

Cancun Agreement stripped bare by Bolivia's dissent

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Bolivia was not an obstacle to progress at Cancun's climate talks. It was rather the only nation daring enough to tell the truth.

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In the famous Hans Christian Anderson fable, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, a weaver famously plays on an emperor's arrogance and persuades him to wear a non-existent suit with the argument that it is only invisible to the 'hopelessly stupid.' The moment of truth comes, as we can all remember, when a child in an otherwise silent crowd yells out, "But he is not wearing any clothes!" What we don't always recall is that the naked Emperor suspects the child may be telling the truth, but carries on marching proudly and unclothed regardless.

The story is a rather apt parallel for the Cancun climate agreements that were signed last week. Only one dissenting nation, Bolivia, dared to voice its dissent with the agreement. Yet their voice was silenced by the gavel of the Chair and by the standing ovations of 191 countries. They, like the naked Emperor, must know that the deal is naked and without substance, yet they march on proudly regardless.

Cancun sets us on dangerous path to runaway climate change

Bolivia's indefatigable negotiator, Pablo Solon, put it most cogently in the concluding plenary, when he said that the only way to assess whether the agreement had any 'clothes' was to see if it included firm commitments to reduce emissions and whether it was enough to prevent catastrophic climate change. The troubling reality, as he pointed out, is that the agreement merely confirms the completely inadequate voluntary pledges of reductions of 13-16% by 2020 made since Copenhagen's talks. Analysts at Climate Action Tracker have revealed that these paltry offers are nowhere near enough to keep temperature increases even within the contested goal of 2 degrees. Instead they would lead to increases in temperature of between 3 and 4 degrees, a level considered by scientists as highly dangerous for the vast majority of the planet. Solon said, "I can not in all in consciousness sign such a document as millions of people will die as a result."

To a stony silence from fellow country negotiators, Solon also pointed out a whole range of critical flaws in the agreement from its complete lack of specifics on key issues of finance to its systematic

exclusion of voices from developing countries. As a press statement from Bolivia put it: "Proposals by powerful countries like the US were sacrosanct, while ours were disposable. Compromise was always at the expense of the victims, rather than the culprits of climate change." Solon concluded that in substance the Cancun text was little more than a rehashed version of the Copenhagen Accord, that had been widely condemned the year before. Patricia Espinosa, chair of the talks, refused to open up any points of her draft text for negotiation and cheered on by other delegates made the legally dubious ruling that Bolivia's opposition did not block consensus. The Cancun agreements were 'approved' to great celebration from the international community.

Cancun mood-music sways opinion

It became clear soon after the plenary ended, that what seemed like roars of support for the Cancun text, were more cries of relief or desperation. After the debacle in Copenhagen and following a probably deliberate policy by major powers who spoke constantly of 'low expectations', the mere existence of an agreement seemed enough. As Chris Huhne, UK climate secretary put it, "This is way better than what we were expecting only a few weeks ago." The mood seemed to infect the larger non-governmental organisations who were gathered in Cancun. Greenpeace that had labelled the almost identical Copenhagen Accord last year a "crime scene" said that Cancun had put "hope over fear and put the building blocks back in place for a global deal to combat climate change." Oxfam echoed, saying that "negotiators have resuscitated the UN talks and put them on a road to recovery."

In the aftermath of Cancun, the main defence of the text has been based on appeals to realism. As Tom Athanasiou of Eco Equity puts it in his analysis on the Accord: "The reason that so many people are celebrating the Agreements is because they believe that, setting aside the details, they capture the only agreement that was possible." Many environmentalists argue that at least with this accord and a reinvigorated belief in the UN, we live to fight another day. Meanwhile they warn that a collapse of negotiations in Cancun would perhaps have for ever destroyed the UN process and even the possibility of any future binding agreement on climate change. Nearly all use one of the favourite mantras of the negotiations, saying that critics should "not let the perfect be the enemy of the good."

Realism of science, or realism of the powerful?

However this argument supposes two things: firstly that progress, even if small, was made at Cancun and secondly that it is better to have some kind of agreement than none at all. This reasoning along with both the financial offers, cajoling and bullying of the major powers - which was revealed most dramatically in wikileaks cables - is no doubt what drove most government negotiators to sign the Cancun texts. Yet both suppositions are highly questionable.

Firstly in terms of analysing progress, aside from the many other critiques of the texts, there is strong evidence that the Cancun agreements take us backwards rather than forwards. One of the key characteristics of the otherwise wholly insufficient Kyoto Protocol is that it had legally binding targets based in theory on the science. As we come up to the first deadline of 2012, seventeen nations will almost certainly breach their commitments to reduce emissions by 2020 by 5% compared to 1990. Some nations like Canada, Australia, Turkey and Spain have instead vastly increased emissions. However the fact that they signed legally binding targets does open up the possibilities of legal challenges and a more effective incentive in future for countries to abide by their commitments.

