Copenhagen's Fateful Friday and Obama's Real Role

Contributed by Albert Bates
26 December 2009

"Cokenhagen" blog's last day

Leaving Copenhagen before sunrise, we passed into the airport terminal revolving doors, each panel emblazoned with the "Hopenhagen" logo, but beneath it was revealed Hopenhagen's corporate sponsor, Coca Cola, taking credit for the advertising campaign. Hope has died but Coke survived.

Upstairs from the revolving doors was a TckTckTck/Greenpeace billboard with Nicolas Sakozy, Premier of France, reading, "I'm Sorry. We could have stopped catastrophic climate change... We didn't."

We are still mulling the meaning of humanity's giant step away from survival. No targets, no timetables, no firm commitments, a crash of the carbon market, massive disinvestment in renewables and a switch back to coal and gas - all of these are the "Copenhagen Outcome."

Perhaps the strangest and most serious outcome was the damage wrought to the UN negotiation process itself. One needs to go back and re-read the 1972 Stockholm principles, the document that emerged from the 21st plenary session of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. From the preamble, authored by Maurice Strong:

“Man is both creature and moulder of his environment, which gives him physical sustenance and affords him the opportunity for intellectual, moral, social and spiritual growth. In the long and tortuous evolution of the human race on this planet a stage has been reached when, through the rapid acceleration of science and technology, man has acquired the power to transform his environment in countless ways and on an unprecedented scale.

“The natural growth of population continuously presents problems for the preservation of the environment, and adequate policies and measures should be adopted, as appropriate, to face these problems.

“A point has been reached in history when we must shape our actions throughout the world with a more prudent care for their environmental consequences. Through ignorance or indifference we can do massive and irreversible harm to the earthly environment on which our life and well being depend. Conversely, through fuller knowledge and wiser action, we can achieve for ourselves and our posterity a better life in an environment more in keeping with human needs and hopes. There are broad vistas for the enhancement of environmental quality and the creation of a good life. What is needed is an enthusiastic but calm state of mind and intense but orderly work.”

With our laptop and a wall socket at JFK, we were able to watch Rachel Maddow’s interview with Andrea Mitchell and learn how freakish and noir the COP-15 talks really were. Looking for Premier Wen Jiabao of China, President Obama followed a lead to a back room at the Bella Center, his press pool in tow.

Before the COP, the United States and China had been sniping at each other over demands that Beijing agree to international monitoring, ostensibly to verify its pledge to reduce by 40% the carbon intensity of its economy (the rate of emissions per unit of economic activity, something that is easy to do if you are growing your GDP by 10% annually).

After the President and Hillary Clinton made some snarky remarks about China's transparency, Premier Wen used diplomatic finesse to express his official displeasure. Twice on Friday, Mr. Wen sent an underling to represent him at meetings with Mr. Obama. Each time it was a lower-level official.

The White House made a point of noting the snub in a statement to reporters. According to an aide who passed it to the New York Times, Mr. Obama confided to his staff: "I don't want to mess around with this anymore. I want to talk to Wen." The story the Times then began spinning has formed the official frame of the talks — China was the bad actor, the US President stood tall and went dragon hunting, he slew the beast in its lair, and emerged with a new Accord, which was not the best, but the best that could be salvaged. "This progress did not come easily, and we know that this progress alone is not enough," he said. "We've come a long way, but we have much further to go." The carpenters then moved in to break the site down and make way for a trade show of home furnishings.

What actually appears to have happened is that the US came into the UN meeting with all the style and substance of John Bolton, Dubya's UN ambassador. Arriving on the final day with a lame, lowball proposal, Obama tried to ram a strictly voluntary, symbolic pledge system down the throats of the delegates, who despite the media clouding, were actually close to several important agreements.

China backed Africa. Africa did not want voluntary, symbolic pledges. So the White House tried to set up a third meeting between Obama and Wen. It also set up a separate meeting with Jacob Zuma of South Africa, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil, and Manmohan Singh of India. China apparently got wind of this sequence of meetings and called those players together on its own, before the Obama meeting.

When Denis McDonough, the national security council chief of staff, and Robert Gibbs, the White House press secretary, learned of the Chinese pre-meeting, they passed the word to the President and he rushed to China's room.

