One NGO’s Views from Copenhagen

Moravian College alumnus Jim Zaremski ’95 was a member of the Moravian delegation that participated in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, held in Copenhagen last December. These are his observations and personal views; they do not necessarily represent the views of Moravian College.

By James Zaremski ’95

12/13/2009:

Stepping onto U.S. Air flight #753 out of Philadelphia to commence the first leg of an interminable, multi-connection journey that would ultimately end at the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change—commonly referred to as COP 15 (or the 15th Conference of the Parties)—in Copenhagen, my gait was spongy with the ebullience of anticipation. As an alumnus member of the Moravian College, non-governmental organization (NGO) delegation, my participation in the Conference would be peripheral, but important nonetheless. Ostensibly, the role of Civil Society Observer delegations—by their mere presence—is to ensure the transparency, credibility, and therefore the integrity of the negotiations, and to facilitate communication of the occurrences of the Conference to the larger communities they serve.

I practically floated into the humming, dimly lighted fuselage, certain that, despite the ominous predictions of collapse that had preceded the Conference, a planet-saving accord would be struck. So confident was I in the idea of self-preserving rationality that I elected to attend the second week of the Conference, believing that someone as ordinary as I would be a part of history.
Surely, given the well-established international scientific consensus aggregated and published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), an objective panel formed by the U.N. in 1988, the world’s short-sighted, ultimately deleterious obstinacy was beginning to erode. After all, no rational person could reasonably impeach the science. Reasonable minds understand that science is intrinsically, and often harshly, objective. Certainly a reading, unburdened by politics or agendas, of the substantiated assertions promulgated in the IPCC’s Climate Change 2007 Synthesis Report would compel the world’s leaders to take immediate action to save the planet. Among the starkest of the assertions made in the IPCC Report was that “Warming of the Climate System is unequivocal” (IPCC 2007 Report, 30), that eleven of the twelve years during the period 1995-2006 were “the twelve warmest years in the instrumental record of global surface temperature (since 1850)” (IPCC 2007 Report, 30), and that most of this increase is “very likely” due to anthropogenic (that’s us folks) carbon emissions (IPCC 2007 Report, 39). Consider:

The observed widespread warming of the atmosphere and ocean, together with ice mass loss, support the conclusion that it is extremely unlikely [emphasis theirs] that global climate change of the past 50 years can be without external forcing and it is very likely [emphasis theirs] that it is not due to natural causes alone. (IPCC 2007 Report, 39)

12/13/2009 – 12/14/2009:

By the time I had reached Zurich, the excitement that had been coursing through me in Philadelphia had dissipated into the stuffy and sluggish Customs line. After an hour of compulsive Blackberry time checks, a miserable Swiss Custom’s officer finally processed me with a dismissive wave of the hand and what was certainly an expletive mumbled in some language. Evidently, I had somehow managed to irritate him.
Unfortunately, I had already missed my connection to Copenhagen and was advised that my luggage may or may not be in one of three different countries.

I didn’t know it then, but the inauspicious beginning to my trip would foreshadow the tepid culmination of the Conference. With four hours until the next available flight to Copenhagen, I decided to catch up on some reading as the bustle blurred around me.

With the sounds of chiming clocks and multi-linguistic flight announcements as accompaniment, I bemusedly scanned an Associated Press clipping regarding its independent investigation into the non-controversy that had come to be called “Climategate.”

To my never-ending amazement, skeptics remain and persist. I categorize the skeptics into two distinct, though no less irrational, categories: the science skeptics and the fiscal skeptics.

