

Bali: no time to lose

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[0]All eyes are on Bali, where the United Nations conference on [3-14 December 2007](#) [1] faces a critical test: whether it will set a course towards genuine global action to tackle climate change, or founder on the rocks of rhetoric.

Time is running out. And while talking is key, demonstrating a willingness to take action is desperately urgent. An ambitious, robust and fair deal on climate change will have three key elements:

- a firm commitment from the north to push for a 2-degree target, backed up by credible domestic measures
- the provision of big developing-country emitters with the technology, investment and incentives to go for low-carbon growth
- an increased focus on the problems faced by the poorest countries in adapting to the inevitable impacts of climate change.

What this demands, above all, is leadership. True leaders are prepared to go first, to accept responsibilities, and to shoulder blame. True global leaders know that national interests cannot take precedence over getting a global deal that is fair to the very diverse circumstances faced by different countries.

But where is the leadership on climate change?

In 2005, Gordon Brown offered fine language around the heroic challenge of "[making poverty history](#) [3]". We need an even stronger stance to match the challenge of global warming, and we need it to be based on more than words and promises.

But much time and energy is being wasted. The tired cliché that China builds a coal-fired power station every week is still being [circulated](#) [4] by the media almost every day and used as an excuse not to act. It serves only to make people forget that the industrialised nations have been emitting vast amounts of carbon for more than 150 years.

The setting of a global-warming target involves addressing direct conflicts of interest, between those needing to cut back on greenhouse gases and those suffering the damaging impacts. Countries like [Japan](#) [5] and Canada are taking a higher target of global warming, of 3-4 degrees Centigrade - which might seem to make sense for a country in the upper part of the northern hemisphere and, hence, less at risk. Some higher-latitude countries may even gain

Also on **openDemocracy**, in partnership with [E3G](#) [2]: a new blog - [Global Deal](#) [2] - tracks the policy debates and arguments at the Bali climate-change conference on 3-14 December 2007.

Read and respond to David Steven's vivid daily reports and commentary [here](#) [2]

Also in **openDemocracy** on the Bali conference:

Alejandro Litovsky, "[The accountability challenge for climate diplomacy](#) [2]" (30 November 2007)

initially from lower energy requirements for heating and a longer growing season. However, for many developing countries, especially those in the tropics, going above 2 degrees will wreak ever-more devastating consequences. Yet, trying to keep to 2 degrees or below will be hard and require substantial shifts in price and investments immediately.

Fund it

The commitment to an ambitious target is a good and essential step. But for it to work and be credible in the negotiations, other countries need to be convinced that such a statement of intent is backed up by firm resolve to put the measures in place to make it happen.

At present, all governments are suffering a very serious credibility gap in their translation of fine rhetoric into budgets, spending plans, and legislation. In rich countries especially, current government priorities reflected in their budgeted expenditure reveal a situation several orders of magnitude adrift from where it should be. The spending mismatches in Britain are acute: £12-20 billion on the national health service's computer system, against £38.9 million in total energy investments by the research council (2004-05 figure); an estimated £9bn for the Olympic games in 2012 versus the £100m annual budget of the [Carbon Trust](#). [6]

[Yvo de Boer](#) [7], executive secretary of the United Nations framework convention on climate change ([UNFCCC](#) [8]), said in August 2007 that the costs of mitigating climate change would be \$200-\$210 billion in 2030, while the costs of adaptation would run to several tens of billions.

It seems a lot. But look at the cost of the invasion and [occupation](#) [9] of Iraq, now reckoned to have surpassed \$1,200 trillion. Has this made the world a safer place, more tolerant of different cultures and beliefs? I don't think so! The money could hardly have been spent to [worse](#) [10] effect.

At the second [world climate conference](#) [11] on 29 October - 7 November 1990 in Geneva, one leader spoke eloquently of the difference between the threats posed by climate change and those by mortal men.

"The threat to our world comes not only from tyrants and their tanks," she said. "It can be more insidious though less visible. The danger of global warming is as yet unseen, but real enough for us to make changes and sacrifices, so that we do not live at the expense of future generations."

Those surprisingly visionary remarks came from Margaret Thatcher, then British prime minister, [speaking](#) [12] a month before she left office about the urgent need to negotiate the UNFCCC.

openDemocracy writers debate the politics of climate change:

Stephan Harrison, "[Kazakhstan: glaciers and geopolitics](#) [5] (27 May 2005)

Simon Retallack, "[Climate change: the global test](#) [5]" (10 November 2006)

Tom Burke, "[Climate change: choosing the tools](#) [5]" (21 December 2006)

John Elkington & Geoff Lye, "[Climate change's right and wrong fixes](#) [5]" (2 February 2007)

Dougald Hine, "[Climate change: a question of democracy](#) [5]" (2 March 2007)

Andrew Dobson, "[A politics of global warming: the social-science resource](#) [5]" (29 March 2007)

Oliver Tickell, "[Live Earth's limits](#) [5]" (6 July 2006)

Andrew Dobson, "[A climate of crisis: towards the eco-state](#) [5]" (19 September 2007)

Mike Hulme, "[Climate change: from issue to magnifier](#) [5]" (19 October 2007)

"We shan't succeed if we are all too inflexible", she continued. "We shan't succeed if we indulge in self-righteous point-scoring for the benefit of audiences and voters at home. We have to work sympathetically together. We have to recognise the importance of economic growth of a kind that benefits future as well as present generations everywhere. We need it not only to raise living standards but to generate the wealth required to pay for protection of the environment."

What if

Progress on climate change requires qualitative as well as targeted shifts. A crucial step forward could occur if Bali brings some surprises that radically shift the tone of debate.

What, for example, if western leaders start competing to be greener than their neighbours? Maybe George W Bush will become a born-again green, building on his half-forgotten pledge [13] to break the United States's addiction to fossil-fuels. Since fossil-fuels have brought the world to the state it is in, it would make sense to use surpluses from petroleum sales to fund a shift to a low-carbon economy.

What if Norway pledged part of its pension fund [14] to bringing low-carbon energy to China and India? What if the Gulf states offered billions of state-managed funds for green investment in Africa? And what if Canada said it would offer to be a home to the thousand of islanders [15] in the Pacific who risk losing theirs, beneath rising waves?

What if the world's leaders gathered in Bali take note of the views and voices of the poor, who have done little to cause climate change but are already feeling its effects? What if they leaders find the language to construct a new collective vision [15] that allows nation-states to put aside domestic interests in favour of a global deal that delivers for all?

It is seventeen years since Margaret Thatcher's warning. Today, too many of the world's political leaders are pointing fingers, playing word games and delaying action. As Paul Rogers has written in **openDemocracy** ("Climate change: a window to act" [15], 22 November 2007), we don't have another seventeen years. Time is running out.