

U.S. and Canadian elections, and climate change petition offer chance for positive action

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Initially it looked good in Bali with a near-consensus agreement on a delicate framework of 2020 targets for rich countries, in return for which China and the developing world would do their part over time.

By now, every Canadian knows that our environment minister, John Baird, with instructions from Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, used wrecking tactics to prevent new international agreements up until the very last moment. These tactics are common for the United States, which holds out until everyone is so exhausted that they can barely think, break out in tears and give in to the seriously weakened language. In Canada, however, we are not accustomed to this behaviour.

The official Canadian delegation disregarded international efforts in which we have long played an important role before Harper's Conservatives began leading a minority government in Canada. Canada has a strong international reputation for diplomacy and fair-mindedness. In fact, European Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas, lead negotiator for European countries at the conference, said, "Canada is perhaps a unique case in the international community . . . It's a country that always delivers, that respects its international obligations . . ."

So where is that country now? And what can we as Canadians do about it?

In the end, two agreements were reached at Bali after a worldwide crisis call to citizens to turn the situation around. Many Salt Spring Islanders participated in this turnaround and know how it feels when your country lets you down in a major way. Remember how differently we felt when Canada made the decision to not join the war against Iraq? I sure didn't feel that way last weekend!

Although we did achieve two agreements, the first agreement was considerably weakened out of pressure from the U.S. and only states that "deep cuts" to GHG emissions will be necessary to respond to the global-warming crisis. Specific targets, which are required for the world to actually reduce GHG emissions, were not included in the agreement, which is now left for negotiations over the next two years. Our work is cut out for us to make sure we get strong target-based agreements.

A second agreement was later reached with the 38 wealthy countries that have ratified the Kyoto accord, which set targets for deep cuts in emissions. The United States was not present in these deliberations because they have not signed the Kyoto protocol.

Hilary Benn, Britain's environment secretary, said: "There are now six billion of us on this small and fragile planet. There will be nine billion of us in less than 40 years' time. What are we going to do when people start fighting, not about politics but about water? What will we do when people start arriving on our shores fleeing not political persecution but environmental catastrophe?"

He went on to say that although the answers are not clear, that he sees the political solution that will follow on from Bali is ". . . the best and only hope we have for the future of mankind."

Where is the room for optimism when the country that generates about 14 per cent of the world's GHG emissions (and the figure is rising fast) refuses to commit to reductions?

And yet, there is lots of room for optimism. At a recent meeting in Seattle, over 700 mayors signed an agreement aiming to meet or beat the Kyoto targets of 2012. They want to reduce their cities' GHG emissions by 80 per cent by 2050 and want national support in accomplishing this. And an election is coming up.

Canada, too, will imminently be holding a federal election and many Canadians are poised to hold our minority government to account. In addition, our local governments across the country are making highly significant decisions around supporting public transit, designing cities, towns and villages around pedestrians and cyclists, establishing energy efficiency targets for new and existing homes and providing more locally grown organic food.

On December 8, 86 countries participated in an International Climate Change Action Day to tie in to the gathering of world leaders at the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change meeting in Bali.

To the theme of Think Globally, Act Locally, Salt Spring held a Salt Spring Musicians for Climate Change Action Day drop-in free concert. We listened to talented musicians sharing their music with the community and speaking out about climate change. We also launched a climate change petition to the Islands Trust and CRD, urging them in

the strongest language possible to ensure that our OCP, related bylaws and recommendations to other agencies demonstrate strong measures to address climate change.

Have you signed the Climate Change Action Petition to the Islands Trust and CRD? Are you aware of the many positive proposed policy recommendations on energy conservation and climate change mitigation and adaptation in the OCP? Check them out on the Islands Trust website. Are you planning to use public transit when it is launched on January 7?

Taking personal action is the key. Action flows from knowing and acknowledging that we can create a better future for our children and grandchildren.

You can find the petition at Salt Spring Books, I-SEA, Apple Photo and Island Star Video. Call me at 537-4567 for more info and if you want to help.

The writer is highly involved in local and global issues.