

The U.S. and Climate Change 2009 -2010

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During most of the Presidency of George W Bush, the administration was either promoting climate skeptics or hindering global consensus and action on Climate change. The election of Barack Obama, appeared to introduce a new era in the US's approach to climate change because the president himself both knew what was involved scientifically and seemed willing to do something about it. By mid 2009, the U.S. appeared to be moving towards and ambitious climate change policies with the passage a comprehensive climate change bill in the U.S. House of Representatives.

From Hope to Despair

Then in December 2009, expectations were high that Copenhagen would complete the Bali Road Map and develop an ambitious, legally binding treaty to reduce green house gas emissions (GHG) and thus tackle climate change. Trust between the Parties to both the UN Convention on Climate Change and the Kyoto Protocol broke down in Copenhagen when the Danish Presidency seemed to abandon the multi-lateral negotiation process in favour of cobbling together an Accord which was negotiated by a select handful of countries. The Copenhagen Accord did at least acknowledge that climate change is the greatest challenge facing humankind, and that steps must be taken so that the mean global temperature will not rise about 2 degrees Celsius. But there were no binding emission targets, timelines or sanctions. All that was asked of the Parties is that they make voluntary pledges to limit greenhouse emissions. A recent study by The United Nations Environment

Programme (UNEP) entitled *The Emissions Gap Report* makes it very clear that current pledges would not reach the target of 2 degrees Celsius set by the Accord.¹

By mid-2010, the momentum to enact climate legislation in the U.S. Congress had passed, partly because of the economic crisis, the intransigence of the Republican Party, some wavering Democrats from coal mining states, scientific disinformation and a well funded opposition. Though the Waxman-Markey cap-and-trade bill had passed through the House in June 2009, the chances of a similar bill passing the Senate was thwarted by the death of two key Democratic Senators, a major oil spill in the Gulf and implacable opposition from Republicans. In July 2010, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid announced that he was not bringing his the bill to the Senate floor.

The emergence of the “Tea Party” complicated things further. Many of the “Tea Party” candidates, who were climate deniers, were well funded by right wing libertarians associated with the Republican Party. Some claimed that climate change was a conspiracy dreamed up to promote industry in China and India at the expense of U.S. companies. This group took votes not just from Democrats but also from moderate-leaning Republicans, several of whom lost their seat in the election.

Mid Term Elections and Climate Sceptics

The mid-term election in the United States on November 2nd 2010, was not just a bad day for the Democratic Party, it also saw the election of a host of climate

¹ The Emissions Gap Report: Are the Copenhagen Accord Pledges Sufficient to Limit Global Warming to 2 degree Celsius or 1.5 degree Celsius? November 12, 2010.

sceptics. This will make it much more difficult for President Obama to get an energy or climate bill through the US Congress during the next two years.

The following are some of the comments made by newly elected members of the U.S. Congress according to Kevin Kobloch, president of the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS).

"With the possible exception of Tiger Woods, nothing has had a worse year than global warming. We have discovered that a good portion of the science used to justify "climate change" was a hoax perpetrated by leftist ideologues with an agenda."

-Todd Young, new congressperson from Indiana.

"I absolutely do not believe that the science of man-caused climate change is proven. Not by any stretch of the imagination. I think it's far more likely that it's just sunspot activity or something just in the geologic eons of time where we have changes in the climate."

-Ron Johnson, new senator from Wisconsin

"I think we ought to take a look at whatever the group is that measures all this, the IPCC, they don't even believe the crap."

-Steve Pearce, new congressperson from New Mexico

"It's a bigger issue, we need to watch 'em. Not only because it may or may not be true, but they're making up their facts to fit their conclusions. They've already caught 'em doing this."

-Rand Paul, new senator from Kentucky.

"There isn't any real science to say we are altering the climate path of the earth."
-Roy Blunt, new senator from Missouri. ²

It is important to recognize that these sceptics had formidable backing from big oil, the coal industry, and electric utilities. In *Merchants of Death*, published earlier this year by Bloomsbury, two U.S. well known academics, Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, exposed how corporations and conservative foundations have funded a number of campaigns during the past 40 years. In the 1970s, despite overwhelming medical evidence linking smoking and cancer, they managed to delay anti-smoking legislation. They have also helped to block legislation curbing acid rain, ozone-layer depletion and, in the past two decades, global warming and climate change.

Robust Science

What about the science of climate change which many of these new members of Congress are dismissing? In 1999, Peter Stott, who was then head of climate modeling at the British Met Office's, Myles Allen from Oxford University and a number of meteorologists published an article in the journal *Nature*. They based their predictions on the range of temperature change for the period between 2000 and 2040 on temperature data which had been collected in the period between 1946 and 1996. They then drew a graph representing the range of predicted outcomes for that period with a dotted line indicating the most likely outcome. The graph predicted that there would be a 0.8 degrees rise in temperature in 2010, when

² http://www.ucsusa.org/global_warming/solutions/big_picture_solutions/next-steps-for-climate.html?utm_source=sp&utm_medium

compared with 1946. This is exactly what has happened. So, in that stringent test, the science has been vindicated.³

Nature does not heed climate skeptics

All the denial in the world will not stop the processes of Nature. The US government's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reported that the first eight months of 2010 were as hot as the first eight months of 1998 – the warmest ever recorded. But there is a crucial difference. In 1998, there was a record El Niño – the warm phase of the natural Pacific temperature oscillation. The 2010, El Niño was smaller (an anomaly peaking at roughly 1.8C, rather than 2.5C), and brief by comparison to those of recent years. Since May the oscillation has been in its cool phase (La Niña). Even so, June, July and August this year were the second warmest on record. Unfortunately, even with such stronger the warnings, there are still many doubters and effective actions is postponed. This, of course, is grossly immoral because those who did least to cause the present crisis will suffer most and, furthermore, delaying action on climate change will have a deleterious impact of all future generations of humans and other creatures.

