

A photograph showing the silhouettes of several people against a bright, warm background. They are holding a large white banner that reads "UNDER THE WEATHER" in bold, black, capital letters. Some individuals are also holding black umbrellas. The scene is backlit, creating a strong contrast between the dark figures and the bright background.

Confessions of a climate doubter

“Climate change” has grown into a large bureaucratic, industrial and political machine, on which the livelihood of many thousands of people depends. In this intellectual climate there is little room for doubt. Changes to the energy system may be inevitable, argues Karel Beckman, editor-in-chief of European Energy Review, but we should not blindly follow the beliefs of the climate preachers.

| by Karel Beckman

What were 12,000 people from 186 countries, including 1,000 journalists, doing in the Polish city of Poznan for two weeks this last December? One thing, really: talking. They were the delegates to round 14 of the UN climate change negotiations, the global warming travelling circus that gives one performance each year in cities across the globe – from Montreal to Rio de Janeiro, from Bali to Johannesburg – chalking up air miles that most business executives can only dream of. In Poznan, all 12,000 travellers were welcomed with a present that you would expect to see at any commercial exhibition: a straw bag containing two CD's, a calendar, a t-shirt, an armband with a USB-stick and a big carton box with a jar of Polish honey.

What these global messengers were talking about exactly, is not so easy to say. There was a daily meeting called BINGO, a daily meeting called TUNGO, there were meetings of various groups, such as the African Group and the Environmental Integrity Group, there was a 7-hour round-table discussion on “The future of ecological vehicles and their impact on the Polish market”, there was even a session on “gender justice in climate change policy”. Those were just some of the side events. The main event consisted of a two-week long plenary session, in which delegates from each country held forth at great length about how climate change affects their country, what they intend to do about it, and particularly what they expect others to do about it. Needless to say, there were also a great many press conferences and behind-the-scenes meetings where, presumably, the real negotiations took place.

So OK, it is easy to be sceptical about a UN event like this, but is it fair? We are, after all, talking about a highly complex, momentous process: hammering out a worldwide climate treaty that will affect every human being on the planet. What is 15 talking sessions (if we include next year's crucial one in Copenhagen) and 150,000 pots of honey when the future of the world is at stake?

Hard rain |

Then again, does the future of the world really hang in the balance? Are we facing a catastrophe, a crisis of cataclysmic proportions, a climate apocalypse? Such expressions are bandied

about quite routinely at any COP (“Conference of the Parties” - as the UN Climate Change Conferences are called), and not just by environmental activists either. But before we try to answer that question, maybe we should first give some thought to what we mean exactly by “climate change”. Back in the old days, people talked about the greenhouse effect. Then came global warming. Nowadays it's climate change – a much vaguer, more flexible concept of course, which can subsume any non-average weather event happening anywhere in the world. Does it get wetter? Climate change. Does it get drier? Climate change. Does it snow more? Climate change. Does it snow less? Climate change. Does it get hotter? Climate change. Does it get colder? Regional climate change.

But it goes further than that. It would be a mistake to think of climate change simply in terms of weather patterns or greenhouse gas emissions. A visit to any COP-meeting makes clear that climate change is much more than that. It is an industry, a worldview, a religion even. Consider the Hard Rain Project. This was an exhibition featured at the Climate Technology Exhibition accompanying the Poznan conference. It showed spectacular posters, each of which was illustrated by a line from the famous Bob Dylan cold war protest song “It's a hard rain that's gonna

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fall”. (“Where have you been, my blue-eyed son, where have you been, my darling young one...”) Some of the photographs depict scenes of pollution and destruction, others show harrowing, Abu Ghraib-like scenes, in which people are debased and tortured. Pretty impressive – but the relation to CO₂ emissions is obscure, to say the least.

The Climate Technology Exhibition did not stop there. Next to the Hard Rain Project was a stand showcasing a thing called

the “Apollo Deluxe” Chillchaser. This turned out to be a climate-friendly “patio heater”, giving out infrared heat, with a built-in MP3-device included. Call it the business-side of climate change. There were also stands of CEFIC, the very humdrum association of the European chemical industry; of a group called Solar Solidarity; of Oxfam, one of the many aid agencies that has discovered there is money to be made from climate change. Confusingly there was a combined stand of the insulation company Isover and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), who together promoted, of all things, dishwashing machines. They had put up the following sign: ‘By washing up in the traditional way, you increase the consumption of water and energy. If you don’t use a dishwasher, your dishes may not be cleaned well enough, and you can never be sure all germs are destroyed.’ If you thought WWF was into protecting panda bears, think again. WWF also put out a report in Poznan called ‘a blueprint for a greener cement industry’.

Clearly, for many people climate change is more than just climate change. In their minds the concept is related in various ways to ideas about social justice, solidarity, rich and poor, east and west, consumption habits, ways of life, health, pollution, war, peace – yes, even “gender justice”. Does this make sense? No, but it is a fact.

It is obvious that what moves these thousands of activists, bureaucrats, politicians, entrepreneurs and consultants who gather at COP-meetings is a genuine mission to save the world. It is also obvious that saving the world has become a way of life to them – bound with their self-interest, their jobs, their income, their status, their airplane tickets, their social network, their colleagues and friends. (I overheard two COP-delegates greet each other with – ‘hey, how many COPs have you been to?’- ‘this is my sixth COP’ – ‘this is my seventh’.) It is not exaggerated to say that for many people climate change has become a religion, in the sense that it gives meaning to their lives.

