

The Copenhagen Concoction

The U.N.'s climate confab runs into the reality of costs and science.

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For months, the U.N. climate change summit that began yesterday in Copenhagen has been billed as the world's last best hope to match the scientific consensus on global warming with a policy consensus. But now it turns out there is little of either, and Copenhagen looks like it will go down as one of the more remarkable cases of political hubris in recent memory.

That's no bad outcome, given the ambitions of Copenhagen's organizers to impose heavy new carbon taxes on top of a struggling world economy. The Australian Senate last week defeated Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's cap-and-trade legislation, largely due to its job-killing potential in the coal-producing continent. Jairam Ramesh, India's environment minister, said Thursday "there is no question of India accepting a legally binding emission reduction cut." China has promised to cut the rate of growth in its carbon emissions, which would nevertheless double over the next decade even on the most optimistic scenario.

As for the U.S., it has become clear even to liberals that it was not the Bush Administration alone that was standing in the way of a global climate deal. Last Thursday, nine Senators sent a letter outlining the terms of their support for cap-and-trade legislation, including that every other country enact and enforce carbon legislation of their own. And those were Democrats.

President Obama has promised an 83% cut in U.S. greenhouse gas emissions (from their 2005 level) by 2050. But such extravagant pledges are only possible when everyone knows they won't happen. Yesterday's announcement by the Environmental Protection Agency that it will regulate carbon as a dangerous pollutant is an attempt to run around Congress in order to impress Copenhagen's conferees, but it is also deeply undemocratic and betrays the lack of broader public support. (See below.)

So what exactly is the point of Copenhagen? The question needs to be asked all the more insistently in the wake of last month's disclosure of thousands of documents and emails from the University of East Anglia's Climatic Research Unit (CRU), long considered an authoritative center of temperature data, modeling and forecasts.

At a minimum, the emails demonstrate the lengths some of the world's leading climate scientists were prepared to go to manufacture the "consensus" they used to demand drastic steps against global warming. The emails are replete with talk of blacklisting dissenting scientists and journals, manipulating peer review and avoiding freedom of information requests.

Nor can the emails be dismissed as a handful of scientists showing their petulant streak. Scientific research must be subject to testing, verification and, if necessary, disproof. Otherwise, its conclusions are worthless. That's especially true if the basic data on which the climate records are based are deleted, as seems to have been the case with the CRU, or if the elaborate computer models used to forecast climate turn out to be poorly designed, as also seems to be the case.

The core question raised by the emails is why their authors would behave this way if they are as privately convinced of the strength of their case as they claim in public. The Earth's climate is a profoundly complex system, sensitive, dynamic and subject to a dizzying range of variables interacting in ways that remain poorly understood. Carbon dioxide is only one of those variables. Climate scientists failed to anticipate the absence of warming in the last decade, a point that Kevin Trenberth, head of the Climate Analysis Section at the National Center for Atmospheric Research, privately conceded in one of the disclosed emails was a "travesty."

Given this, the public is entitled to wonder how exactly climate scientists can state with such certainty that temperatures have never been higher, or that they are sure to rise in the coming decade, to say nothing of the rest of the century. The

public is also entitled to know how the climatologists can suggest the precise degrees by which the Earth will warm, or why a warmer Earth is, on balance, worse than a colder one. Is there a "correct" global average temperature?

The public also has a right to wonder whether the bulk of the scarce financial resources available to mitigate ecological risks ought to be devoted primarily to climate change rather than to other threats to the environment and public health. For several years, Danish statistician Bjorn Lomborg has been convening meetings in Copenhagen of some of the world's leading economists to consider that very question. Overwhelmingly they have concluded that the world's dollars, euros and yen are better spent on tackling diseases such as AIDS or malaria or problems such as malnutrition and run-of-the-mill pollution than on hugely expensive (and dubiously effective) carbon-mitigation schemes.

This conclusion is only common sense: Given the choice between spending \$100 to feed a hungry child in the present or combat a notional climate problem that might or might not have real consequences a century hence, most of us would surely choose the former. We would do so, moreover, with the confidence that the technologies of the future will be better suited to deal with whatever climate problems might then exist.

A typical retort is that "we can't afford to wait until it's too late," but one may as well ask whether the child in our example should go hungry while the developed world spends its money on global warming mitigation in the Third World. Yet that is exactly what the conferees at Copenhagen seem prepared to do, to the tune of billions of dollars per year.

Even if the Earth does warm by a degree or two this century, the world will be better able to cope with any consequences the more prosperous it is. The worst policy would be to impose higher energy and other costs that reduce global growth for decades. The proponents of cap and trade point to this or that study claiming that a tax on the world's main current energy supplies (oil, natural gas, coal) is cost free. But this also defies common sense. The Chinese and Indians don't believe it, and neither do middle-class Americans who can't easily afford hundreds of dollars a year in extra electricity or transportation costs.

Meanwhile, none of the "green" energy sources—wind, solar or biofuels—has so far proved even remotely efficient or scalable, while often entailing serious environmental consequences of their own. These industries exist mainly because governments have thrown tens of billions in subsidies at them, and still they can't compete with carbon sources.

Much of the momentum for Copenhagen is now driven by the alternative fuels industry and its investors, who stand to lose vast sums unless governments artificially raise the price of carbon. These include our friends at Kleiner Perkins, the ecoventure capital fund that includes Al Gore as a partner. And of course that part of the political class congenitally eager to redistribute taxpayer monies also wants to dispense "carbon credits" to friends and political donors.

By now, the idea that global warming represents the gravest threat to humanity has become totemic in much of the world, a belief invested with religious fervor and barely susceptible to rational discussion, let alone debate. Yet it remains telling how quickly a sense of reality has reasserted its cold grip in light of the choices Copenhagen now brings starkly into view.

Mr. Obama has delayed his trip to the conference until its final day, when he thinks he might salvage some kind of deal. Perhaps he will. Then again, Copenhagen is more likely to prove that it takes more than environmental faith and political opportunism to forge a genuine global consensus.