

Paris, France



The Canadian delegation to Paris represents the federal-provincial nature of the climate change challenge. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau with (from left) Alberta Premier Rachel Notley, B.C. Premier Christy Clark, Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne, Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard, and Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall. Adam Scotti photo

From Copenhagen to Paris: The Hard Work of Multilateralism

Velma McColl

Bravo for French diplomacy: it fashioned success where others have failed. Paris was a master class in multilateral negotiations—not simply for the work at Le Bourget, but for the preceding year of travel, building relationships and understanding that trust is the beating heart of good diplomacy and good government. Velma McColl was there, and files this report on the historic context and ramifications of the Paris Agreement.

The seeds of success at COP21, the international climate negotiations in Paris, were sown in the disappointments of six years earlier. In 2009, many claimed the chaos surrounding COP15 in Copenhagen marked the end of multilateralism—a fatal blow to the UN. It seemed to speak to the futility of trying to bridge so many interests, so many regional voting blocks, that no agreement could possibly be crafted to meet all the multilateral conditions for a global climate deal.

For many, it was a final proof, after years of experimentation and incremental successes, that national interests would always trump a global good, thwarting collective climate action into the foreseeable future. There was plenty of finger pointing at governments, but also outside actors recognized that they had, perhaps inadvertently, undermined political will, contributing to the collapse.

And yet, as the Venezuelan negotiator who blocked Copenhagen suggested, the strongest elements of the Paris

agreement would not have been possible without the hard work and understanding of the COPs in Cancun, Durban, Doha, Warsaw and Lima. Each was a redemptive building block on the path to diplomatic, business and environmental success in Paris.

At its most basic, Copenhagen was supposed to shift gears from the Kyoto Protocol era (covering 2008 —2012, 30 per cent of global emissions, developed countries only) to a broader, more inclusive set of long-term climate actions for 2020 and beyond. Beneath that simple goal are several challenging and interdependent concepts, each one addressed by the unprecedented Paris Agreement, which binds 196 countries together into a unified matrix of progressively stronger climate action, starting in 2020, and with ambitions extending out through the middle of the century.

Looking back, it is not surprising that countries were too deeply divided when they arrived in the Danish capital in 2009. It was likely naïve to expect otherwise. The

world was dealing with the fallout of the economic crisis and the five key UN regions—Africa, Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe, Latin America/Caribbean and Western Europe/other (including US, Australia, New Zealand)—saw the next 10 to 20 years very differently. Not to mention that countries like India, Brazil, South Africa and the other emerging players were already economically stronger than in 1995. In the same period, China became the world's second-largest economy and the largest single greenhouse gas (GHG) emitter.

Developed countries, including the EU nations, Canada and the US, also increasingly understood that taking domestic action to reduce GHGs, whether through regulation or a carbon price, created competitiveness issues and first mover disadvantage in global supply chains. If all countries did not act in concert, there were worries that carbon 'leakage' and border tax adjustments would penalize some. The economic and environmental benefits of coordinated global action became more obvious to sectors and industries, though they still lacked policy direction to make investments in new long-run capital stock for electricity generation, transit, renewables and manufacturing.

Over the last twenty years, the science and the visible impacts of climate change have been mounting. With increasing hurricanes, sea level rise, melting glaciers in the Arctic, changes to natural landscapes, loss of forests and shifts in agricultural production, all countries understood that climate change was not just about reducing GHGs (mitigation), it has become increasingly about adaptation—nowhere more urgently than in parched countries in Africa and shrinking small island states. These countries became more influential post-Copenhagen, regardless of the size of their GDP, culminating in the Paris commitment to “limit temperature rise to well below 2 degrees Celsius” and make efforts to limit it further to 1.5 degrees.

Looming over all climate negotiations is a concept, embedded in Kyoto, that

the developed world is responsible for accumulated global GHG emissions in the atmosphere and should therefore act first and largely alone—represented by ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ in the legal texts. While developing countries did not dispute the historic facts, even acknowledging they should act first, it became increasingly difficult to support any post-2015 deal where they were acting alone. At the same time, developing countries appropriately argued that any new deal needed to allow a “differentiated” response, allowing the world's poorest countries to respond on a separate timetable than the richest.

This brought the concept of climate finance into the picture in 2009, acknowledging that poor countries would need support from rich countries—a kind of global equalization payment—to allow the transition to a low-carbon economy. The rationale for creating a US \$100 billion annual Green Climate Fund is essentially that developed countries that achieved their economic growth over the last century through carbon-intensive energy should support developing countries that would be denied access to the same cheaper, carbon-based economic growth. The idea is that governments along with the World Bank, IMF, businesses and other investors would help finance step-change, low-carbon systems—with the related sustainable development and poverty-alleviation benefits.

When climate financing entered the picture, governments were admitting that capital needed to be mobilized, beyond the resources available in public coffers. The private sector needed to play a much stronger role in any future. Since Copenhagen, the international business and investment community (banking, insurance, fossil fuels, renewables, manufacturing, clean tech) voices have grown progressively louder asking for clear policy signals including a price on carbon. Canada's own conversation on carbon pricing was paralyzed by the Green Shift debate in the 2008 election and nothing more federally,

though provinces introduced prices in B.C., Quebec and Alberta with Ontario and Manitoba moving to cap-and-trade systems.

So with all the threads of a global climate deal now woven together, we are pointing all of the world's economies toward a common, low-carbon future. This also creates a fascinating challenge to everyone—young and old, rich and poor—to be creative, to innovate, to find the smart phone equivalent that will help decarbonize our lives.

While not obvious over six years to the untrained eye, we can now see the larger tapestry showing that Copenhagen-to-Paris strengthened the fabric of a global deal, making it more colourful, more diverse, more durable. The new deal is supported by governments, by a wide array of political, social, religious, environmental and business actors, by a common desire to leave the planet in better shape than we found it. Even Pope Francis weighed in, seeking intergenerational justice for Mother Earth.

And to those who say it is not ambitious, look again. Consider how the interlocking pieces work together, what the impact will be over decades. Think about how transparently reporting the PM2.5 levels in Beijing changed China's cultural norms about air pollution within five years.

Canadians are fascinated by the weather. Imagine when we can transparently track emissions on a global scale on mobile screens. Consider what the Paris Agreement might mean to the lives of our children in five, 10 or 30 years. It's not perfect but it puts us on a common, regenerative path.

Only history will know whether Paris marked a turning point for the planet. In the meantime, Canada has its work cut out to create a multilateral deal across our own federation. Let's see if we can repeat the French success. **P**

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