Slouching Towards Cancun

Contributed by Albert Bates
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Editor's note: climate writer Albert Bates, author of the 1990 book Climate in Crisis (introduction by Al Gore), has captured the feeling many of us have about yet another international climate meeting:

“For the veterans, who are less like drunks and more like near-suicidal PTSD sufferers, a dramatic reduction of energy consumption in a complex society is quite unlikely, absent some catastrophic event.”

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In the run-up to the Seventh Biennial Workshop on Advances in Energy Studies in Barcelona, 19-21 October, the organizers put out this statement as context:

Many people seem to believe that it is possible to have a rapid transition to a "low carbon economy," based on a totally different pattern of production of energy carriers (using different primary energy sources) and a totally different pattern of consumption of energy carriers, while still guaranteeing the same set of end uses.

The underlying presumption is that this is achievable by just signing a few international agreements (e.g. 80% reduction of CO2 emissions in 40 years). Very few people seem to realize that changing the metabolic pattern of a complex dissipative system is very difficult, if not impossible. In metabolic systems, the very pattern of dissipation (the use of a given set of energy carriers to serve a given set of operating purposes) coincides with the very identity of the system (its components, characteristics and ways of doing things). This implies that we must expect all kinds of problems if we try to change the characteristics of the production and consumption of energy in modern societies: problems generated by the inertia of complex systems, which tend to resist structural change.

In recent weeks we have been in discussions with other members of non-governmental organizations (NGOs, or “civil sector major groups” in UN parlance) as part of the run-up to the Cancun climate conference that starts just 3 weeks from now. Because of the huge outpouring of non-profit energy, money and effort at Copenhagen last year, and the subsequent meltdown of the Copenhagen round, the approach to this year’s COP (Conference of Parties to the Framework Climate Convention) has been like a drunk waking up with a really bad hangover. A hot shower and several carafes of coffee later, many are really wondering if we want to go back into the bar again tonight.

There is fresh meat in Cancun, including some inexperienced groups still enamored of the vision of a low carbon future that might be achieved just by signing a few international agreements, eating fewer animals, driving hybrid cars and changing light bulbs.

To the veterans, who are less like drunks and more like near-suicidal PTSD sufferers, a dramatic reduction of energy consumption in a complex society seems quite unlikely, absent some catastrophic event, which in their darker moments some have even begun to hope for. Even Peak Oil is moving too slowly, with shale gas and biofuels propping up near-term supplies. We need a supervolcano.

In Copenhagen, the NGOs had displays and presentation rooms right at the Bella Center, the Ground Zero of the UN meeting. That ended the snowy December day Obama arrived, when, suddenly, NGOs were rationed passes, and then thrown out into the cold, quite literally. This year the host country is starting at the point of last year’s exclusion, dividing the delegate deliberations at the Moon Palace Hotel from the Civil Sector Sideshow at the Cancun Messe, 5 miles away. KlimaForum10, an off-site alternative congress continuing from this past April’s World Peoples' Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Bolivia, is even farther away, across impassible swamps and pedestrian-

inadvisable highways.

The differences between these venues are like the differences between their names. In the Palacio, you have to pass through many layers of security, take off your shoes, empty your water bottle, and show credentials to be scanned every time you cross sectors. Everyone wears suits and ties and if you get too close to a security detail for a Head of State or Oil Minister you can be arrested or machine-gunned by bodyguards. We venture into this lions' den because we want to hear and report what is said, and because there are presentations to the delegates behind these closed doors that do not occur anywhere else.

The KlimaForum, (klimaforum10.org) is intended to be more like the Summer of Love, where anything goes. Twenty meeting tents and 2500 campsites are being readied. The poster looks like an ayahuasca rush.

People wear polar bear costumes and no shoes and you can smell incense burning. There is guerrilla theater. Many stands are set up to hand out literature and chatchkas like key rings and water bottles. It is a free speech zone and people create opportunities to share, give powerpoints, or have debates. Klimaforum09 cost more than 125 million dollars, provided mostly by the Danish government. Klimaforum10 asked the Mexican government and the Cancún municipal government to provide the same. Mexico gave space but no money. European funds were frozen to pressure the Mexican government, but at this late date, that hope is pretty forlorn.

The Messe is a halfway house, where you need credentials to get in, but they are easier to get. It is for the Major Groups like Greenpeace, Oxfam and Yale 350. In the Palacio there will be 20,000 to 30,000 diplomats and 10,000 press. In the Messe there will be 10,000-40,000 environmental activists and no press.

Recently George Monbiot, writing for The Guardian, despaired for the Cancun talks:

How should we respond to the reality we have tried not to see: that in 18 years of promise and bluster nothing has happened? Environmentalists tend to blame themselves for these failures. Perhaps we should have made people feel better about their lives. Or worse. Perhaps we should have done more to foster hope. Or despair. Perhaps we were too fixated on grand visions. Or techno-fixes. Perhaps we got too close to business. Or not close enough. The truth is that there is not and never was a strategy certain of success, as the powers ranged against us have always been stronger than we are.