Nobel Prize |

What is a simple business executive or government policymaker to make of this? Can the climate change genie be put back in a bottle

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where it can be studied and dealt with on a practical, manageable level? Well, a representative of the European Commission did try to do this in Poznan. ‘The scientists have spoken’, he said. ‘If at 8 o’clock in the morning, the scientists say we have a problem, we cannot go on at 10 o’clock as if nothing had happened.’

That sounds fairly straightforward. And it is true – the scientists of the UN’s International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have indeed spoken. They have even been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize

for their efforts. But the IPCC-scientists are not all the scientists there are. And they are only ordinary human beings, too – with their prejudices and interests.

Consider for a moment the Dutch company Econcern. This very dynamic company is one of the largest producers of renewable energy in Europe. It had sales of half a billion euros in 2007, employs 1200 people, and is active in a wide variety of fields: offshore wind farms, sea-water air conditioning, biomass, solar power, utility buildings, carbon credits, automotive concepts, biomethanol, electricity trading, greenhouses, solar water heaters, silicon production, and so on. Econcern also has a flourishing research and consultancy arm called Ecofys, which advises governments and businesses on climate change policies. What is more: the scientists on Econcern’s payroll are actually some of the lead authors of the IPCC. When the IPCC got the Nobel Peace Prize, Econcern said in a press release that the company ‘provided the largest share of lead authors to Working Group Three of the IPCC’. No fewer than 7 IPCC lead authors were employed by Econcern. Of course you can say these scientists are genuinely concerned about global warming and put their money where their mouth is. What is wrong with that? You can also say that there is some conflict of interest here.

If there was one major scientific leitmotiv sounded at the Poznan conference, it was the notion that increasingly severe climate impacts were being felt right now as a result of climate change. ‘Countries are sinking as we speak’, a worried journalist said at one press conference. ‘Communities around the world are experiencing natural disasters with increased severity and frequency – the occurrence of drought in sub-Saharan Africa has seen an almost 25-fold increase since the 1960s’, said Oxfam. ‘Sea levels are rising, coastlines are shrinking, we’ve seen record drought, spreading famine and storms that are growing stronger with each passing hurricane season’, said president-elect Barack Obama in a video message to the conference. The Korean Energy Management Corporation (KEMCO), a Korean government agency, handed out a brochure saying: ‘Save Energy, Save Earth, Save Us’. It had wealthy Korean kids on the cover who did not look like they needed to be saved from anything. But no one at a COP meeting bats an eyelid at such pronouncements. They are taken for granted.

Terrorism |

There are no doubters around at COP meetings. That is the problem. The Prime Minister of the Pacific Island of Tuvalu calls global warming a ‘slow and insidious form of terrorism against us’, but you would not know from going to a COP conference that sea levels at Tuvalu have not risen for at least 35 years. You would not know that according to the Swedish sea level specialist Nils-Axel Mörner, there is no long-term trend in global sea level whatsoever, or that according to generally accepted research, there has been no accelerated rise in sea levels as a result of global warming. You would not know that the number of droughts has decreased rather than increased in the world over the past century. You



Environmental activist near the entrance to the UN Climate Change Conference in Poznan. Photo: Joe Klamar/AFP/Getty Images

would not know that coastlines are not shrinking; that Antarctic ice is not melting; that some glaciers are melting but others are advancing; that the number and strength of hurricanes has not increased; that polar bears are not being threatened; that sub-Saharan Africa has been subject to droughts for many centuries and it is hard to find any trends in the occurrence of droughts there; that more people die because of cold winters than of hot summers; that climate is not a factor in the spread of malaria; etcetera, etcetera. Indeed, you would not know that on December 11, 2008, the one but last day of the Poznan conference, the US Senate Environment and Public Works Committee put out a report announcing that 'more than 650 international scientists dissent over man-made global warming claims', including some highly respected scientists from prestigious institutions. Those are the inconvenient truths that the climate change advocates prefer to ignore.

So this is the dilemma we – all of us who try to keep an open mind on this issue – are faced with. If climate change is as threatening as many people say it is, we are up against the greatest crisis humanity has ever faced. If it is not, we are looking at the greatest

delusion mankind has ever suffered from. It is a dilemma that creates huge uncertainties and entails huge potential costs. It is, unfortunately, not a simple "win-win" situation, in which we can rely on "no-regret" measures that benefit us all. Fighting climate change carries a mega-multibillion-dollar bill. Money that could be spent on other causes.

Still, there are some no-regret policies we can follow. There are other issues unconnected to climate change, but which have similar solutions. Think of security of energy supply, employment, innovation, pollution, depletion of resources. We may ponder once more the oft-quoted pronouncement of Sheik Yamani, the former Saudi Arabian oil minister, who said that 'just as the Stone Age did not end because of lack of stones, the oil age will not end because of lack of oil'. A worldwide search has started for new forms of energy. This is a benign genie that has been let out of the bottle together with the climate change genie. This good genie could well have some pleasant surprises in store for us. Surprises that might transform the world for the better. This thought may not solve all of our policy dilemmas, but at least it may keep us from getting too heated. ■