



Beyond Copenhagen

Ian Lowe returns from the UN Climate Change Conference.

The Copenhagen climate change conference was a significant step forward. More than 100 world leaders agreed that urgent concerted action is needed to slow climate change.

For the first time, all the major greenhouse gas emitters have agreed to be part of a global accord to tackle the problem. That includes the USA, which never ratified the Kyoto Protocol, and the large developing countries that had no obligations under that agreement, such as China, India, Brazil and South Africa.

The Accord still needs to be turned into a treaty with legal force. There is a clear timetable for that to happen by next year's meeting in Mexico.

To slow down climate change, two elements are necessary. There must be commitment by major developing nations to rein in the anticipated growth of their pollution. The equally important component is that developed nations – including Australia – have to put forward serious plans for the scale of emissions cuts needed – toward 40% by 2020.

As US President Obama said on the last night of the conference, the targets being put forward today are not sufficient. The science demands more aggressive action.

Kevin Rudd has to stand up to the big polluters and set serious emission reduction targets to go well beyond the proposals in the watered-down Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme. The CPRS was still too demanding for the Opposition and brought the denial faction to power in the Coalition, so the government has a real political challenge.

But the 2007 Bali Road Map called on us to reduce emissions by at least 25%. The latest science says we should go further. There is no economic or social reason to delay.

The good news is that technical studies presented at Copenhagen for the UK, Denmark and Europe as a whole all came to similar conclusions. Developed countries can halve their energy use in the next 20 years with no loss of material living standards. The reduced energy demand can be supplied entirely by a mix of renewable energy technologies. A Stanford University study found that world demand in 2030 could be powered entirely by renewable energy.

We need governments to stand up to the coal industry and those peddling nuclear power. The old approaches have no role in the clean energy future. The

government must produce measures to effect real change in Australia.

Skepticism is an honourable tradition within science. I have been a member of Australian Skeptics for many years and have published in their journal.

But skepticism turns into denial when there is no longer an intellectually respectable case for disagreeing with mainstream science. Those who are in denial characteristically change their explanations as often as they need to maintain their pre-determined position. This seriously stretches the idea of what is respectable science.

If your local GP said that you might have cancer, it would be sensible to seek an opinion from a specialist in the field of oncology. Even if one expert confirmed the diagnosis, you would probably seek a second opinion. It would be sensible to consult another specialist before consenting to surgery or other life-changing treatments. That is a legitimate sceptical response.

If several of the best oncologists agreed that you had a serious but operable cancer, it would be perverse to shop around the fringe medicine community until you found a quack who would tell you just to drink pomegranate juice and put your head out the window on a moonlit night. That would be denial.

When almost all of the best climate scientists in the world agree that human action is changing the global climate and threatening our future, it is just perverse to shop around for a semi-retired geologist or a minor British politician with a dubious reputation who will assure you that the scientists have got it wrong and there is nothing to worry about.

At the end of 2009, that was the stance of the Coalition in the national parliament.

I know the ABC had its B team on duty during January, but it was still a shock to hear a reporter solemnly say that Melbourne was sweltering with the *barometer* in the thirties!

Ian Lowe is Emeritus Professor of science, technology and society at Griffith University.