Signs of Hope

On the positive side the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) reported that GHG emission declined during the period 2008 – 2010. This was a result of the economic down turn and the conversion of some coal-fired utilities to natural gas. Another positive factor was the Obama economic stimulus package (the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act). This directed 18% of the total US\$787 billion to climate change and energy projects. The five largest green

³ Robin McKie, “A dark ideology is driving those who deny climate change,” *The Observer*, August 1st 2010, page 28.

allocations, in descending order are renewable forms of energy, energy efficiency, transit and high-speed rail, and the modernization of the power grid. This injection of capital was very important as ‘green’ energy companies were beginning to row back financially because of the recession.

On another front, the U.S Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is preparing to regulate CO₂ as a pollutant under the Clean Air Act and the Supreme Court decision of 2007. If the rules to further restrict NO_x, SO₂, Mercury and acid gas come into force this will reduce an estimated 25-59 GW of highly polluting coal-fire utilities. Many fear that the Republicans, with support from the coal lobby, will do everything in their power to thwart this course of action.

States are more active

While serious movement at the Federal level is being hampered by politicians in Washington promoting corporate vested interests, there has been quite a bit of movement at State and local level. Forty one States have established greenhouse gas registers. In addition, nearly two-thirds of the states are involved in one of three regional initiatives for capping emissions. The three are the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI), The Western Climate Initiative (WCI) and the Midwestern Greenhouse Gas Reduction Accord) MGGRA). While all of the three have relative modest targets the combined scale is significant.

As often happens, for good or ill in the U. S., where California goes the nation follows. California adopted the Global Warming Solutions Act (AB 32) in 2006. This is a large scale demonstration project designed to combat climate change by combining emissions limits with huge investment in green energy. Rules to limit GHG emissions will become operative on January 1, 2012.

Despite the dubbing which the Democrats received in the mid-term elections, Californians voted down Proposition 23, which was designed to suspend AB 32's provisions until unemployment fell below 5.5%. The Republican candidate for the Governorship, Meg Whitman promised to impose a one-year moratorium on A 32 if elected. She was defeated by Democrat Jerry Brown, a longtime supporter of environmental initiatives, even though she spent a fortune on her election campaign. Furthermore, Proposition 32 was defeated by a large majority, despite a well-funded campaign backed by out-of-state fossil fuel interests and the "Tea Party."

How will the U.S. behave in Cancun?

Participants, particular from the CSOs, are hoping that the U.S. doesn't throw its weight around this week. Any effort by the Obama Administration to withhold funding from countries which have been critical of the Copenhagen Accord will backfire. It will only annoy countries of the South and possibly derail any substantive negotiations. The main media focus on Wikileaks documents last week was on the embarrassment felt by U.S. politicians and diplomats because of comments they had made on fellow politicians and diplomats right across the world on, what they thought were secure confidential cables. But WikiLeaks cables also show the extent to which the U.S. was willing to pressure on those nations which were critical of the Copenhagen Accord.⁴

Some countries feel that the U.S. will attempt to block progress the setting up a Global Climate Fund if its demands on mitigation (reducing GHG emissions) and

⁴ Damian Carrington, *The Guardian*, December 3, 2010.
www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2010/dec/03/is-basics-copenhagen-accord-tactics/print

transparency from emerging economies such as China are not met. Todd Stern issued such an ultimatum at the Geneva Dialogue of Climate Funding in September. He is on record as saying: “We are not going to move on the Green Fund (A UNFCCC controlled Climate Fund to help developing countries adapt to and mitigate climate change) and the \$100 billion (in long-term financing that the U.S. had previously promised to help mobilize) if the issues that were central to the Copenhagen Accord, that were part of the balance of the Copenhagen Accord, including mitigation and transparency, don’t also move.”⁵⁵

This is some of the back ground to the U.S. presence here at Cancun. Like the Chinese, thus far they have not raised their voice too loudly. A lot will be revealed this week.

In the intensity of the debate and the various dimensions of what is a complex process, one can easily forget the importance of what is happening here in Cancun. In a sense the world media has forgotten. Only a fraction of the media which were at Copenhagen is here in Cancun. In my daily internet checks of media outlets in Irish, British and U.S., I find that the Cancun Conference is getting very little coverage. But the issue hasn’t changed. Unless the international community can frame an ambitious, legally binding treaty within a year or so, the consequences for humankind, the planet and all future generations will be dire. In the past two years countries such as Ireland, Britain and the U.S. used taxpayers’ money to save doggy bank in the belief that they were too big to fail. But it seems that the welfare of the planet cannot garner the same kind of attention. Is there any clearer indication that our values are totally skewed in the wrong direction?

⁵⁵ Fact Sheet prepared by a number of Civil Society Organisations, The Third World Network, November 2010.

Some of the above technical data is from A **Stockholm Environment Institute** (SEI) Policy Brief distributed here at Cancun. The rest is my own gleaned from a variety of sources.