

## “Climate Change: the diplomatic challenge”

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I would like to congratulate London and South East Region of the United Nations Association for staging this conference on climate change at such an opportune moment, in the early months of a year, 2009, which could well be a make-or-break one for the so far not very effective efforts by the international community to take action to slow down and then reverse global warming.

Over the last twenty years, a lot of time has been spent talking about the dangerous consequences of global warming; we now know a lot more than we did about the scientific and economic aspects of the phenomenon; we may even know where Kyoto is and (some of us) what the Kyoto Protocol sets out to achieve. But the hard fact is that, despite all that sound and fury and all those international conferences, from the Earth Summit in Rio to Bali at the end of 2007 which set the scene for the negotiations which will culminate at Copenhagen in December of this year, global warming is continuing at a cracking pace: the glaciers and polar ice-caps are melting, the forests are being reduced, the deserts are spreading, and the time when the damage that we are doing becomes irreversible, when the very expensive option of adaptation becomes the only option on offer, gets closer. So there is a lot more cause for alarm than for complacency.

As the title of this talk indicates, I intend to concentrate on the diplomatic challenge the world faces if we are to get an effective response to this looming crisis agreed in Copenhagen, and not on the scientific and economic arguments for doing so. These have both been covered by a huge amount of research and a number of weighty reports, and others today will focus on them. Suffice it to say that, while the criticism of climate change sceptics must certainly be taken seriously and must not simply be swatted aside, I have not myself seen any compelling evidence that we do not face a major threat to all the countries on this planet, and that we do not need a global response if we are to turn aside this threat. Some of the sceptics have scored valid points off some of the more overstated environmental activists; but they have not in my view demonstrated that we can continue on the path we have followed since the industrial revolution began to stoke up carbon emissions for much longer without disastrous consequences.

If diplomacy gets itself a bad name it is because diplomats are mostly inveterate optimists, who have a tendency to believe that any compromise is better than no agreement. Both optimism and a willingness to compromise are going to be needed if these climate change negotiations are to succeed. But, at every stage of the negotiations, we will need to remember that, if the Copenhagen outcome actually results in the continuing rapid growth of carbon emissions and global warming beyond what the world can tolerate, then we will have failed and no amount of diplomatic legerdemain will conceal it. There will be a reality check, even if we are not all there to be found wanting. So let us avoid like the plague self-serving arguments about how this is an awkward time to be taking costly and long-term decisions which can be swept under the carpet for a few years until our economics are in better shape. And let us avoid the blame game, which both diplomats and politicians tend to resort to when the going gets rough and difficult decisions have to be taken. The blame game – a historical analysis of how we came to be in our current predicament – will not help us to get out of it.

One other general point: far too much of the energy of the main protagonists of getting a good outcome out of Copenhagen is currently being devoted to rubbishing other people's prescriptions for action and to promoting some 'silver bullet' solution of their own renewables, or a carbon tax, for example. But common sense and some fairly simple calculations surely demonstrate that we are going to need a multi-faceted policy mix, containing some if not all, of these prescriptions. This is therefore an argument against excessive denigration of carbon efficient routes such as civil nuclear energy or second-generation bio-fuels which really can be demonstrated as of benefit in carbon equation terms.

So what are the main components of the diplomatic challenge we face? Two relate to timing considerations, two to burden-sharing, and one to institutions.

The first timing problem is one of shortage of time between now and the Copenhagen conference at the end of the year. We should have no illusions. If the main building blocks for a post-Kyoto regime are not on the table ahead of the Copenhagen conference there is not likely to be a successful outcome to that meeting. It is simply no good hoping that a ministerial meeting or summit of 192 countries is going to be able to snatch agreement from a chaos of conflicting positions and proposals. At the earth Summit in Rio in 1992 – and plenty of people have since then criticised it for being short on achievement – the only bankable achievements were the two conventions on climate change and on biodiversity which had been agreed ahead of that meeting and were opened for signature at Rio. On issues such as forests and desertification on which nothing was agreed on in advance, nothing genuinely worthwhile was agreed at the conference and that remains the case now some 17 years later. So there is a major diplomatic challenge here to put the series of preparatory meetings between now and Copenhagen to good use. If extra meetings have to be inserted, so be it. And if the preparatory process is to be fruitful, the European Union will need to continue to give a lead as it has now done in these negotiations for several years. The shift in US policy which has taken place since the Obama administration took office is hugely welcome and offers hope of a successful outcome where there was none under the previous administration. But this new administration is likely to be heavily pre-occupied this year with getting essential cap-and-trade legislation through congress. So continuing leadership role by the EU will be crucial. Let us hope they rise to the challenge at the June European Council.