In Climategate, the science skeptics emerged with coincidental timing just as the Conference was commencing. These skeptics, despite the great weight of empirical and anecdotal evidence smacking them on the cheek, insist upon challenging the legitimacy of the thousands of international scientists submitting their findings to the IPCC and, consequently, the veracity of the science the IPCC publishes. As Mr. Richard Littlemore, editor of DeSmogBlog, commented in an interview at the Conference on 12/16/2009, most, if not all, of these science skeptics have questionable credentials, are funded by the carbon industry, and virtually none has had their science subjected to peer review as a prelude to publication (a beat DeSmogBlog has been drumming for years) (www.desmogblog.com). Yet this didn’t deter some of their yet-to-be identified acolytes
from hacking into an e-mail server at the University of East Anglia’s Climate Research Unit to abscond with and ultimately post—grossly out of context—e-mail correspondence arranged to create the impression that the decades of reviewed and corroborated climate-warming science was somehow fraudulent. The absurdity of the effort didn’t preclude the AP from pursuing its own independent inquiry. Pursuant to its investigation, the AP concluded: “The messages do not support claims that the science of global warming was faked.” (“Climate scientists didn’t fake.” Associated Press. 12/12/09). Regarding Climategate’s implication of suppression or rejection of skeptical science, one such allegedly dismissed study was later discovered to have been subsidized by the American Petroleum Institute (“Climate scientists didn’t fake.” Associated Press. 12/12/09). Finally, the Pew Center on Climate Change, chiming in on the matter, noted: “The data sets involved in discussions have been reproduced independently by other scientists and other countries and yielded similar conclusions.” (www.pewclimate.org. 12/2009). In other words, even if improprieties were discovered, it would be absurd to infer that all of the peer-vetted, subsequently published climate-warming science was invalid. The skeptics may have had more credibility when the now-well-established science corroborating climate warming was nascent; but today, this desperate attempt echoes faintly as a last gasp amid the rising seas.

The fiscal skeptics, while begrudgingly accepting of the science, question the costs of remediation. The fiscal skeptics often assail those who espouse climate change as caring more about the environment than about people…as though the two are mutually exclusive! However, according to the IPCC’s Climate Change 2007 Synthesis Report, climate change already has adversely impacted more than polar bears:
The health status of millions of people is projected to be affected through, for example, increases in malnutrition; increased deaths, diseases and injury due to extreme weather events; increased burden of diarrhoeal diseases; increased frequency of cardio-respiratory diseases due to higher concentrations of ground level ozone in urban areas related to climate change; and the altered spatial distribution of some infectious diseases. (IPCC 2007 Report, pg. 48).

Additionally, Geneva, Switzerland-based International Organization for Migration (IOM) cites the approximately 10 million Africans displaced in the past 20 years due to slow-onset climate catastrophes, such as drought-induced desertification (IOM Brief, 5/09). And for those of you who believe that such mass displacements are exclusively endemic to certain impoverished regions of the world, that these migrations couldn’t possibly happen in the developed world, consider that the 2005 Hurricane Katrina displaced approximately 1.5 million Americans (IOM Brief, 5/09). Such catastrophic climate events have costs, and these costs will far outstrip any contemporaneous outlays made to preempt them if not addressed. Moreover, the International Energy Agency asserts that the initial costs of retrofitting the planet green will be offset by “new jobs, improved lives, more secure energy supplies, and a reduced danger of climate catastrophe.” (John M. Broder. “Climate deal likely to cost trillions of dollars.” New York Times. 12/9/09. www.msnbc.msn.com. ). Conveniently, the fiscal skeptics’ models seem to include neither the costs of inaction nor the innate potential for fiscal growth in a green economy.

12/15/2009:

It was around 4:30 a.m. Copenhagen time. Rumors were circulating that the UN organizers were going to begin severely restricting NGO-delegate access to the Bella
Center (the Conference Venue). I had come too far—without my luggage—to be denied access. To my surprise, I was not the first in the queue (in Europe they refer to standing in line as standing in the “queue”). Two Chinese students and two members of the foreign press already were appropriated to their respective queues, along with some blue-vested politi (police) milling in the street between the entrance to the Bella Center and the metro terminal where the winding metallic barriers of the queue were arranged. I stood aside and listened as the students and members of the press intently debated China’s environmental policies and the merits of “carbon intensity,” a metric based on carbon emissions per unit of GDP. It was cold (I would later come to discover that I had the misfortune of making my first trip to Europe during one of their coldest spells in years; the temperature was about 5 degrees F most of the week). The clothes I had been wearing for the past two days did little to insulate against the cutting gusts. To prevent my teeth from chattering, I chewed some gum. By 5:30 a.m., three Americans and a Canadian joined us in the queue. By 6:30 a.m., I could no longer see where the queue ended.

Soon thereafter, the politi announced that a “secondary badge” was required for access, in addition to the primary badge issued at delegate registration. This was disconcerting news for those of us who had neither registered nor knew exactly what a secondary badge was. The politi explained that unaccredited delegates would be able to register, but only upon presentment of a secondary badge. Again, this was of little consolation, given that no one in the queue seemed to have the mysterious secondary badge. Even those who had been issued primary badges upon registration were out of
luck and confused. I thought that tear gas and rubber bullets were imminent as the
grousing escalated to restive stirring.

