

OPINION:

## Climate warnings ignored

*Andrew Macintosh 18 December 2007*

Political leaders from around the world left the climate change conference in Bali sprouting platitudes about how the outcomes from the meeting were a step in the right direction. What they didn't mention is the fact that the window of opportunity for avoiding dangerous climate change has now almost closed.

Although no politician will admit it (possibly even to themselves), a decision has been made to accept the risks associated with a much hotter global climate. We are currently crossing greenhouse thresholds that commit the earth to warming of 2degrees above pre-industrial levels. This is the level that most agree constitutes the outer marker for dangerous human interference with the climate system.

In order to have a real chance of staying within this temperature bound (noting that global temperatures are already up by 0.8degrees since 1900), global emissions would have to peak and start declining in the next five or so years. They would then have to be cut by 60 to 90 per cent by 2050. Meeting these targets would be a mammoth task requiring the adoption of one of two strategies.

The first involves developed countries dramatically reducing their emissions now to provide some scope for emission increases in developing countries, while still keeping the total global emission budget on track.

The second involves more moderate cuts in the developed world and a greater effort by developing countries to control and reduce their emissions.

Bali proved that neither of these strategies is achievable in the current political climate. Despite a decade having passed since the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol, Bali showed that the positions of the major developed and developing countries have not shifted significantly. Developed countries with substantial fossil fuel reserves and cheap energy steadfastly refuse to come at deep emission cuts.

The Europeans are more open to the idea, but they are not as reliant on fossil energy and energy intensive industries as other countries like the US, Canada, Russia and Australia. Among developing countries, there is a widespread reluctance to curb emissions before the developed world has cut theirs. Some developing countries have signalled a greater willingness to consider mitigation measures. However, they are a long way from signing up to binding emission reduction targets.

The outcomes and positioning at Bali were predictable and politically understandable. Political leaders in developed countries with large fossil energy sectors are reluctant to pursue deep emission cuts because it could threaten their chances of re-election. In developing countries, the focus is on poverty alleviation, conflict avoidance and fixing governance structures. Climate change is down the list of priorities. Moreover, most countries are trying to avoid being a leader on mitigation efforts. This hesitancy is driven by fears of "free riding" and concerns about domestic businesses being disadvantaged in world markets.

While the predicament of political leaders is understandable, it leaves the global community having to accept that the 2 degree target now looks unachievable. Only luck or a radical shift in political sentiment in the next two years would make this target a realistic objective.

Political leaders have not presented these facts clearly to the community. Most people remain under the impression that climate change is a distant thing and that there is no need for urgency. The truth is that climate change is upon us and that the time for procrastination is over.

The lack of honesty about the situation has had two notable effects.

Firstly, it has denied the public the opportunity to consider important questions about the trade-offs that are being made. Melting of the Greenland Icesheet, the inundation of low-lying areas and countries, widespread species extinctions, destruction of the Great Barrier Reef, Alpine ecosystems, and the Kakadu wetlands, spread of tropical diseases, loss of agricultural output the list of risks associated with warming in excess of 2 degrees is long. As governments commit the earth to a path that makes warming of more than 2 degrees almost inevitable, the public should be made aware of what has been chosen.

Secondly, the failure to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation has warped the policy settings. Governments have been focused on arguments about reducing emissions and ignored the need to promote adaptation.

In Australia, small steps have been made to start the adaptation process, but much more needs to be done. Adaptation should now sit as an equal partner with mitigation in the fight against global warming.

Over the next two years, world leaders will thrash out an agreement on emission reduction targets for the period after 2012. These targets should be based on what is needed and achievable. The targets should also be devised in a manner that is honest and transparent.

Recent international negotiations have been premised on the lie that countries are committed to preventing dangerous climate change. Some may be, but most aren't. The public should be made aware of this and be given the chance to say whether they accept the choices that are being made.

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