

UN climate change conference a watershed moment

By Dr. Hans Martin

The United Nations climate change conference, COP 21, is set to be a watershed moment in the history of global climate warming. In this setting Canada is obliged to present our newly minted Prime Minister along with a likely large entourage of individuals of varying importance and competence. I suggest a dearth of competence simply because climate change has not been important in our country.

In fact, I believe that the meeting may bewilder even the most devoted and hardened participants from around the world. COP21 is close to a last chance, especially if the next major COP meeting occurs in some years. In a few weeks, we are going to set new targets for carbon dioxide emissions along with a number of other challenges.

I believe we are at the point where little wiggle room is available or tolerable. Canadians are at a disadvantage. We have smudged the existing international agreement by publicly withdrawing from the activity, we have degraded our scientific capability and finally, without sufficient material, our national press has been unable to adequately educate the public and address urgent questions of national importance which many other countries take as commonplace. We do not know where we are going.

A few weeks from now, we will certainly have a better idea of where we should have gone, and, hopefully, have an iron resolve and a dedication to a new common direction. One can be excused for being pessimistic having witnessed Canada, just 30 years ago the poster child of environmental caring, falling off its path to take a cynical, selfish and reckless direction.

In another world it seems, in 1986, at a meeting of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), Canada invited world leaders to an international conference "to consider ways of improving the world capacity for forecasting environmental change." With the encouragement of the WCED, the World Conference on the Changing Atmosphere was held in Toronto, June, 1988. In presenting this invitation to the WCED delegates 1986, Tom McMillan, our then environment minister, suggested that "climate change should be one of the first topics considered."

The conference was attended by 341 delegates including 20 politicians. The participants came from 46 countries. The main substance of the conference was addressed in the theme papers.

Dr. Kenneth Hare, University of Toronto, presented the first theme paper on the Global Greenhouse Effect. In retrospect this paper was remarkable. Dr. Hare exhibited unusual prescience. His opening remark was: "In this paper I shall put forward the view that the greenhouse effect is the most important environmental problems facing the world. It is an old conjecture that has suddenly become central to international strategy." Dr. Hare referred to the abundant evidence of the sensitivity of various aspects of the human economy to climate impacts and the reverse phenomenon. He noted that the studies generally were not stimulated by senior government or corporate management. He goes on to say that "this indifference is at an end as demonstrated by the scope of the conference."

Well Dr. Hare, nearly 30 years have passed and in Canada the indifference still prevails. But not for long, perhaps just one month more.

This morning I listened to Tim Flannery, an Australian climate-change scientist, describe the current global situation. He gives an example of the scope and speed of global deterioration: the Great Barrier Reef of Australia is one of the 7 natural wonders of the world. It is one third the size of Ontario. Flannery rues the fact that his young children will never see the reef. It will be gone in a few years.

What comparable disaster awaits Canada, perhaps in the Great Lakes area, in the grain basket in the prairies, in the BC forests, or the Arctic which already is showing great signs of change.

In this context and with this backdrop we have decimated our scientific capacity to access and to adequately predict the direction of change and provide guidance in the difficult times ahead. Our Paris delegation is expected to present interventions during the dialogue in Paris. What will we say? What can we say?

We didn't know!

Remember that it was in 1986 that Canada, our prime minister, invited the world to Toronto for the first climate change conference.

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