



LOW-LYING, HIGH PROFILE?

Speech Delivered by Tom Spencer, Vice Chairman Institute for Environmental Security at the University for Peace, International Climate Change and Vulnerability Conference 13th and 14th February 2007, The Hague

What might persuade a rational, if bad tempered, climate campaigner to abandon his comfortable house, on a big island, 300 feet above sea-level to speak to a group from some of the most low-lying places on the planet? Not the joys of travel! This campaigner has both a head cold and a toothache. Not the fee – this is a Dutch conference and they don't pay! No, my reason for travelling to be with you tonight is because I believe you represent a group of countries licensed to be the voice of the planet – permitted to tell the truth because of the desperateness of your situation! Your conference programme on adaptation is excellent, but I want to plead that part of your time continues to be devoted to mitigation. After a career in advertising, politics, academic life and public affairs I now do something called Decision Mapping. Decision Mapping teaches you to identify who owns the decision that really matters to you. I want to argue tonight that there are decisions out there about the burning of forests or the functioning of Cap and Trade that matter to you in that they directly raise the level of your seas.

I regard this as a decisive moment in the history of climate change. We spent one hundred and fifty years from 1820 to 1970 not knowing that we were doing. We then spent twenty years from 1970 to 1990 suspecting the truth. Much of our energy in the period 1990 to 2006 has gone into fighting climate denial. We should celebrate that victory even while we regret the amount of human energy spent in winning it. If we look ahead from 2007 to 2016 the skies may seem a little clearer but we will undoubtedly still be faced by our old friends – Greed, Inertia and Stupidity.

I first worked with the Association Of Small Island States (AOSIS) after Rio. They made a powerful emotional case in the UNFCCC as “victim states”. Sea level rise was the first concern expressed about global warming, before we realised what a complicated nightmare we had made for ourselves. Victim status is an unstable commodity, for sympathy decays over time. I was offered an early lesson in this fact in 1997 when I chaired the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament. Alexander Downer, the Australian Foreign Minister asked to see me on a range of subjects. I agreed, provided that we could begin with climate change. He reluctantly agreed, but explained that Australia was not worried by climate change as “we have big beaches”. I looked for signs that he was joking and failed to find them. It is from such lack of empathy that the “send a boat” mentality grows.

Australian coal exports to China are just a small part of the whole fossil fuel lobby that has fought a well financed and brilliant public affairs campaign for the last fifteen years. In the early 1990s the lobby tried to buy my services before finding out my views. Not a clever thing to do. But it was useful to start a ten year career dealing with climate change in the European Parliament knowing the arguments of the bad guys. They deliberately denied the science of climate change and set out to confuse the public. They explained ceaselessly that any effort to curb climate change would increase taxes. One of them explained to me in 1990 that this would “buy the industry fifteen years and that after that all that was left was adaptation”.

So why should I be optimistic that something has now genuinely changed? Strange weather seems now to have finally persuaded public opinion in the most advanced democracies. The latest IPPC Report, even if most of the scary feedback stuff was taken out at American insistence, makes the position desperately clear. The Stern Report wins the argument in economic terms, even if it argues for an unwisely high target of 550 ppm. President Putin's penchant for turning off pipelines seems to have successfully frightened President Barroso and Europe into taking energy security and climate change seriously. Meanwhile “Westward look, the land is bright”. Governor Schwarzenegger has brought California back into the game, joined by a swarm of Democrats belatedly offering to do something about climate change. The truth is that what underpins this new activism is that much of US business has recognised that the game is up and wants a functioning system that they can influence as rapidly as possible. So having put up with American delay for ten years, we may be about to be deluged in

American enthusiasm. Winston Churchill once remarked that the Americans always do the right thing eventually, but only when they have tried everything else first.

My other cause for optimism is that I believe we are in one of those rare moments of foreign policy shift when passionately phrased input from small countries can make a difference. Stephen Weber at Berkeley has pointed out that the tragedy of the last fifteen years was the accidental combination of uni-polar domination and globalisation. The combination lead to the Americans acting as lazy monopolists who felt that they could pick and choose when to pay attention. They would never have been so casual in the Cold War world. It is now clear even to the densest Congressman that we live in a multi-polar world where China, India, Europe, Russia and Japan compete for influence. Expect to be courted by the rivals! Your maximum leverage is likely to be with Europe, whose new foreign policy is being constructed around climate change and energy security. It is designed as an external manifestation of the treaty approach that has served Europe well internally. The Union will be looking for allies and support in the African, Caribbean and Pacific group. An early demand on the Union should be the inclusion of tropical forestry projects into the EU ETS. I do not believe that we have even begun to come to terms with the impact of the Chinese on the global environment. They are simultaneously terrified of their internal instability and the political consequences of the polluted environment that they have created. However, this has not inhibited their dash across the southern hemisphere in search of raw materials at whatever environmental cost. We certainly know the destination of most of the illegal logs ripped from our few remaining tropical forests. Meanwhile, the Indians relish their great power status and have yet to draw policy conclusions from their new prominence. One thing is clear in the politics of the United Nations. North-South should follow East-West into the dustbin of history. In particular, you might like to bury the “Group of 77 plus China”. In a multi-polar world the Indians and Chinese can no longer claim to speak for the developed world.

In a multi-polar world your voice counts for more and you have much to use it for. I hope you will use your voices to complain when American or European farmers get subsidies for bogus biofuels that are not green. I hope that you will join what should be a chorus of fury about five billion dollars worth of Cap and Trade money going to China to phase out a gas that they should have given up voluntarily and where the cost of scrubbers was only a couple of hundred million dollars. While you are speaking truth to China, you might also want to complain about the way that the Clean Development Mechanism and its projects have been monopolised by India, Brazil and China to the exclusion of forestry and other projects in smaller, less politically powerful countries. No doubt Costa Rica and the Caribbean will want to cross-examine the Brazilians on Antonio Nobre’s groundbreaking work on the “climate pump” in the Amazon (www.envirosecurity.net). He shows how the felling of the forest has reduced the power of the pump to suck warm air off the southern North Atlantic. This has the twin impact of causing drought in the Amazon and intensifying hurricanes in the Caribbean. No doubt Brazil’s excellent foreign service will be happy to explain the historical logic behind their activities to raise your sea level. Please do not limit yourself to the Brazilians! The world is invited to Bali for the next UNFCCC Conference of the Parties. The continued destruction of the Borneo rainforest and its replacement by palm oil plantations is probably the single biggest decision bearing down on your beaches. Next time you meet a nice Norwegian concerned about sustainable development, invite them to explain why they are so keen to exploit the oil reserves under the melting Arctic ice and thus prolong the fossil fuel age to your detriment. Oh, and have a go at any German car manufacturers who happen to pass by, or any national governments in Europe reluctant to set proper targets for greenhouse gas emissions. In your situation, it is surely permissible to be angry.

I have long believed that The Hague would be an ideal place for a memorial for the victims of man-made climate change, but we would need to be able to add to the commemoration each year. Our world of statisticians and spin doctors needs to be reminded that climate change is not an abstract concept. It is about peoples’ lives and their deaths. Speak for the planet - your motives are clear and your voices will be heard.