It bears mentioning here that the Bella Center has a very curious layout, thanks to the Danish hosts. All of the national delegations were assigned a Bella Center office and display space for administration, conferencing and receptions, which was typically a plastic-walled Star Wars battlecruiser cubicle between 24 and 48 square meters in size. There were no distinctions based on population size, GDP, or emissions, but there were some differences in both placement (near or far) and size between G-77 (130 poor countries, green in the image), G-30 (the industrial economies headed by Merrill Lynch's William McDonough, no relation), and a few VIP countries who rated special treatment.

China, with a quarter of the world population and emitting 20% of GHG emissions, was given a 2-room box in the back row of offices. The US, with 5% of the population and also about 20% of the emissions, got a glass skybox suite with conference rooms, communications center and a mini-Oval Office. This was the safe home for climate deniers James (Torture-9) Inhofe and Marsha (No Czars, No Death Panels, Demand Obama's Birth Certificate) Blackburn, as well as the

travel office for high-level junketeers Nancy Pelosi, Bart Gordon, Henry Waxman, John Kerry, Ed Markey, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jim Doyle and many, many other USAnians needing photo ops in the Restaurant at the End of the Universe.

Locating China's tiny room at the downstairs back, just behind the boiler room, under the steam vents, where the greenish neon lights flash intermittently through a high window and there is a faint odor of solvents, Mr. Obama called from the doorway. "Mr. Premier, are you ready to see me? Are you ready?" From inside a room that was already stuffed with Presidents Zuma, Lula, Singh and their top aides and translators, Wen, surprised, beckoned Obama to enter.

The Chinese, who had to send their people out to make room for Obama and his aides, balked at admitting the White House press pool to the fluorescent-lit craps game. Gibbs pressed forward with the pool's photographer. "My guys get in or we're leaving the meeting." They squeezed Gibbs in, which yielded this (hands over head) photo from Doug Mills at the NY Times:

Despite whatever had been discussed by Zuma, Lula, Singh and Wen before Obama arrived, the US got its wish for a barebones "accord." Danish hosts Rassmussen and Hedegaard, and UN leaders Ban Ki Moon and Yvo de Boer, none of whom had slept more than 2 hours in the previous 48 trying to broker a highest denominator deal, were not invited.

Obama, seated, started by asking what they could agree on. That settled a number of issues, including changing the wording on monitoring and verification to satisfy Mr. Wen. The other 188 countries were not asked for an opinion, although Mr. Obama then shopped his "Copenhagen Accord" around to a few European leaders, who each declined to join such an outrageous outlaw process. Ban Ki Moon and Yvo de Boer tried to put a nice face on it, but had to be steaming inside. They said the next COP in Mexico would resume the process, but as George Monbiot opined, Mexico is where negotiations go to die.

Having destroyed the whole notion of consensus negotiations carefully crafted over the 37 years since Stockholm, Mr. Obama joined his waiting motorcade and exited. In 8 hours, he had done more to destroy the fabric of the United Nations than his predecessor had accomplished in 8 years.

As for the $10 billion dollar per year pledge Hillary Clinton offered to support clean green economies in the 2/3 world, beginning in 2012, the US knows it will simply borrow that money from China and the loan will vanish in the slippage of the dollar against the huan.

Hugo Chavez told Amy Goodman, "We have to transition ourselves to a post-petroleum era, and that is what we must discuss."

Goodman asked him about reducing Venezuela's emissions. Chavez replied, "We must reduce emissions 100 percent… We are in agreement — we must reduce all the emissions that are destroying the planet. However that requires a change in lifestyle, a change in the economic model. We must go from capitalism to socialism, that's the real solution."

"How do you throw away capitalism?" Goodman asked. Chavez replied, "They way they did it in Cuba. The way we are doing it in Venezuela. Give the power to the people and take it away from the elites. You can only do that through revolution."

Being more evolutionary than revolutionary, we are still betting on the dolphins. They can survive even without T-mobile and a laptop.

* * * * *

Read all about Albert's observations and adventures in Copenhagen and Hopenhagen on his blog. For more on his peak oil work, see the Culture Change article Albert Bates, guide for our post-petroleum, globally warmed future. For more articles on or by Albert on this website, visit this listing