The ever variable access protocols would become the bane of the NGO-delegate’s
existence during the second week of the conference. For those fortunate few with both
primary and secondary badges, access would begin at 8:00 a.m. I had no real plan at
that point, other than to remain in the queue out of principle . . . if they wanted me to
move, they’d have to move me. Two or three bodies ahead was a hyper Belgian kid
wearing one of those goofy sheep-lined hats with the ear flaps stomping about and
talking to whomever would listen. I found him to be generally annoying for two reasons:
he seemed to have slunk his way to the front of the queue and, most irritatingly, he
seemed incongruously chipper for the times. I would soon discover why.

A mysterious, well-appointed Englishman wearing a long black coat would
approach him and pull from an interior pocket what appeared to be a stack of these
secondary badges. White and plastic and the size of an average business card, I swore
they shone an angelic gold and sounded heavenly trumpets as they were surreptitiously
passed from the Englishman to the Belgian.

The group of Americans with whom I had struck a transient friendship noticed
what I had. A deal soon followed several minutes of supplicating. The Belgian agreed to
allow us to “borrow” the secondary badges to gain access for registration, but only if we
promised to return them as he was obligated to distribute them to other members of his
NGO.

By 8:00 a.m. my brain was providing a refresher course to my frozen and weary
legs. The warmth of the Bella Center was an oasis, and once in, the registration process
proceeded efficiently. I’d find the Belgian to shake his hand and return his secondary badge as promised. Turns out he wasn’t so bad after all. Without his magnanimity, I may have made the trying journey for nothing. Later that day, I’d meet the head of our delegation for a secondary badge. Although the photo on my badge made Nick Nolte’s mug shot look like a Victorian portrait, as far as I knew I was now fully, and thankfully, accredited.

I spent most of that day meandering the Bella Center, woefully underdressed and in a daze—equal parts bleary-eyed fatigue and jaw dangling awe. Slouched in the shadow cast by a black and white, 10-foot-diameter approximation of our planet as I listened to a panel discussion on the scales of wind power, I was immediately struck by the enormity of the occasion. The Bella Center was imbued with the elbow to elbow synergetic intermingling of NGOs, press, and heads of state. The energy was urgent but, consistent with Copenhagen’s moniker for the two-week Conference, “Hopenhagen,” it was frenetically hopeful.

By 2:30 p.m., sleep deprivation dictated that I call it a day. I resolved to take in everything that I could tomorrow, then dozed on both intervals of the 15-minute commute back to Oesterport.

At 9:30 p.m., I nearly hit the ceiling. A call from the lobby woke me from a deep slumber, with a voice on the other end saying something about my luggage. I shuffled down to the lobby in a disoriented semi-consciousness only to be advised by the fellow at the desk that there was a mistake. My luggage had not arrived. Just as I was about to rotate back toward the elevator in defeat, he smiled wryly and wheeled from behind a nearby door a piece of standard black luggage distinguished only by a fluorescent-green
Yoda luggage tag . . . my luggage was here! In addition to speaking excellent English and being highly tolerant of Americans mangling the pronunciations of their towns, the Danes possess a healthy sense of humor, I learned. As quick to whistle as they are to chuckle, this hearty, sub-Celsius-bike-riding bunch were, by far, the most pleasant Europeans I encountered during my trip.

12/16/2009:

It was around 5:00 a.m. I was the first NGO delegate to enter the queue this day. Perhaps the rumors that UN organizers were no longer allowing NGO accreditation were dissuading delegates from bothering to come out.

Upon arrival, I was immediately approached by a politi and asked if I possessed both the primary and secondary badges required for access. To this, I rather proudly responded in the affirmative, as procuring these credentials was no easy feat. After visual inspection of my badges, the politi looked me up and down before informing me that “it is freezing.” Of this, I was keenly aware, responding, “yes, I know.”

He then inquired if I “had anything warm to wear.” Evidently, I did not appear sufficiently bundled, but I assured him that the long underwear was doing the trick. Less than five minutes later he was pouring me a cup of coffee, forewarning that as “police coffee,” it wasn’t very good but that it was hot.

