

Paris, December 2015: Saving the planet ?

It happened in big exhibition sheds, at Le Bourget, 8km North-East of central Paris. By 2015, then the hottest year on record, the clock was already ticking on virulent climate change. 21 years after the world signed up to UN's Framework Convention on Climate Change, triggering years of extensive annual meetings (ie. Conference of the Parties or COP), its long road had led to two weeks in Paris, in early December 2015. More than 40,000 delegates attended COP21, from national teams, UN agencies, NGOs, indigenous peoples, civil society, media and journalists.

Reminder of context: COP21, was preceded by thirty years of science denial by the 'merchants of doubt' corporate players who had wrought mass impedance of public policy, and was largely perpetrated by the big oil companies - including Exxon and Shell both in denial of their own 1980s' research - along with extensive funding of political lobbyists (aka. 'think-tanks'); not least from the multi-billionaire Koch brothers in the US. It is against this corporate antagonism to humanity's future welfare, the achievement in Paris should be weighed.



And so the world's 195 countries, all immersed for a common cause at Le Bourget, met for two intensive weeks to save humanity from run away climate change: to interact; tortuously argue into early hours, and to compromise towards an agreement, orchestrated by their French hosts. In the closing days several versions of the agreement still circulated. For many years, a global warming target limit of 2°C had been the focus but now the small island states, and civil society especially, were having none of it. Canada too, in close-door session, came to champion the aspiration 1.5°C. It all fed into an increasing crescendo of hope.

Friday, 11th December came and went, negotiations stretched on, tension built at Le Bourget. So too in central Paris it was, where tens of thousands of climate activists had come from across Europe and the world to rouse the delegates onwards. With the terrorist atrocities of a few weeks earlier, the Paris police edict on the Friday was any assembly of more than three people would face arrest. In defiance on Saturday, as the Agreement was still being worked on, a carnival of about 20,000 protesters, plus a few polar bears, assembled on the boulevard de la Grand Armée, just north of the Arc de Triomphe, all contained by thousands of armed police.

Finally, at 19:20hrs, Saturday evening, with a finished draft concluded and agreed by every country, President of the COP21, Laurent Fabius, declared the Agreement, which included the crucial 1.5°C limit aspiration. Even the cynical cried and celebrated. With hindsight, we can now see that if the Paris COP21 had failed to reach a tangible agreement, our tenuous window of opportunity for any effective global response to catastrophic climate change may have been lost completely.

The Paris Agreement is a unique testimony to human civilization. Ironically, it came into force a few days before the US elected one of the most obscene affronts to humanity. Now 184 countries have ratified the Agreement, representing 90% of global emissions, with a rapidity of adoption unlike any other UN treaty. The Agreement was only the bare bones. With follow on COPs; such as at COP24 in Poland this December; there is much to do on process and implementation. A UN report called for at Paris, to distinguish between a 1.5°C and a 2°C world, was delivered in October. With high confidence, it spells out the dire difference and underscores the urgency for action. We have but 12 years left to shift from a truly catastrophic course.

Since Paris, China has invested more than a third of a \$ trillion in renewables; India is on track to exceed its ambitious 2022 target for solar energy; Costa Rica is set to be zero carbon by 2021 whilst a big shift towards renewables is being seen in many other countries. Since 2015, divestment from fossil fuels has almost doubled to over \$6 trillion. Despite Trump, 40% of the US population is under cities subscribing to the Paris goals. Closer to home, Greater Manchester have set a zero-carbon target by 2040. As for the foot-dragging of the UK Government, and what individuals can do, perhaps that will have to await another article.

At Paris Bill McKibbern, of 350.org, tweeted: ***"This agreement won't save the planet. It may have saved the chance to save the planet (if we ALL fight like hell in the years ahead)"***.