



Watching the players at the climate poker table

In two decades of covering climate-change negotiations, Frank McDonald, has seen youthful hope fight dark forces, and a distant threat become a reality.

Nearly 20 years ago, as I wandered as a newspaper reporter from tent to tent at the Global Forum in Rio de Janeiro's Flamingo Park, with young, idealistic environmental activists milling about, I couldn't help thinking of Dale Arden's line from the film *Flash Gordon*, a decade before: "Flash, Flash, I love you, but we only have 14 hours to save the Earth!"

Brazil's 1992 Earth Summit was in full swing, and when it closed it even seemed that we would manage to save the world from global warming, and species extinction too. After all, delegates at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development — as it was officially known — had just adopted two conventions to stave off these threats.

Little did I realize that the newly formed UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) would become my ticket to see the world, via its annual Conference of Parties (COP). On Monday morning, I arrived home in Dublin from covering yet another frenetic COP meeting, this time in Durban, South Africa, where it was held in the International Convention Centre, surrounded by a continuous concrete barrier with steel fencing on top.

It was the latest gig in the UNFCCC travelling circus. We queued in Copenhagen in 2009 and boiled in Bali in December 2007 — after nearly freezing in Montreal two years earlier. I didn't get to Buenos Aires (1998), Marrakech (2001) or Delhi (2002), but I've been at all the rest — in exotic locations, and in Poznań, Poland.

What's striking is how the climate issue has become more pressing with each passing year, and how difficult it has proved to resolve. Back in Berlin at the first COP in 1995, climate change seemed like a distant threat — something for our grandchildren to worry about. But as the scientific evidence has hardened since then, so has the reality on the ground. Anyone who has travelled in sub-Saharan Africa (as I have) with his eyes open will have met smallholders who relate their personal experiences of how the climate is changing, and how difficult it is to survive as a result.

There have been dark forces at work over the years too, led in the 1990s by the benignly named Global Climate Coalition — the fossil-fuel lobby in disguise — and the likes of Washington lawyer Don Pearlman, who was crowned by environmentalists and frustrated delegates as King of the Carbon Club. Pearlman, who died in 2005, was such an expert on the process that the Saudi Arabian delegates, long-running obstructionists, took their orders from him.

Still, Pearlman met his match in Angela Merkel, who chaired that first COP in Berlin when she was Germany's environment minister. As the deadline for agreement loomed, she simply

overlooked the Saudi delegate's objections and, despite his screeched protests, and the UN rules that demand unanimous decisions, gavelled through the mandate that led us to the Kyoto Protocol two years later.

The current crop of COP delegates are a diverse bunch, from the hawkish Todd Stern, the US climate-change envoy, who seems to be entirely devoid of emotion, to the more engaging Connie Hedegaard, who survived the shambles of Copenhagen to become the European Union (EU) Climate Action Commissioner, and burly Xie Zhenhua, China's rising star in this bewildering game of climate poker.

The latest big player is India's environment minister, Jayanthi Natarajan. She played with high stakes in Durban, in a showdown with Hedegaard over an EU road map on future action (see page 299). In response, the EU forged an impressive coalition with delegates

representing people much more vulnerable and equally blameless — the Alliance of Small Island States, which fear global warming could wipe them off the map, and the impoverished group of least developed countries, which are mainly in Africa. And as Durban had been dubbed 'the African COP', the moral power of this alliance heaped pressure on the three biggest emitters — China, the United States and India.

What we got, after two all-night sessions and nearly two days of 'injury time' was hailed by insiders as a breakthrough, comparable to that first COP in Berlin, in giving a mandate for negotiations and a 2015 deadline to conclude them.

But it is improbable that this will save the world. Except in Europe, bigger countries still seem unwilling to take the steps required to respond to the science. One wonders if this will

ever change, even after the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change produces its Fifth Assessment, due by 2014.

In 2009, US President Barack Obama pledged to "lead the world" on climate change, but there has been no evidence of any such leadership. And with a US presidential election next year, there's even less chance that Obama will give any hostages to his sceptical and hostile Republican Party opponents.

As for China, the advantage of having a totalitarian regime is that once it decides that wind turbines or high-speed trains are good things, they start to happen very quickly — but not fast enough to ensure that its now-prodigious carbon emissions, or those of the United States, will peak any time soon. And as each is fearful of the other gaining any advantage, the game of climate poker will run and run. ■

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