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Copenhagen Accord

At last Monday's assembly I spoke about the conference on World Climate Change being held in the Danish capital, Copenhagen. I did say that the outcome of the talks was not certain and that the shape of any agreement was still to be determined.

Well, the outcome of the two weeks of negotiations was an agreement, called the Copenhagen Accord, issued in the final hours of the conference. The document has been accepted by the United Nations but it is a long way from the outcome demanded by many nations present at the conference. The Copenhagen Accord was signed by only 5 countries; the USA, China, India, Brazil and South Africa. It is important to note that the two key nations, the USA and China, did agree to the terms set out in the document. You will notice, however, that the European Union, Russia and the other 150 countries at the conference did not sign the agreement. The fact that the United Nations Organisation has accepted this Accord, drawn up by only a handful of nations, has angered many countries.

So what does the Copenhagen Accord mean for the world and climate change? The United Nations has agreed to strive to limit the increase in average world temperature to 2C by the end of the century. The United Nations has also agreed to set up a fund to assist small nations in their battle ahead against the effects of climate change. The countries that will be affected in the first instance by an increase of 2C are the low-lying ocean nations that will be submerged by a rise in sea level and those nations where agriculture will suffer from less rainfall, particularly in Africa.

The shortfall of this conference is that there are no specific targets on greenhouse gas emissions that countries will be legally bound to implement. The failure of Copenhagen Accord lies in the lack of detail. The United Nations has effectively resigned itself to the fact that the Earth's temperature will continue to rise. What it has not accomplished is the development of an action plan to slow the increase in global temperature or a strategy that will lead to a reduction in carbon emissions.

What comes next? The United Nations will hold its next conference on climate change in Mexico City in 2010. One would hope that the nations attending that meeting will come up with specific plans for reducing emissions. The signs are optimistic particularly as there does appear to be a willingness on the part of the USA and in particular China to take action to improve the environment and reduce greenhouse gases.

What is really required, however, is a change in global lifestyles. Chinese industry is driving the demand for consumer products, particularly in the United States and in Europe. Chinese industry needs coal and other minerals, with Australia leading the way in exports to China. The world's industries produce so much that even a small decrease in manufacturing would have a significant impact on carbon emissions. Getting countries to agree to cutbacks, however, is another issue.

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