The second timing challenge is of an opposite kind, it arises from the fact that the timescale for the actions needed to check and reverse global warming are extremely long, far longer than the timescale to which most politicians normally work. Whether one is talking about the construction of nuclear power stations, or investment in renewable energy sources, or bringing research into carbon capture and storage to fruition, allowing the world's resources of coal to be exploited without disastrous consequences for carbon emissions, one is talking in periods far longer than those between elections in a democratic country. So there really is a need for a non-partisan, non-party approach to this issue of climate change, one that can hope to avoid the normal zigzags in policy that occur when power changes hands after elections. This is a tall order, I know, but not I believe an impossible one. The support for action on climate change is both broader and deeper than it has ever been before.

The heart of this negotiation is going to be about burden-sharing and that is going to be an extraordinarily complex equation. There will need to be agreement on burden-sharing among the developed countries – between the US, Japan, the EU, Canada, Australia, and others – and that will be difficult enough. Far more difficult will be the burden sharing between developed and developing countries. The two extremes can easily be set to one side. There will not be agreement simply to exclude the developing countries from any targets or limits on carbon emissions as was done at the time of the Kyoto Protocol; and there will not be an agreement on a single system that applies equally to developed and developing countries. Between those two extremes there is a wide scope for a differentiated system, and the greater diplomatic challenge will be to identify and agree differentiation which neither fails the tests of actually checking global warming nor arouses such domestic resistance in either developed or developing countries as to lead to rejection.

If I understand it correctly, the heart of the concern of developing countries is to avoid finding themselves locked into a scheme which will inhibit their capacity for economic growth and thus also their ability to narrow the prosperity gap between their citizens and those in developing countries. Those are surely legitimate concerns and ones with which we should all have sympathy. It is not after all in our interest in the developed world that the increasingly important markets of the developing countries should stagnate or be clamped into a rigid set of limits. Part of the answer to this conundrum will lie in the transfer of technology based on accelerated research programmes into the most promising areas for producing energy more efficiently and with less carbon emissions.

Currently, it takes several times as much energy in China, India or the other main developing countries to produce a single unit of production as it does in developed countries. The latter made massive progress in achieving greater energy efficiency following the quadrupling of the oil price in 1974. It must be in our interest to help developing countries to progress as rapidly as possible down that same road, not least because it will also relieve some of the upward pressure on the prices of fossil fuels which is coming from developing countries' increased demand. Similarly, it will be in our interest to help developing countries such as China and India and also of Eastern Europe to exploit their very substantial coal reserves while capturing and storing carbon emissions. So a substantial technology transfer dimension from developed to developing countries will need to be part of any package to be negotiated.

It is good to hear that the British government is now increasing the resources they devote to, and the urgency with which they address, carbon capture and storage. Of course, this technology is not yet proven. But no less an authority than Prof. Martin Rees, the President of the Royal Society, believes that this could be vital to success.

No complex negotiation of the sort being undertaken this year is complete without its institutional provisions. This is not just because we are talking about N negotiation; and because diplomats enjoy discussing these institutional matters. It is because no one is going to accept binding legal obligations on climate change – and we do need binding legal obligations – unless they believe that these are going to be monitored carefully and transparently by some objective body; and it is also because any Copenhagen package is going to need effective implementation by an international body. The UN as currently structured is not equipped or mandated to perform either of these tasks. So I would suggest that we will need a fully-fledged UN agency or organisation of the sort which manages world health or refugees to take the place of the current UN Environment programme. And it would surely make sense, given the ever-closer linkages between environmental and energy issues, to give any new UN body that is set up a remit to cover energy policy which is largely ignored by the UN's economic institutions.

These then are some of the different parts of the diplomatic challenge which lies ahead of us. It will not be easy to keep up the momentum towards finding solutions and to avoid being distracted by the economic and financial turmoil through which all our countries are currently passing. But the important thing to remember is that, were Copenhagen to fail, the problem, will not simply go away; it will get worse, and the cost of remedying the damage we are currently doing will get greater. So we need to resist the temptation, ever present in diplomacy, to start talking about a Plan B, or to regard deadlines like Copenhagen with cynicism, as just one more artificial deadline which can be overrun at no greater cost. Our governments will need a lot of determination and perseverance, and our task is to encourage them to supply both of those commodities.