

The Road to Copenhagen [Korean and Japanese translations available]

Gavan McCormack

The Road to Copenhagen

コペンハーゲンへの道

[A Korean translation is available [here](#); a Japanese translation is available [here](#)]

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In September, after its warmest August on record, Australia's East coast was shrouded in thick red dust. Visibility was reduced to metres, forcing cancelation of flights and driving people indoors as some five million tonnes of soil blew in from the country's vast interior where the drought is in its ninth year. Early in the same month, Koreans were told that in future snow was likely to disappear in their country save for a few mountain peaks, and that their climate would become sub-tropical. Elsewhere, the Arctic sea-ice crumbles, opening navigation and exploration routes into the polar regions, glaciers retreat, half the world's tropical and temperate forests, wetlands, and coral have gone or are threatened; storms, floods, and other natural disasters ripple around the world. Scientists warn of approaching global catastrophe.



Australia facing record temperatures

The UN Environment Program's latest study tells us that, even if the international community enacts every climate policy so far proposed global temperatures will still rise significantly through this century. Whatever we do now we "cannot reduce the already committed GHGs [global greenhouse gases] warming of 2.4 degrees Celsius." The world's preeminent climatologists, according to the report in the April issue of the scientific journal, Nature, estimate that even with a moderate warming (20C) we stand "a strong chance of provoking drought and storm responses that could challenge civilized society, leading potentially to the conflict and suffering that go with failed states and mass migrations." That is our future, and the outlook is steadily worsening.

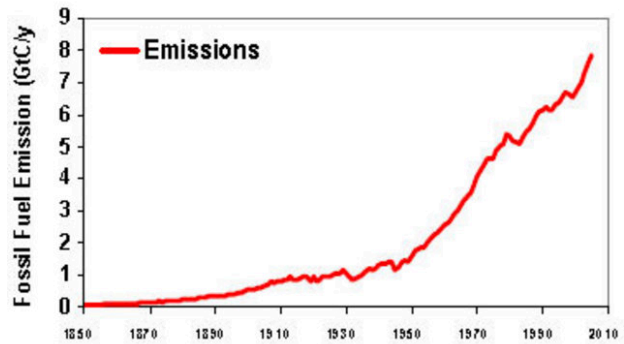
At Copenhagen we have to reach global consensus to launch a campaign - amounting in intensity to wartime mobilization - to try to arrest, or at least slow, the degeneration of the

world as we know it into the catastrophe of climate chaos. The December conference becomes the most important event in the history of humanity, our last chance.

Global NGOs, including Greenpeace and WWF, estimate that we need at Copenhagen a commitment to a global carbon cut of 40 per cent cut by 2020 and 80 per cent (95 per cent for the industrial countries) by mid-century. Another way of putting it is to say that the Kyoto targets - only reached in a few places - now have to be multiplied by two to three times in the short term and up to ten times in the medium term.

At present, despite the commitments many countries have made since Kyoto in 1997 to reduce them, they are rising steadily. Globally, greenhouse emissions rose by 38 per cent between 1992 and 2007, increasing from a rate of 1.1 per cent annually in the 1990s to 3.5 per cent in 2000-2007. The specialist literature is punctuated increasingly by bleak words: threshold, tipping-point, irreversibility. We are destabilizing the climatic conditions under which over the last several millennia humanity developed agriculture, villages, cities, civilizations.

2007 Fossil Fuel: 8.5 Pg C



1990 - 1999: 0.9% y^{-1}
 2000 - 2007: 3.5% y^{-1}

World fossil fuel emissions, 1990-2007

Human activity, pumping carbon into the atmosphere at steadily increasing rates ever since the industrial revolution has raised the pre-industrial concentration of carbon in the atmosphere (280 ppm) to 387 ppm, and that level continues to rise by around 3.1 ppm per year. On a “business as usual” projection of our current trajectory, we are headed towards an end of century carbon concentration figure of around 950 ppm and a temperature rise of 4.60C.