Greens are a puny force by comparison to industrial lobby groups, the cowardice of governments and the natural human tendency to deny what we don't want to see. To compensate for our weakness, we indulged a fantasy of benign paternalistic power - acting, though the political mechanisms were inscrutable, in the wider interests of humankind. We allowed ourselves to believe that, with a little prompting and protest, somewhere, in a distant institutional sphere, compromised but decent people would take care of us. They won't. They weren't ever going to do so. So what do we do now?

I don't know. These failures have exposed not only familiar political problems, but deep-rooted human weakness. All I know is that we must stop dreaming about an institutional response that will never materialize and start facing a political reality we've sought to avoid.

For the past 300 years the massive production and consumption of potent, once-in-history, energy sources spawned gigantic infrastructures that locked in our contemporary pattern of meeting daily human needs from Earth’s bounty in ways that are both wasteful and out of balance. The flush of superhuman energy supplanted the old narrative for

individual and family relationships to the natural world with a modern, generic one that saw nature as a machine that could be revved up to produce infinitely more.

The new world view also enshrined the political/military power structure, as witnessed by recent elections in the USA. Political and military power seeks only to continue itself, by any expediency, no matter how short-sighted. Student protests over tuition increases and most labor union agendas fall into this same expediency. Sooner or later, they are all as deer, frozen in the headlight of an approaching freight train. Nothing in their cultural conditioning or centuries of military history has prepared them for this moment. Nature is no machine, and she is angry when revved up.

Cheap oil and coal, along with an anomalously mild and stable climate for 10,000 years, have tricked our economic systems by conflating the consumption and production of goods and services with availability of credit and technological prowess. Shortfalls are met not by rationing and reseeding but by increasing indebtedness or thinking outside the box. We strive to re-inflate national economies by buying, with money that we do not have, goods and services that we do not need, using financial instruments that are complete fictions, in order to sate our addiction to growth. We forget that “economics” and “ecology” share the same root. In Greek, it means “home.”

Cornucopians, including many of the Indian NGOs attending COP-16, see population growth as positive since it enlarges the work supply and the potential for creative innovation. How food for 7 billion people in the world can continue to be supplied at today’s negative Energy Return on Investment of 0.1 (10 calories in for each calorie out) is an inconvenient question.

Neo-Malthusians, including many of the major NGOs today, see population growth as putting unsustainable pressure on resources and the environment, but can’t seem to find a way to discuss this rationally with their Indian, African or Catholic counterparts.

Equally unrealistic are the 10 points emerging from Cochabamba in April that seem utterly detached from best available science and from pragmatic politics. To be detached from pragmatic politics (meaning it can never be accomplished) is not necessarily a bad thing, because politics needs to be pushed and to have something to aim for, so that the compromise leans farther.

But the lack of scientific coordination is troubling. It will not be possible to limit global temperature increase to 1 degree. We are already past that. It may still be possible to limit it to one degree per decade for the remainder of this century, although that will be global average and already we are seeing 2 to 4 degree increases at the high latitudes.

It will also not be possible to reduce emissions by more than 50% for 2017, as some Southern NGOs are calling for. It is possible to reduce emissions from transportation and energy by 50%, but it is far slower and more difficult to reduce emissions from buildings and agriculture. In Copenhagen we were very close to a consensus 50’ by ‘50 deal, and that still seems achievable, albeit probably not in Cancun.

We need to get rid of the rhetoric that employs terms such as "developing countries." In the world to come, the only developing countries will be those that follow the example of Bhutan, and develop qualitative measurement of happiness. In that sense the North is the most undeveloped. The notion that somehow all countries can achieve a higher standard of living by industrialization is a busted paradigm and we need to distance ourselves from it. India and Senegal will never be

Sweden. Nor should they want to be.

Lastly, we need to get beyond the concept of zero emissions. We need to go below zero. Below zero by, say, 2060 could be a KlimaForum goal. Practical approaches like Zero Carbon Britain 2030, if implemented sooner, rather than later, could blaze the trail and shorten the 2060 timetable. Wouldn't it be great if the ZCB-30 goal could be universally cloned by all States-Parties to the convention at Cancun?

As in Copenhagen, we are attending as part of the Global Ecovillage Network, which has consultative status through the Economic and Social Committee of the United Nations. We'll probably devote a small amount of time each day to visiting the Palacio (where the lines are very long at security checkpoints) and the rest of the time be at the Messe or KlimaForum. The meetings we most want to attend, such as the formal discussions on solutions like tree-planting, biochar or carbon farming, versus ill-conceived non-solutions like geoengineering, nuclear power or clean coal, will be at the Palacio.

Expecting to accomplish something really promising is probably asking too much at this point, but we can still attend as witnesses. Who knows? We might witness something really historic.

Or not.

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Follow Albert Bates' blog at peaksurfer.blogspot.com and read his articles on CultureChange.org. His new book is The Biochar Solution: Carbon Farming and Climate Change

Further reading at Culture Change:

Political Platform for Klimaforum10 by Mexico's Grassroots
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PLATAFORMA POLÍTICA DEL KLIMAFORUM10 por Miguel Valencia