

All Hot Air – Squandered Opportunity in Paris

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We should all be alarmed that the Business Community is giving cautious praise to the Paris Agreement, where the vast majority of nations signed a document aimed at global consensus to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees above the pre-Industrial mean.

The text of the Agreement is an arduous 30 pages long, with the actual agreement beginning at page 20. Alarm bells start ringing when the UN is endorsing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – somewhere along the line the word ‘ecologically’ has disappeared, and is absent throughout the text. The particular reference is welcomed at the very beginning of the Paris Agreement, ‘particularly goal 13’, which is the eradication of poverty by ‘creating sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth’. The disconnect is palpable – sustained economic growth is what has brought us to this looming environmental disaster of ecosystem service* collapse and cannot get us out of our dire fate. Economic growth went gangbusters last century, because in those hundred years the world population doubled, twice! With 7 billion people and counting, this world simply cannot double the population, let alone twice, to have the same economic growth we are used to, and is required for market capitalism to bubble along.

The introductory articles of the Agreement are noble, to keep global climate well below 2 degrees and to pursue efforts to keep global climate at 1.5 degrees, all in the context of ‘sustainable development’ and ‘eradication of poverty’. The reason these phrases are in inverted commas will become clear shortly.

Reading down the articles becomes an exercise in fluff. As stated above, if the Business Community is giving qualified support, we all should be alarmed. The text of the agreement is soft, non-binding law, with soft, fluffy, ambiguous and vague obligations – so vague as to be meaningless. Contracting states are *to undertake and communicate ambitious efforts*, representing a ‘progression over time’ (Art 3). Parties *aim* to reach a global peaking of greenhouse gases *as soon as possible* (Art 4(1)), with no sanctions if they fail to lift a finger. What states *shall* do (strong, binding language) is ‘prepare, communicate and maintain successive nationally determined contributions [they] *intend* to achieve’ – and I *shall* prepare my contributions for my intended achievement of visiting Mars....to my *highest possible ambition*, along with the contracting parties. All vague, non-binding, meaningless puff. While contracting parties *shall* prepare documents on what they say they intend to do, to the highest of their abilities, there isn't anything concrete that they are obliged to do. Parties *should strive* to formulate low greenhouse gas emission strategies (Art. 4(19)), but again, they *should* only strive instead of being compelled to take action.

Article 5(1) says parties *should* take action to preserve carbon sinks, i.e. forests. Should, not must. This article is optional. Parties *are encouraged* to blah blah blah. Encouragement is not binding, is not enforceable, nor in any way compelling. What indeed parties are encouraged to do is stop deforestation (Art 5(2)), however, if anyone knows anything about the palm oil trade, they will know it is going in leaps and bounds, in cleared virgin rainforest in Borneo, Sulawesi and West Papua. Other countries are buying huge tracts of rainforest in Indonesian provinces to raze the forests for agriculture to send back to home countries. And who can forget the never-ending clearing of forests for our insatiable global appetite for meat? Art 7 is the surrender provision – where parties establish global goals on adaptation to climate change, while Art 10 appears to open the floodgates to geoengineering, a concept so inherently risky that it beggars belief anyone could take this seriously. Art 10(5) calls for ‘accelerating, encouraging and enabling innovation [that] is critical for an effective, long-term global response to climate change and promoting economic growth and sustainable development.’ Economic growth prioritised over environment or planetary carrying capacity yet again. Finally, when we think this document cannot get any weaker, there remains an ‘opt out’ clause in Art 28. Withdrawal with no penalty – what an Agreement! You get the picture – the Paris Agreement is smoke and mirrors, with soft, fluffy articles to appease civil society. Now where have I heard this one before?

Recall paragraph three, where ‘sustainable development’ and ‘eradication of poverty’ are in inverted commas. Recall, if you are old enough, the hope and promise of a new, clean, green world following the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. The Rio Summit heralded the era of ‘sustainable development’, and ‘ecologically sustainable development’. The concept was enshrined in similarly soft laws, declarations and conventions, such as the Rio Declaration and the Convention on Biological Diversity. Readers old enough will recall the flooding of ‘green’ products on supermarket shelves, corporations cashing in on the feel-good environmental feeling of the public with ‘green consumerism’. How times have changed – in 1992 the shelves were awash with ‘green’, ‘sustainable’ products, and yet now I have extreme difficulty even buying recycled toilet paper. When I do find my preferred bog-rolls, they are relegated to a small section in a far off self, overpowered by the soft, fluffy, scented, never-been-another-paper-product brand.

Since the Rio Summit we have moved from the threat of climate change to the threat of runaway climate change, we have significantly accelerated deforestation of rainforests including the Amazon, mostly for cattle grazing or for crops to feed livestock. So much for sustainable development. Since 1990, more than 60% of all new palm oil plantations in Malaysia and Indonesia were virgin rainforest, and the new palm oil cartel between these countries means that the palm oil problem is going to get a whole lot worse.