The plastic cup collapsed slightly inward as it was filled; the steam rising into the dark morning. By the time it reached my lips, the coffee was on the margins of luke-warm. The politi had been criticized throughout the Conference as being heavy-handed. As the messengers of the UN’s variable access protocols, they were often placed in
untenable situations. Given the circumstances, the politi were as courteous as could have been expected. (One even began whistling “let it snow.”) The playful whistles of that morning soon would be juxtaposed against a surging demonstration outside the venue, which would yield 126 arrests later that day.

I was the first NGO-delegate to enter the Center. I carefully plotted the events I would attend, hoping to squeeze as much in as I could: I checked off Senator John Kerry’s speech to be given at 1:15 p.m. in the Hans Christian Andersen Room. The programme confirmed that there would be no more NGO accreditation, and that NGO access would be severely restricted to 1,000 delegates on Thursday and whittled to only 90 by Friday as high-level heads of state began to arrive.

Unable to fall back asleep after retrieving my luggage, I decided to go for a run on the treadmill in the hotel’s fitness room. Watching CNN’s coverage, the prospects of an accord on even the most marginal issues seemed grim. The Africans were threatening a walk-out. The Chinese were soberly predicting a complete collapse of negotiations. The developed world was accusing the Group of 77, a coalition of the developing world, of employing procedural ploys to bog down the negotiations. The tumult inside the Bella Center appeared to be reaching a “tipping point.”

There are three intermingled tenets of climate change remediation: Mitigation, Adaptation, and Transfer of technology (for applications to mitigation and adaptation). Mitigation refers to the mechanisms by which governments may cut carbon emissions, including energy-efficiency measures, establishment of a carbon-emission market, and the subsidization and implementation of renewable sources of energy. Recognizing the
currently entrenched manifestations of climate change, adaptation refers to a society’s ability to adapt to climate change. Adaptation practices include the creation and preservation of natural ecosystems that act as buffers to flood and as sinks for carbon, dam building, rainwater harvesting, and population migration. Because carbon has a shelf life of approximately 100 years, these remediation principles are inextricably correlated.

The IPCC 2007 Synthesis Report notes:

Unmitigated climate change would, in the long term, be likely [emphasis theirs] to exceed the capacity of natural, managed, and human systems to adapt. Reliance on adaptation alone could eventually lead to a magnitude of climate change to which effective adaptation is not possible, or will only be available at very high social, environmental, and economic costs. (IPCC 2007 Report, pg. 65).

In other words, by adapting to climate change, we can buy ourselves time until carbon life cycles run their course and greenhouse gases dissipate to stabilized levels. However, adaptation without mitigation will create an adverse environment that exceeds our ability to adapt, leading to what many call “the tipping point” . . . or point of no return.

Transfer of technology is correlated to both mitigation and adaptation because, to put it plainly, comprehensive and effective climate change remediation will not be possible without the developing world. Inequitably, it is the countries with the smallest GDP’s and the most pervading poverty that are the most susceptible to, yet the least responsible for, the manifestations of climate change in large part due to a dearth of the financial resources necessary to engage the consequences of 150 years of unfettered carbon emissions not their own (International Energy Agency 2009 Report. “Carbon Dioxide Emissions from Fuel Combustion”). As evidenced by the widely accepted principle of “the polluter pays,” the international community has long acknowledged that
the developed world is primarily responsible for the current levels of greenhouse gases as a result of its industrial-age activities. However, it is also well established that, because of the very fiscal dynamics that render the developing world the most susceptible to the adverse affects of climate change, the majority of new emissions will emanate from the developing world. Coal, for example, is an abundant and consequently cheap source of energy for many of these countries. Senator John Kerry addressed the dilemma that is often neatly expressed in the euphemism “shared but differentiated responsibilities,” in his COP 15 speech on 12/16/09:

*Industrial Pollution did not begin in the developing world . . . there is no excuse for America not to act when we account for just 5% of the world’s population but 20% of its emissions. By the very same token, when 97% of new emissions over the next two decades will come from the developing world, that is more than an “inconvenient truth” in our larger struggle . . . it is a core issue.*

The “core issue” to which Senator Kerry refers is essentially the question of “Who pays?” (and by extension “How much?”) Converging at the nexus of this fundamental question are the intractable arguments of the developed and the developing worlds.

