

THE COPENHAGEN CLIMATE SUMMIT

EARTH FIRST

By Nick King

The world's biggest environmental event

All eyes are on the charming Danish city of Copenhagen as the UN Climate summit unfolds, involving an estimated 34 000 individuals. The world awaits as politicians, observers, lobbyists, heads of state, protesters and the media interact in what has been described as the biggest gathering on the issue of climate change ever. Over 190 countries will be represented and there will be 100 world leaders present, including US president Barak Obama and the Prime Minister of Australia, Mr. Kevin Rudd.

The purpose of the summit

An overwhelming number of scientists are of the opinion that if global temperatures are allowed to rise to 2 degrees or more, the effects of climate change will become dramatic and disastrous. The ultimate goal of the summit is to produce an agreement among nations which prevents this happening. For this to be avoided, science demands a cut in greenhouse gas emissions of 50% by 2050.

The Carbon Rich World

To have a chance of keeping warming below the dangerous 2 degrees centigrade mark, scientists say that cuts of 25-40% of co2 levels are needed by 2020 (relative to 1990 levels), rising by 80-95% by 2050. Developed countries such as Australia have grown rich on burning cheap fossil fuels and still emit vast amounts of carbon dioxide per person . (Australia emits 25 tonnes of co2 per person.) Therefore, rich countries like Australia have a responsibility to make the deepest cuts.

Carbon in the developing world

Emissions from fast growing countries like China and India are surging, and any future global limit on emission requires curbs on the pollution of these nations. Yet, per person, these countries have small carbon footprints and there are millions of people who exist in deep poverty. So they can argue that they need to be allowed to continue to pollute for a while as they improve their citizens' lives before reducing their emissions.

Paying the bill for climate change

A low carbon economy may be cheaper than a fossil fueled one in the long run, but time is short and there will be costs now. All agree that the poorest nations from Haiti to the Sudan to Bangladesh need urgent help. Their citizens have done virtually nothing to pollute the atmosphere, but are bearing the worst impact of floods and droughts. Richer nations will have to pay billions from now on. It will also cost a lot to build the global clean technology infrastructure necessary to effectively reduce carbon emission from power plants, buildings and transport.

This is the task, and the issues confronting those involved in the Copenhagen conference. It is a daunting task, but Copenhagen also presents the world with a never to be repeated opportunity to put things right.