That Sinking Feeling

In the north of England, 2015 ended with the flooding of several major cities. The rain was delivered by an Atlantic storm system so disruptive that it raised midwinter temperatures at the North Pole above freezing for only the second time ever recorded. All this was a sobering corrective to the carefully choreographed euphoria of December's climate talks in Paris.

Malé, capital of the Maldives, is one the most densely populated places on earth. Barely a metre above sea level, it is also one of the most vulnerable to rising seas.

Like the previous twenty, the 21st conference of the parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change was a forum for discussions between nation states. The UNFCCC has no power to make or enforce any rules or policies except by agreement of all parties. Consensus decision-making between unequal parties can take a very long time. As deadlines loom, things get messy. Groups and coalitions form and dissolve. Stronger parties bribe or bully weaker ones into abandoning key demands. Finally the areas where no agreement has been reached get fudged, papered over, or simply not mentioned. Reaching an agreement, no matter how bland and toothless, becomes the goal.

It was a genuinely historic achievement, albeit a rather belated one, for all countries to reach agreement that climate change is a real problem. Every nation state has agreed in principle to publicly set targets towards reducing net greenhouse gas emissions. There will be no compulsion to set targets at any particular level, nor indeed any penalties for not meeting them - but every country will set targets.

Even this achievement of apparent consensus, though, masks a significant backward step. The previous 1997 Kyoto agreement, for all its many flaws, acknowledged the issue of 'differential responsibility'. Countries such as the US and UK, whose current wealth and power derive from their early industrialisation and disproportionate past use of fossil fuels, were seen as bearing particular responsibility for current greenhouse gas levels, and expected to lead the way in reducing emissions. Following twenty years of pressure from the US in particular, this acknowledgement has now been abandoned. We are now officially all in it together, and a veil has been determinedly drawn over the fact that some did more than others to get us here.

Degrees of separation

The other headline achievement was the unexpected adoption, alongside the target of keeping global temperature rise within two degrees, of a more challenging 'aspiration' to limit warming to 1.5°C. This was particularly welcomed by the Alliance of Small Island States, some of whose countries are predicted to be drowned by the sea level rises which will occur at 2° warming.

Unfortunately though, there seems little prospect of keeping the waves at bay. The adoption of a 1.5° target was a public relations masterstroke, but given that temperatures have already risen one degree, and that there is a delay of several decades between emissions and the resulting warming, it is almost certainly unachievable even if all available stops were pulled out now. Existing targets, if met, will result in warming of more like 3°. To have even a 50 percent chance of achieving 1.5°, current emissions levels would need to be cut by 60 percent within ten years.

Paris did not produce an agreement to pull any stops out. It has been widely presented as the beginning of the end of the fossil fuel era, but in fact it makes no mention of reducing the extraction or use of fossil fuels. It does not call for reductions in consumption levels. It does not question the religion of economic growth. It does not even endorse the direct taxation of fossil fuel production.

Caught in the net

How does the agreement reconcile these contradictions? The answer lies in two misleadingly innocuous little words: 'net' and 'balance'. The aim ultimately agreed on is to 'achieve a balance between anthropogenic emissions by sources and removals by sinks of greenhouse gases in the second half of this century'. By 2050, the amount of carbon emitted should be matched by the amount being 'removed'. It's 'net emissions' that will supposedly be reduced, rather than what might be (but never are) called 'gross emissions'.

This means we will hear a lot in coming years about 'negative emissions' technology, magical solutions that take carbon back out of the atmosphere. Some measures, such as increasing carbon sequestration in topsoil, could conceivably be beneficial if done sensitively. Others, such as pumping CO_2 into exhausted oilfields, or seeding algal blooms in the oceans, could well be disastrous. However it's done though, carbon capture will be used to offset continued growth in emissions.

'Carbon sinks' are apparently the only game in town, and new trading mechanisms and accounting rules will join up national and regional carbon markets to make the game easier, and more profitable. As places start disappearing underwater, the spin doctors might need to come up with a less ironic turn of phrase.

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