

## SCALING THE SUMMIT

### This year's UN climate change conference is a chance to take urgent action, say Andrew Pakes and Rachel Reeves – but securing a deal will be tough

**T**HE ROAD TO Copenhagen is paved with good intentions and competing demands for what should be included in the new treaty on global warming. The UK government has set a high bar for success, building on its own ambitions in the Climate Change Act for an 80% cut in emissions by 2050. Following on from April's G20 summit in London, which achieved international agreement on measures to rebuild the global economy, the United Nations climate change conference in Copenhagen in December is a chance to rise to the urgent challenge of tackling global warming.

With competing priorities and objectives thrown into the mix, a deal is clearly going to be tough. While policies based on the science are the first-best outcome, they are not the most likely as horse trading gets underway. Meanwhile, the scientific evidence on global warming already outstrips the data presented by the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), making meaningful commitments based on solid facts difficult to come by. The reality is that the fast moving nature of global warming and the world's continued exploitation of resources means consensus too often converges on moderate ambitions. Geopolitical demands – on energy security, economic development and sovereignty, for example – will require great resolve to achieve the agreements we need. Implementing what is agreed will be harder still. Yet concrete commitments are essential if we are to do anything to preserve our planet for future generations.

The commonly used image of polar bears on melting ice caps is a popular proxy for the impact of climate change. But relatively little has been written about the impact of climate change and the importance of the negotiations on the Arctic environment itself. Beyond the polar bear, there is a wider story of environmental decline and competing economic demands in the high north. Having just returned from the Arctic Circle to examine these issues, we wanted to record our thoughts on the impact of global warming on the region, how that will impact us and how demands for economic development and political influence are competing with the need to protect the planet.

Undoubtedly, the Arctic environment is an area of outstanding natural beauty and worth protecting for that reason alone. But in this environment the scars of human activity are easily seen – be it the slag heaps and concentrations of the coal industry, changes to the ice cap or the increasingly volatile nature of the seasons.

The Norwegian Polar Institute has been monitoring and researching the Arctic environment since 1928. Their latest research reveals a much faster rate of climate change than is commonly reported and compared to what has been observed up to now. The pace of change is accelerating, with temperatures now five degrees higher than the average for the last 30 years. Rising sea temperatures have already led to a significant reduction in the ice sheet, with its consequent impacts on the Arctic wildlife. The impacts of climate change are felt most in the north. Indeed, between 1990 and 2100 the (northern) polar temperature is expected to rise by six degrees, possibly more, compared to a rise of around three or four degrees elsewhere in the world.

The rate at which the ocean is warming is dramatically changing the marine environment and, in turn, further feeding climate change. One direct economic impact of these changes for the UK is changes in the fish distribution as species move further north to follow oceanic temperatures. Going forward, rising ocean temperatures and the melting ice sheet means we will see continued rises in sea levels. The international community should be interested in these changes as melting sea ice is a direct threat to low lying countries elsewhere in the world.

Reductions in the polar ice sheet have also increased commercial opportunities in the Arctic ocean. Most shockingly, the melting ice means that by as early as 2013, it is likely that ships will be able sail straight across the North Pole for at least part of the year. In turn, this will create the opportunity for shorter and more lucrative shipping routes from China and Russia to the west. If these routes are developed, it would further damage the environment and would represent a stark failure of the international community to tackle climate change.

More sea channels in the Arctic are also likely to lead to further territorial disputes, especially as melting ice makes it easier to access gas and oil reserves under the ocean. There is already a competitive struggle over the continental shelf in the north driven by a potentially toxic mix of high politics and economic opportunities.

The virgin oil and gas reserves in the region further skew the incentives away from protecting the environment. Under international law, the five states with territory inside the Arctic Circle – Canada, Norway, Russia, the US and Denmark via its control of Greenland – have a 200-mile economic zone around the north of their coastline. Concerns about future energy supplies and the presence of huge reserves under the Arctic cap do not make international cooperation to tackle climate change easy. In 2007, the Russians undertook a costly exercise to plant a flag on the sea bed under the North Pole to mark ‘their’ territory, starting yet another round of territorial negotiation.

These issues highlight the difficult task facing global leaders as they prepare for Copenhagen. It also raises the importance of international cooperation and progressive politics in understanding both the causes and impacts of climate change. It fundamentally challenges the principles of the Conservative party which, despite talking the talk on climate change, is utterly opposed to the greater European cooperation that is essential for a breakthrough.

The government’s priority for Copenhagen is to seek a comprehensive agreement to limit global temperature rises to no more than two degrees. This is in the context of scientific evidence which is already out of date, with the pace of change moving much faster than international negotiations can keep up with. The opportunity in Copenhagen to effect change must be embraced as further delay can only make eventual action harder to achieve.

The UK’s international efforts will be helped by the Labor government in Australia and the new mood in the US following President Obama’s election. The greatest challenge is in reaching consensus between the developed and developing world, including China, Russia and India. Here in the UK, it means the government must lead by example and bring forward its own ambitious plans in the summer as part of the energy policy and renewable strategy. Indications show a positive sense of resolve from ministers. We also need a broader coalition of support to provide a greater sense of urgency, helping to realise the potential for green growth and jobs out of the recession and to meet our international obligations.

In the past, climate change camp-aigners talked of reaching the tipping point of irreversible change. The reality is that there are many tipping points, as the fragile environment in the Arctic Circle reminds us. From the melting of the ice sheet, through to changing flora and fauna and the threat to polar wildlife, at each step we are narrowing our opportunities to act. The scale of the challenge should be central to our international vision and renewed political commitment to establish a globally and inter-generationally just and fair society.

---

Andrew Pakes is chair of SERA and Labour & Co-operative parliamentary candidate for Milton Keynes North.  
Rachel Reeves is Labour’s parliamentary candidate for Leeds West