To hold temperature increase to around 2 degrees, the world’s scientists meeting in Bali in 2007 insisted that we must at all costs keep levels of atmospheric carbon concentration below 450 ppm. The EU and Australia have now adopted that goal. However, many scientists think that the real tipping point is more likely to be 400 ppm - in any case now unavoidable and imminent - and highly influential ones, including Rajendra Pachauri, the head of the IPCC, think that, as a matter of urgency, we should reduce it to 350. Even if all cuts pledged by countries around the world as

of this moment were realized, the temperature rise will still be in the order of 3.5 degrees, ie. almost twice the previous “worst case” scenarios.

For Australia, where a reformist and climate-conscious government took office in 2008, the subsequent commitment to 450 ppm has grim implications. It takes for granted continuing and worsening ravages of drought, fire, extreme summer heat up to 45 degrees in Southern Australia in 2008), and - since it is a big country - floods. Already drought in the country’s grain basket, the Murray-Darling River basin, has drastically reduced the output of irrigated crops and forced complete suspension of rice agriculture in the past two seasons. Most shocking of all, with a 450 ppm carbon concentration in the atmosphere, the Great Barrier Reef - one of the wonders of the world - will not survive.

In Japan too, a reforming, climate conscious government took office in September 2009 and immediately announced a commitment to a 25 per cent reduction on its 1990 emissions by 2020. Even under the previous LDP governments, Japan has sometimes been seen as a model of clean and efficient energy, but the fact is that it not only failed to meet its 6 per cent Kyoto reduction target but its emissions grew by 11 per cent to 2007. That was better, to be sure, than the US (+20 per cent), but it pales before the accomplishment of countries such as Germany which cut its emissions by 21 per cent.

Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio’s 25 per cent “reduction on 1990 levels” is a bold promise, and it stands in relief compared to the paltry US gestures thus far. However, Hatoyama has yet to persuade industry or to develop a blueprint of how to accomplish it, his pledge is conditional on a Copenhagen agreement in which “all major economies participate,” and because of the failure of the post-Kyoto decade his 25 per cent of 1990

levels actually means he has to cut current levels by 36 per cent. And, if he accomplishes all that, in terms of what is needed it represents no more than a first step.

As for South Korea, its greenhouse gas emissions have been growing at the highest rate among OECD counties (increasing by 90 per cent between 1990 and 2005), and its thus far announced short-term (to 2020) goal is to hold them to an increase of not more than 8 per cent above its 2005 levels. Should it take that stance to Copenhagen, Korea is unlikely to fare well. Facing global catastrophe, any industrial country that talks of increasing its carbon emissions can expect to be told to go back and re-consider its global responsibilities.



South Korea’s carbon emissions

Short of some technological breakthrough (of which at present there is no sign), the political and moral imperative is that we shift from non-renewable, carbon-intensive to renewable, carbon-neutral economic activity, cut back on production, consumption, and waste in the “conventional” carbon sector, husband existing resources and find more equitable and less wasteful ways of distributing them, eliminating the unnecessary and inefficient. Yet, as I wrote in this column in 2008 (“The Chimera of Growth,” March 2008), humanity’s shared, quasi-religious faith, shared by Christians, Buddhists, Muslims and atheists alike, is that human society must be organized so as to maximize production, consumption, and waste. GDP scale and growth is currently the major indicator of the “success” of countries.

December’s Copenhagen meeting calls therefore for a Copernican shift so that henceforth countries will be evaluated not for their GDP but for their success a global citizens in cutting back greenhouse gas emissions. The growth fetish has to be set aside lest our

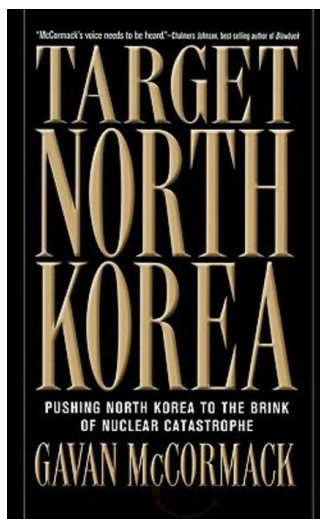
decline into climate chaos, punctuated by water wars, oil wars, food wars, and epidemics, becomes irreversible. The Kyoto, Bali, and other major conferences on climate change were no more than feeble nudges in the direction humanity has to go. Copenhagen must go much further.

This is the text of a column written for Kyunghyang Shinmoon and published on

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