

Opinion & Analysis

Political paralysis as clock ticks on climate change



**JOHN
GIBBONS**
ANALYSIS

A scientific consensus on the minimum needed to forestall global warming runs up against political failings

A MASSIVE tsunami in the Indian Ocean in December 2004 left nearly a quarter of a million people dead. In the wake of that disaster, rescue teams were puzzled at how relatively few animals had been killed.

Since then, anecdotal reports repeatedly emerged of elephants, monkeys and even dogs fleeing to higher ground minutes before the waves hit. Was it a "sixth sense" that warned them of such an impending disaster? The more mundane explanation is that many animals are acutely tuned to subtle environmental warning signals.

We humans generally prefer to live indoors. The comforts we gain are at the price of putting us out of synch with the physical environment, leaving us incapable of perceiving such faint cues.

And that's why we have scientists. Their job is to collate and then make sense of the physical data gleaned from close observation of the world around them. They are by training a cautious, sceptical, even prickly bunch with a notoriously low tolerance for fools. As Thomas Huxley memorably put it: "The great tragedy of science – the slaying of a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact."

Which is why the findings of a poll of scientists attending a climate conference in

Denmark in March were so alarming. About 60 per cent of respondents said that yes, in theory it was still possible to prevent global average temperature rises exceeding 2°C – the accepted point beyond which runaway climate chaos awaits.

There is however a yawning chasm between scientific necessity and what is politically acceptable. Some 86 per cent believed the 2-degree threshold will in fact be crossed. Most reckoned an apocalyptic 4-5 degrees this century is on the cards. In other words, they believe humanity can still save itself, but will choose not to.

Scientists are not themselves robots. As one respondent commented: "My optimism is not primarily due to scientific facts, but to hope." Another explained: "As a mother of young children, I choose to believe there's a chance, and work hard towards it."

It's now barely 150 days to the start of the Copenhagen Climate Conference. It's a mammoth UN-sponsored affair charged with bringing together more than 190 countries to agree a replacement for the ill-starred Kyoto Protocol. You could also call it the last chance saloon. The journey to Copenhagen began 18 months ago at the climate conference in Bali and the project received a welcome shot in the

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arm with the installation this January of a scientifically numerate administration in Washington.

US engagement is critical, but President Obama faces fierce domestic opposition to all measures, however modest, that aim to rein in Americans' high-energy lifestyles. Legislation known as the Waxman-Markey Bill is now before Congress. It's so watered down that if it were a medicine, it might well be classified as homeopathic. And yet, after eight years of Bush era anti-science, the very fact that a climate Bill is even on the table is cause for celebration. It would be inconceivable for the world's largest polluter to arrive in Copenhagen without having its own national

policy on climate change in place.

As the countdown to Copenhagen continues, what unites the major players is a shared unwillingness to grasp the political nettle of putting a proper price on carbon, especially in the middle of a global economic slump. As long as fossil fuels continue to get a free ride on pollution, there is zero chance of deep cuts in CO₂ emissions being achieved.

Last week, new ocean floor drilling data confirmed that current atmospheric CO₂ levels are the highest in at least 2.1 million years. "What's remarkable is how little CO₂ concentration changed in the past," said Prof Jerry McManus of Columbia University. "What we're seeing now is the same magnitude of natural variations happening in only a few decades."

Pre-industrial concentrations of atmospheric CO₂ varied between 181-297 parts per million (ppm). Today, the level stands at about 392ppm. When other greenhouse gases such as methane and nitrous oxide are tallied, the real figure is about 460ppm. This pushes us over the 450ppm line that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warns we must stay below to avoid catastrophic climate tipping points. Others argue the true "safe" limit is actually 350ppm.

Small wonder then that the scientists who produced the Synthesis Report in March are glum. Their work updates the IPCC's 2007 data, much of which is seriously out of date. Worryingly, the new figures show that the IPCC's worst-case scenarios are now unfolding.

Ironically, some non-CO₂ atmospheric pollution is actually helping to keep a lid on global temperatures. "If we were ever to install sulphur filters all over the world, we would already be at 2.5 degree warming," said physicist Hans-Joachim Schellnhuber.

Atmospheric and ocean heating already "in the system", as it were, will continue to heat the planet for centuries. Ice melting and sea level rises cannot now be stopped, but they can be ameliorated. Put another way: you're in a car that's speeding towards a brick wall; do you slam on the brakes and brace for impact, or continue squabbling with your passengers about whose fault it is and drive on regardless?

Exactly 90 years ago this Sunday, the Treaty of Versailles was signed. It proved both unjust and ineffective, and with it were sown the seeds of future calamities. Copenhagen is a thousand Versailles. This time, we simply cannot afford to fail.