

ENERGY AND CLIMATE REALISM

Jürgen Krönig, Presentation at the German British Forum, Foreign & Commonwealth Office, London, 20 October 2009

<http://www.staff.livjm.ac.uk/spsbpeis/kroenig2009.htm>

The French Statesman Talleyrand once said "that speech is given to man to disguise his thoughts". In today's mass media democracies it could be translated into "speeches are made by politicians to disguise their intentions."

Gordon Brown's apocalyptic warnings about the future of the planet if Copenhagen should fail can be interpreted as cry for help: Please make sure that we get a face saving agreement that can be presented as a success. And this is what will come to pass. With or without Barack Obama's presence - Copenhagen will be presented as a great success, like all the other global environmental conferences before.

But the conflict between the West and the new industrial powers cannot and will not be resolved. What we are seeing in the remaining weeks before the conference is a desperate attempt of all major players not to be seen as the culprit who will be blamed for the failure.

The original EU strategy was, we will set an example and go for binding cuts in green house gas emissions and the world will follow - clearly a naive approach, reminiscent of other unilateral intentions in the past.

But now, especially after the financial and economic crisis, this sort of climate unilateralism is untenable - it would mean a dramatic financial transfer from the west to the advantage of our competitors China and India which our economies can ill afford and our populations won't accept. Public opinion in Europe and America, according to the latest research, published by the Financial Times, is further hardening against any financial transfers.

As far as the ambitious targets of the UK and other EU states are concerned, Professor Roger Pielke Jr. is right when he points out that setting "unachievable targets is not a policy, it is an act of wishful thinking". He calls it "a politics of symbolism with no impact on real world outcomes." Pielke adds that the focus on "magical solutions" is leaving little room for the practical.

Leading business figures agree with this damning verdict. The CEO of Eon, Bernotat, said that the British politicians need "to stop misleading the public about what is achievable." He is scathing about the target of 30% electricity coming from renewables in 2020 and refers particularly to the plan to build 33 gigawatts of off shore wind power up from the present 0.6 gigawatt, a plan he calls naïve and unachievable. Of a similar opinion is Tony Hayward, CEO of BP.

There are too many illusions propagated and circling around alternative and renewable technologies: about their promise and potential, about the time frame, in which they can be introduced and changes be realized, about the jobs, that a new green Keynesianism can create and about the political impact of a radical green policy. Centre left politicians in Britain and Germany, the new leader of the German social democrats, Sigmar Gabriel and the Labour Ministers David and Ed Miliband seem seriously to believe that climate change will be the new mass mobilizing topic and will help saving their parties too. A more likely outcome is that this strategy will neither save the centre left nor will it help to save the planet. Such a strategy seems to drive away voters fearful of losing the lifestyle of mobility, warmth and comfort.

The arguments against the extensive use of wind are well known. Wind is intermittent and needs conventional backup, the electricity it delivers is extremely expensive, feasible only with high subsidies. It won't even deliver the promise of jobs: Wind turbines can and will be more cheaply built in China, the same goes for solar panels, as Germany recently found out. In the UK, the

closure of the turbine factory on the Isle of Wight was another example of the same trend.

This does not stop business to be keen on wind power. It is attracted by huge subsidies, offered by governments, driven by "the pressure of fashionable, green ideology", as James Lovelock writes in his latest book "The vanishing face of Gaia". Lovelock's judgement could not be clearer: "Europe's massive use of wind as a supplement to baseload electricity will be remembered as one of the great follies of the twenty first century".

Whatever happens, if the folly is continued or not, the next twenty years could be called "the new age of carbon." If the UK really intends to cut CO₂ emissions by 34% till 2022, the UK would need to build in the next 6 years the equivalent of 30 new nuclear power stations. The telling comment of the (Labour) chairman of the "Climate Change Committee" of the House of Commons: "Well beyond our political capacity to deliver".

More oil, gas and coal will be burned than ever before - and carbon dioxide emissions will continue to rise. Renewables can't and won't deliver the scale of energy needed for a rising world population. For the time being only fossil fuels and nuclear power will be able to deliver the necessary energy. In the light of these facts it is especially sad that Britain and Germany, once leading nations in nuclear technology, have either neglected or given up on it completely and left the field to other, more farsighted nations like the French. 30 years ago Britain had 15 000 nuclear engineers, now the figure is just a tenth of that. Germany decided an atomic exit strategy which at least will be reverted now. But precious time has been lost.

We can call ourselves lucky that we have gained a bit of breathing space. The global warming trend has stopped, for the time being at least. Since 1998 global average temperatures have not risen. In fact, there has even been a slight fall - despite the fact that CO₂ emissions have been rising relentlessly during this period, and in spite of the "binding" agreements in Kyoto to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

The climate modellers of the IPCC did not foresee the halt in global warming. Professor Mojib Latif, one of the leading IPCC scientists, admitted to this inconvenient truth recently during a climate conference in Geneva and talked about "one or two decades more of cooling", before he expects the recommencement and continuation of the global warming trend.

One thing is clear. The belief in the accuracy of computer models has suffered. The science is not settled, as many climate researchers claimed in the past few years, a claim which goes against the essence of science and research and should never have been made in the first place.

We are faced with an awkward position. Nobody seems to know what the future holds; even if we are prepared to follow the lead of the IPCC, we are faced with huge, irreconcilable differences of opinion. Some school of thought predicts catastrophe, if not apocalypse, another forecasts at least a massive challenge to our usual way of life while some sceptics seem to suggest, that we will, in a few years time, wake up to the fact, that global warming was just another one of the many unfounded scares which modern mass media societies are prone to fall for.

What to do? Yes, we need more energy efficiency, we need to decarbonise our industries, we need to diversify our sources of energy as much as possible and we need new, clean technologies. We should start building nuclear power stations, at the moment the only effective way of producing carbon free electricity. At the same time we should avoid damaging our western economies, either by transferring too much money to our competitors or falling into the trap of the "green-industrial complex," about whose malign influence even James Lovelock, the founder of the Gaia theory, of earth and biosphere being a self-regulating super-organism, and convinced that it is too late to stop 'global heating,' is scathing.

We should in future be more sceptical of computer-based predictions of climate change and focus more on observing what is actually happening in reality: Is there any sign that the rise of global

temperature or the sea level is accelerating, for instance. We need to prepare for adaptation and on top of it all we need an insurance policy in form of geo-engineering, in case the worst predictions should come true. Some of the technologies are already available and geo-engineering might prove to be a significantly cheaper solution than the desperate attempt to mitigate climate change, by cutting emissions and creating economic hardship for billions of people.

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