By contrast, the Cancun agreement effectively kills off the Kyoto Protocol and replaces it with a pledge system of voluntary commitments. Not only does this lead to countries only offering what they plan to do anyway, ignoring what science demands; there is absolutely no possibility of legal penalties if a country fails to fulfil its commitments. It is an ineffective and highly dangerous way of tackling one of the biggest crises humanity has faced.

Will good be the enemy of the necessary?

The second questionable supposition is that any agreement is better than no agreement. This may be true for some international discussions on less critical issues, but is it for discussing a climate crisis where urgent and radical action is the only way to avert runaway climate change? As even supporters of the Cancun agreement note, the text has mainly punted off most difficult decisions to the next meeting of the UNFCCC in Durban, South Africa in December 2011. It already seems likely that we will see a repeat of the hype built up around Copenhagen and the equal likelihood of either a fudge or a failure – particularly if delegates can seem so easily sated by a few symbolic gestures such as the ones in Cancun.

Meanwhile the window of opportunity to act is closing. One report by the London School of Economics suggested that greenhouse gas emissions will have to peak by 2015 to have even a 50 per cent probability of keeping temperature increases below 1.5 degrees – the demand made by over 100 developing nations. The Inter Governmental Panel on Climate Change similarly identified 2015 as a time when emissions will have to peak to stabilise atmospheric CO₂ at levels of 350 to 400 Parts Per Million. Yet in the face of this, the best the world community can come up with is an agreement to continue negotiating? And we are happy to call that a success? [As a side note, it can only be seen as deeply cynical that industrialised countries in Cancun agreed on 2015 as the date to review whether the global target should be 1.5 degrees rather than 2 degrees given that any action after that will almost certainly be too late].

The truth is that Cancun revealed a shocking failure by the world's nations – and particularly those most responsible for causing climate change – to find a collective and effective response to a crisis that will affect the most vulnerable. A report by the Climate Vulnerable Forum, in December 2010 noted that already 350,000 people die from natural disasters related to climate change and that this figure is likely to rise to one million people every year if we don't radically change course. Bolivia was not an obstacle to progress, it was rather the only nation daring enough to tell the truth. Rather than less Bolivias, we need more willing to stand up and say that the agreement was 'naked' and unacceptable. Perhaps if more nations – especially major emerging economies like India and Brazil – had said they would not accept an illusory deal, it could have shocked the world into moving beyond cautious approaches and acting radically for humanity and the planet.

Only mass mobilisation can shift power balance

The needed shift in thinking and action, though, will only happen if we mobilise and on a scale that has never been done before. Bolivia's bravery came to a large degree from the mandate it received at the World Peoples' Conference on Climate Change, and the support it felt from people on the streets just a few blocks from the negotiating halls. There thousands of indigenous people, smallholder farmers and grassroots activists marching on the streets were unequivocal in condemning the Cancun agreements and in supporting Bolivia. They already see the costs of climate change and were not prepared to be bought off with a deal that did nothing to safeguard their future. They were backed by climate justice networks worldwide. Yet the isolation of Bolivia in the

conference plenary shows that this movement faces a huge challenge in the coming year to scale up. As Bill McKibben, founder of the global campaign 350.org, argues we need to “build a movement strong enough to take on the most profitable and powerful enterprise that the human civilization has ever seen—the fossil fuel industry” and we need to do it urgently before it is too late.

Cancun text: A backwards step

- **Document effectively kills of the only binding agreement**, Kyoto Protocol, in favour of a completely inadequate bottom-up voluntary approach
- **Increases loopholes and flexibilities** that allow developed countries to avoid action, via an expansion of offsets and continued existence of ‘surplus allowances’ of carbon after 2012 by countries like Ukraine and Russia which effectively cancel out any other reductions.
- **Finance Commitments weakened:** commitment to “provide new and additional financial resources” to developing countries have been diluted to talking more vaguely about “mobilising [resources] jointly”, with expectation that this will mainly be provided by carbon markets
- **The World Bank is made trustee** of the new Green Climate Fund, which has been strongly opposed by many civil society groups due to the undemocratic makeup of the Bank and its poor environmental record
- **No discussion of Intellectual Property rights**, repeatedly raised by many countries, as current rules obstruct transfer of key climate-related technologies to developing countries
- **Constant assumption in favour of market mechanisms** to resolve climate change even though this perspective is not shared by a number of countries, particularly in Latin America
- **Green light given for the controversial REDD** (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) programme which often ends up perversely rewarding those responsible for deforestation, while dispossessing indigenous and forest dwellers of their land
- **Systematic exclusion of proposals that came from the historic World Peoples’ Conference on Climate Change** including proposals for a Climate Justice Tribunal, full recognition of indigenous rights, and rights for nature

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