Distilled to their cores, the respective arguments are as follows: the developing world argues that the developed world evolved into the developed world by polluting with impunity for the past 150 years and that, consistent with the precept of “the polluter pays,” should bear the burden of remediation. The developing world sees a fundamental inequity in being asked to cap its emissions as it is developing. The developed world, though acknowledging its responsibility, argues that the preponderance of future emissions will be derived from the developing world. Accordingly, the developed world views this as a global issue that can only be remedied on a global scale, and that it is counterintuitive to make economic sacrifices in the form of cuts in emissions if the developing world is permitted to continue to emit.

12/19/2009:
Most were immersed in a heightened state of irritability. Some were surly; some belligerent. The men in uniform hovering on the periphery of the queue were besieged with anxious questions to which they could only offer vapid, scripted responses over the unintelligible static of their walkie-talkies. Scrolling through pictures of the ships docked in front of the pastel houses lining lovely Nyhavn Canal, I found refuge from the cacophony around me and wondered if that beautiful piece of the planet would be there in another 100 years. The last I had heard, President Obama was characterizing some kind of accord as “unprecedented.” I surveyed the winding queue with a bemused grin; this was downright luxurious compared to the queues earlier in the week. I was summoned forward. Approaching United Air’s counter at O’Hare International Airport, I knew the news wouldn’t be good. “Two feet of snow in Philly,” he advised. “The earliest flight out is Monday at 10:40 a.m.” With that, my trip was extended another 36 hours.

The results of the 2009 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Conference of the Parties 15, can best be gauged against three questions: What did we need? What did we get? And, what does it mean?

Going into the convention, the general consensus was that for the Conference to be deemed a success, it would have needed to produce an accord binding industrial nations to emission targets that would limit global temperature increases to no more than 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

What emerged was a rather tepid twelve-paragraph text subsequently called The Copenhagen Accord, which, while acknowledging climate change as “one of the greatest challenges of our time (par. 1, Draft Decision CP-15),” produced no substantive
measures. Pursuant to the Accord, all countries pledged to submit their respective plans for curbing emissions by 1/31/2010 (par.4, Draft Decision CP-15). Additionally, the developed world committed to $100 billion in mitigation/adaptation aid to the developing world by 2020 (par.8, Draft Decision CP-15). Essentially, this agreement amounted to no more than an agreement to meet again to compare notes at COP 16 in Mexico City.

Aside from the absence of binding cuts, the most acute failure of the Conference may have been that it did not produce a framework for proving substantive incentives to developing nations to stop their slash and burn policies toward indigenous rainforests, a major carbon source when cleared and a major carbon sink when left to stand. Perhaps most disconcerting of all is the philosophy of delay perpetuated by this conference. The parties to the conference stipulated to drop from the final draft an end-of-2010 deadline for reaching a binding agreement on carbon cuts (“New Copenhagen climate draft drops treaty deadline.” Reuters. 12/18/09).

So what does all of this mean? It means that, once again, the world’s leaders have decided—for all of us—that this problem can wait until next year. The anti-climactic culmination of the Conference represents both human impotence and irrationality. Presupposing that there are no innate fiscal benefits in a “Green World,” and that the costs associated with tomorrow’s catastrophic weather events aren’t worth addressing today, the idea that climate change remediation is cost prohibitive seems awfully counterintuitive. To paraphrase a Cree Indian proverb, only after we destroy everything, will we realize that we can’t eat money. Should cost really be the primary consideration given that the viability of the planet hangs in the balance? Are we really that far from fighting wars over natural resources such as water? A TIME Magazine article
documenting the disquietingly rapid rate of melting Himalayan glaciers cites a report from international consulting group McKinsey & Co. extrapolating a 40% worldwide water deficiency by 2030 (Bryan Walsh. “A River Ran Through It.” TIME. 12/14/2009). The author goes on to note that the regions predicted to become the most arid, also happen to encompass Pakistan and India. Nuclear armed nations that have fought intermittently over arbitrarily shifting boundary lines surely wouldn’t hesitate to mobilize for water (Bryan Walsh. “A River Ran Through It.” TIME. 12/14/2009). If the world’s leaders continue to forestall in subjugation to money, the result will be the greatest crime perpetuated in the history of civilization; and if we don’t insist upon more from those who profess to lead, then we all will be complicit in our own extinction.