

OPINION

Watching as the world withers

Nicholas Stuart 18 December 2007

Wasn't Bali a triumph for Australian diplomacy! Our support to tuck away even the notion of binding emission targets as a mere footnote to a non-binding preamble shows that when it comes to word games, Australia's finest are redefining the meaning of world's best practice.

There was a bit of tough competition from the US team though, which clearly demonstrated that although the superpower may be fading it can still manage a vigorous rally at the negotiation table. Just hours before the final agreement was due to be signed, America came up with the sort of brilliant move that seasoned diplomatic observer's will chuckle about for years. The US would sign up, but only if any agreement was voluntary, allowing countries to set their own targets and timetables for reductions in emissions.

The deadpan expression on the faces of US negotiators was priceless, because it revealed they never had any intention of getting involved in anything other than raiding the drink's cabinets of their hotels. However, it was their sense of timing waiting until the last day of two weeks of talks before revealing their hand that really delivered the knockout.

Australia played the diplomatic game brilliantly according to the rules originally laid out by Prince Metternich at the Congress of Vienna. Towards the end of his life the Austrian statesman summed up the lessons he'd learnt through a lifetime of negotiation: "The greatest gift of any statesman rests not in knowing what concessions to make, but recognising when to make them."

We were able to use the warm glow that accompanied signing up to Kyoto to not only avoid yielding any further ground but also to avoid opprobrium of being lumped with the US as part of the problem. Kevin Conrad, of Papua New Guinea, probably summed up the frustration of the conference best when he told the American delegation, "If for some reason you are not willing to lead ... please get out of the way." Australia pretended to be "bridging the gap" between the US, Europe and the developing world but the reality is we were just standing by and watching.

The similarity between the Bali negotiations and the Congress of Vienna is more than superficial. Both represented attempts to supposedly try and frame the future of the world; yet both failed to realise that the environment whether social or climatic is changing faster than ink can dry on a sheet of paper.

Just a year before dramatic revolutions would convulse the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Metternich attempted to dismiss Italy as a mere "geographical expression". This might have been quite a witty little epigram if he hadn't actually believed it. Metternich was a natural conservative and so proudly took a stand firmly opposed to change. His efforts were rewarded for years, until finally the pent-up demands of society led to dramatic revolts in the capitals throughout Europe. In the summer of 1848, after he'd fled to London, the prince found himself standing on the steps of the

British Museum chatting to the French ex-prime minister, who was another exile. Despite the tumultuous insurrections of this time he insisted he'd never made an error. Less than a year after this conversation took place Karl Marx would begin his daily walk up those very same stone steps as he began writing his own gospel preaching further revolution Das Kapital.

By the middle of the 19th century it had become obvious that social change was occurring whether it was wanted or not. The old monarchies were left with different ways of attempting to deal with the changing reality around them; they could adapt and incorporate the dynamism of the modern economy or attempt to stifle it and pretend nothing was happening.

Metternich started the Austro-Hungarian Empire down the blind alleyway that resulted in its eventual disintegration at the end of World War I. Instead of creating a flexible structure that could adapt to new challenges he insisted there was no need to change. Because things suited him just the way they were, Metternich had the astounding presumption to assume that by some extraordinary feat of willpower he would be able to stop the clock at the year 1815.

Today we easily dismiss such delusions. We are quite willing to accept the idea of technological progress, and take this as a "given". The path of social change doesn't appear quite as deterministic, but there is a broad acceptance that things aren't static. However we appear to be unwilling to accept the evidence when it's suggested that the environment is changing dramatically and, potentially, catastrophically.

The journal Science predicts, in its latest issue, that climate change will see the Great Barrier Reef reduced to rubble and the Australian Alps devoid of snow. These changes are significant and will cause dislocation, but this is manageable.

Other challenges, however, are far more difficult to predict or guard against and that is why our participation at Bali failed abysmally.

The changing global weather patterns will lead to security challenges the like of which we have never experienced before. Our own environment is fragile, but the resources of this country will be viewed covetously by refugees from all our neighbours. Nothing that happened in Bali last week has provided any sort of answer for our future security.

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