

UPDATE

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Global warming – the challenge remains

COPENHAGEN HANG-OVER

The Copenhagen Climate Summit of December 7/18 exposed the fragility of planetary management and the absence of responsibility and leadership from the developed industrial nations.

The Australian Conservation Foundation reports

- It was the largest meeting of world leaders in history
- The outcome is disappointing but there is a pathway to move things forward
- The 55 countries which formally pledge to cut emissions, constitute 78% of global emissions
- Agreement – It is a matter of ‘when’ not ‘if’.
- It leaves the hard decisions to ongoing negotiations during 2010 and to November in Mexico.

THE SUMMIT’S VOLUNTARY ACCORD

Barack Obama flew in for 8 hours and with 14 rich countries came up with a 3 page voluntary agreement called the Copenhagen Accord which commits to containing global warming to 2 degrees Celsius but set no targets for emission cuts by 2030 or 2050 to achieve it. The Accord calls for:

- Investment in forestry carbon sinks in poor countries
- Market mechanisms to reduce greenhouse gas emissions
- A Copenhagen Green Fund and a Technology Mechanism to manage these agreements
- A Clean Development Mechanism (in which carbon capture and storage was excluded)
- US\$30 billion in 2010-2012 to help poor countries invest in a low emissions economy.

The next UN level focus on climate change will be in Cancun, Mexico, in November this year.

This was a Summit the world’s nations had to experience, if only to show the disparities between rich and poor countries, but also the disparities among rich countries and their loss of international clout.

Rich countries are in an enormous dilemma and between a rock and hard place of their own making, trying to juggle the dual crises of finance and global warming. This is going to take more than a Copenhagen Summit to find some common ground and many more years of intense negotiations between the industrially developed countries and the undeveloped to find an equitable solution.

WHAT MUST AUSTRALIA DO?

It is only over the past 60 years that Australia has become a developed industrial society and it is also over that period that we have also become the world’s highest per capita CO2 emitters, ie, polluters.

Australia also contains enormous renewable wind, solar, thermal, wave and other energy resources but our country’s economy is 80% dependent on fossil-fuels and this dependency, rather than declining, is being pushed to a maximum by fossil-fuel corporations and compliant governments.

This has to be reversed, and to do so will require confrontation with the fossil-fuel industries and the ‘greenhouse mafia’ that leads them, as in the coal, aluminium, oil, mining, cement and energy companies. Governments nation-wide have to face up to and work their way through these dominant economic interests to correct this imbalance and to invest in renewable technologies.

Natural gas, while a fossil-fuel, is less polluting and will have an important bridging role in a transition from coal and oil to renewables. The NSW Government is poised to make a decision on its proposed two new power stations and must take up the natural gas option in preference to coal.

ECONOMIC GROWTH - SLOW IT DOWN OR DOWN WE GO

The following research shows us why and how some economic growth, generated as it is by population increase, is necessary and more importantly, how we have opted for excess.

Currently, it's the particular model of economic growth that needs our scrutiny. Models such as escalated, exponential, and even macro and business as usual, now ring out a warning of fiscal crises.

On the other hand, slow-growth and steady-state economic growth have gained both credence and support in the wake of the global financial crisis and the business and personal wreckage left behind.

This is one very good reason why a new economic growth model is needed, and as the following will also show:

- Economic growth of say 3 to 4% would double current demand on the planet by 2025 (just 15 years ahead), and quadruple demand by 2050.
- American scientists show that human activity took 70% of the planet's regenerative capacity as early as 1961, and 120% by 1999 (overshot by 20%).
- Prof. Tim Flannery stated that in 2008 the figure for that year was 25% in excess of the planet's capacity to meet human demand.
- A scientific team of 28 say (New Scientist Feb. 2010): "we passed the danger threshold more than 20 years ago when the 350 parts per million (PPM) of CO2 pollution was exceeded".
- **Prof. Herman Daly** (former World Bank economist): "**You can't grow your way to a sustainable world**".

WHY 350PPM....IN THE PAST ISN'T IT?

With CO2 levels now at 387ppm and rising, what's now so important about 350ppm? Good question! Because, say the scientists: "...*the answer is that we haven't yet experienced all the warming from that amount of CO2, not by a long chalk....Every degree of warming caused by CO2 is amplified by feedback processes*".

NASA Climatologist James Hansen argues that there are other 'slow feedbacks' (such as where) methane stored in soils and permafrost is destabilised and released sending increased temperatures as high as 6 degrees.

DID YOU KNOW?

- According to the Garnaut Review: we emit 28.1 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent per person – the highest of any industrialised country. As other countries attempt to go green, we get browner through the burning of fossil-fuels.
- That Australia's renewable energy sector is the seventh smallest among nations surveyed – at 5.7% of the total energy production.
- The current 'commitments' on carbon emission cuts for 2020 would see the atmosphere warm by 3.5 to 4 degrees celcius this century, thus ensuring runaway climate change.
- That if all the costs and externalities of maintaining the motor industry were genuinely calculated, the current price of petrol would have to be \$10.00 per litre. As far back as 1997, a similar assessment had shown that petrol would have been \$5.00 per litre at that time.
- So, why isn't petrol being sold at \$10.00 a litre? Simply because taxpayers subsidise the industry with roads and highways among other concessions, even bail-outs, and a multitude of handouts in billions of dollars a year to keep it functioning. But can we afford it?
- Treasury's Ken Henry (SMH 6.3.10) said that: "... in valuing the environment much of it is flawed and fails to give proper weight to retaining Australia's unique biodiversity".
- **Herman Daly again** – "...macro economic growth, if left unchecked, will eventually diminish and destroy the only thing that counts for each individual – per capita income.... a steady-state economy will allow per capita income to be maximised and made sustainable indefinitely".