Despite all the uncertainties inherent in coal seam gas production (and shortly, shale oil gas production along the far north west Queensland Cooper Creek), coal seam gas production has ramped up through much of the world and including contentious projects in Queensland. The key tenet of ‘sustainable development’ is meeting the

needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs – clearly *not* being considered in the unswerving march of the CSG wells, where up to 40,000 are planned for Queensland alone, using 300 gigalitres of water a year on this, the driest continent, and producing a million tonnes of salt each year, along many gigalitres of polluted ‘produced water.’ Whistleblowers have disclosed that they were compelled to sign off on thousand page environmental impact statements for coal seam gas projects with only a matter of hours to read them. We have the situation where 90% of all large fish have disappeared from the world’s oceans, and recent reports have shown that the earth has lost half of all its wildlife in the last 40 years, notwithstanding we have had ‘sustainable development’ for three quarters of that time. Do you see where I am coming from and where I am headed?

Sustainable development, like the Paris Climate Conference, is a con. Both have been hijacked by Big Business, both ignoring the elephant in the room – that the current, human-devised paradigm of sustained economic growth in the form of market fundamentalism is killing the planet. The organisers of the Rio Conference were aware that civil society was unhappy at the continued destruction of Planet Earth in the pursuit of profit. The suspicious deaths and disappearances of high profile environmental activists such as Bruno Manser (Swiss citizen who lived with Penan tribes in Sarawak) and Chico Mendes (Brazilian environmental and trade union activist) caused all the more international outrage against multi-national companies by civil society, forcing Big Business to act. And act they did. The UN had already been somewhat infiltrated by the Thatcher-Reagan neoliberals (‘there is no alternative’), and at Rio this once-oddball economic theory and its proponents came into their own. Big Business rapidly got to business pre-Rio, and formed the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, brainchild of Swiss billionaire Stephan Schmidheiny and Canadian oil and mineral billionaire Maurice Strong. The latter was part organiser of a previous global environmental conference that took too much notice of civil society, and he was determined civil society would have minimal interaction at his Rio Summit. At the time when the UN was trying to force transgressing Transnational Companies to be responsible for their human abuses and environmental destruction, but Strong and Schmidheiny’s plan saw business promoted as ‘leaders’ in environmental and human rights protection, and they would lead voluntarily by ‘corporate social responsibility’. This too was a con, and is now a tick-a-box exercise by leading environmental polluters. In order to win brownie points on Kofi Annan’s ‘Global Compact’, a company has only to tick that it has taken action in 3 areas out of 10, with those actions as paltry as giving workers a document on human rights, or clean water processes, with absolutely no obligation to follow the guide. Corporate social responsibility and sustainable development are shams, because they con the public into believing ‘something will be done’, and the Big Business is part of the solution. These constructs con the public into believing *we can* halt global environmental catastrophe without changing our profligate, consumerist lifestyles, and without shifting away from market economics – which we have seen though Enron and the Global Financial Crisis cannot work without regulation and oversight.

Market economics will not save us, nor will technology (arguably technology got us into this mess, firstly from the good-for-humanity coal, and later through the Green Revolution of the 1950s, which destroyed soil structure but enabled massive yields of crops – based on petrochemical fertilisers and other fossil fuels – and concordant massive population growth, referred to above). The Paris Agreement leaves open the possibility for geoengineering (injecting SO₂ into the stratosphere to make temperatures liveable for US citizens, with a side effect of plunging Africa into extreme drought) and carbon capture (many plans focus on huge underground CO₂ storage facilities, but in a case of mishap, CO₂ asphyxiation is a terrible way to go, especially on a grand scale). Time to give up hope – the Paris Agreement will not save us from 2 degrees higher climate. As all the most credible climate scientists have been reiterating, *huge* changes *must* happen *now* for us to have any hope of a not-too-disruptive future. As it is, global climate is set to exceed 2 degrees higher, so goodbye much of the Great Barrier Reef and agricultural land, and hello severe water shortages, food crises and coastal infrastructure damage.

Unless we acknowledge and deal with the underlying economic system that requires permanent, sustained growth to continue, we are doomed. Doomed and insane, as following the same path as the Rio Summit, the Paris Climate Conference did not challenge the pervading global financial system that rewards and requires exponential growth. As Albert Einstein said, insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. We haven't done anything different at Paris, and unless we are collectively insane, we cannot expect any different result than runaway climate change of our own making.

* Ecosystem services include clean air, water cycles, liveable climate, nutrient cycling, biodiversity – all those gaian functions that allow us and the planet to live with relative comfort.