they rightly point the finger at us in the developed world who have been the instigators of the climate change problem. Only if a sufficiently large financial transfer is available to enable them to adapt to climate change impacts and develop along sustainable lines will they sign up to any agreement. Indeed the African nations walked out of the recent Copenhagen dress rehearsal in Barcelona in disgust at what was being offered.

The transfer proposed is currently about €100 billion per year of which the EU is offering about 20 per cent, probably not enough to effect the changes necessary in the developing world. Though the figures are huge they have to be seen in a global context. The US budget deficit for example is about €1 trillion. In any event, promises of transfers and actual delivery are often very different as the developing world countries have come to appreciate.

So what should we expect from Copenhagen? At best probably a political commitment to reach a binding agreement before the end of next year can be hoped for. This remains the most likely prospect and would in itself not be a negative result.

But what must be guarded against is a half-baked agreement designed to placate a restless electorate back home. This would be worse than a well managed disaster which might provide the necessary wake-up call.

In the event of a complete breakdown or walkout by key countries, the EU's commitment to increasing its emission reduction targets to 30 per cent should a global deal have been reached, would then come under new scrutiny. There would possibly also be calls from some EU countries for tariffs on "pollution subsidised" imports raising a risk of protectionism tendencies.

What is clear is that the planet does not have a Plan B. As our procrastination eliminates the options which will be available to young Irish people as they seek to eke out a living on this island in forthcoming decades, the short-sightedness of nations acting in their own narrow self-interest will become ever clearer.

As the president of the Maldives, a nation with a rather serious priority in the area of climate change put it recently: “At the moment every country arrives at the negotiation seeking to keep their own emissions as high as possible. They never make commitments unless someone else does first.

“This is the logic of the madhouse, a recipe for collective suicide.”

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