

Climate Change, Copenhagen and the United States
An Urgent Call to Prayer and Action from Sir John Houghton and Bishop James Jones
9 November 2009

The Moral Imperative

Underlying the discussions to take place at the International Copenhagen Conference on Climate Change in December there is a very strong moral imperative. In rich countries over 200 years, since the industrial revolution, the growth of our wealth has largely come through cheap energy from the burning of fossil fuels. We had not realised its effect on the world's climate nor that the damage falls disproportionately on the world's poorest. Now we know. A telling statistic is that the populations of the 100 states now most vulnerable to the effects of climate change are themselves responsible for a mere 3% of global emissions. There is therefore an inescapable moral imperative for rich countries to avoid further damage by rapidly reducing their carbon emissions and to share their wealth and skills with developing countries to enable them to adapt to climate change and to build their economies sustainably.

For Christians this imperative comes over with particular potency. We live in times when we are raping the Earth and exploiting the poor. When the effects of trade are added to aid, the flow of wealth in the world is overwhelmingly from the poor to the rich – a statistic that should make us all blush with shame! The Bible, from its first chapters, through the prophets, the ministry of Jesus and to its last book, puts high priorities on caring for the poor and caring for the Earth. Psalm 47 vs 9, the psalm for today (9 November) as in the Book of Common Prayer reads, *God, which is very highly exalted, doth defend the earth, as it were with a shield.*

A target of 2 degrees

Crucial discussions at Copenhagen will take place regarding global reductions of carbon emissions and the rate at which both developed and developing countries can contribute to them. The Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC) agreed by all countries in 1992 states that developed countries, because of the benefits they have enjoyed so far from cheap fossil fuel energy, should take the lead in these reductions.

It is widely agreed that the increase in global average temperature from pre-industrial times should not be allowed to rise above 2 deg C. To have a good chance of achieving this, it is necessary for global carbon emissions to peak well before 2020 and reduce rapidly thereafter to close to zero carbon well before the end of the century. Further, scientists have recently realised that if the carbon concentrations rise such that the 2 deg target is exceeded, the inertia in the system is such that reversing the process, if possible at all, would likely take centuries.

The need for US leadership

Recently, one of us (JH) attended a Symposium at the Institute of International Studies at Aberystwyth University at which some international experts on the politics of climate change reviewed the present state of negotiations leading up to the Copenhagen Conference in December. The speakers all agreed that for success at Copenhagen, it is crucial for the United States to present strong leadership in reductions in carbon emissions (including targets) and in the financing of adaptation in the developing world. They pointed out that, as of now, indications are that this leadership will not be forthcoming.

In particular, Congress is consistently repeating its view that it is not willing to make specific commitments regarding emissions reductions that do not also include specific commitments from major developing countries such as India and China. That goes against the strong moral imperative we mentioned above and also against the FCCC rubric. It is taking the moral low

ground rather than the moral high ground. Further, there seems little indication as yet that the United States is prepared to lead regarding the adaptation funding required by developing countries that should be a key part of the response of rich countries to the moral imperative.

The G2

It is widely reported that President Obama will soon visit China and will be discussing the Copenhagen conference with the Chinese President Hu Jintao. Is it possible that those discussions, by the G2 (as they have been called), could result in positive agreement on action by the world's two largest carbon emitters (together their emissions are about half of the global total) recognising the principles of the moral imperative? If the agreement were to be strong enough, other nations would be encouraged to follow. Without that sort of lead from the United States (even better from the G2) the prospects for Copenhagen are bleak.

If the Copenhagen Conference fails

What will happen if the Copenhagen Conference fails and the urgency to combat climate change slips away. The main messages uncovered by scientists about the world's climate over the next few decades and centuries are clear and unequivocal. First there is compelling evidence that the world is warming and the climate changing - largely because of humans burning coal, oil and gas. Secondly, increased global temperatures make climate extremes more likely. For instance, a heat wave in central Europe in 2003 of unprecedented intensity led to the premature deaths of over 20,000 people. Higher temperatures also lead to more energy entering the atmosphere's circulation that in turn brings more frequent and intense floods, droughts and storms. Further, because ocean water expands as it warms and because of increased melting of ice in polar regions, the sea level is rising at a rate of about one metre per century.

These climate change impacts are already becoming evident. Within a few decades they will severely affect billions of people, disproportionately those in poor countries in the developing world – it is there that climate extremes will be most severe and where there is little capability to adapt to them. By the second half of this century, there could be hundreds of millions of environmental refugees whose homes are no longer habitable either because of rising sea level, gross flooding or persistent drought. The impact on the world's ecosystems will also be large. Many species are already threatened by the destruction of tropical forests; climate change is adding to this. Millions of species are likely to be lost in the coming decades. Even if the global average temperature rise is contained below 2 deg C the damages are likely to be serious. Above that target level, the damages will be increasingly more devastating in many parts of the world.

The fierce Urgency of Now

The necessary reductions to meet a 2 deg target are possible to achieve. They are affordable and the necessary technology is available but there is no time to lose. In May 2009, Prince Charles hosted at St James' Palace Symposium of Nobel Prize Winners addressing Climate Change that resulted in a Memorandum entitled *The Fierce Urgency of Now* – emphasising strongly the urgency of decisive action. The messages coming out of Copenhagen are therefore of paramount importance.

In the parable of the Steward in Luke 12, Jesus challenges us with the words, *From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded.* We therefore call on Christians to act and influence as they are able and to pray especially for the United States of America, President Obama and for members of Congress that they will recognize the extreme urgency of the situation and ensure that the opportunity of the Copenhagen Conference will not be missed.