

3 Questions: Henry Jacoby on Copenhagen

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The co-director of MIT's Global Change program discusses what to expect from the U.N. Climate Change Conference, and the effects of 'Climategate.'

Delegates from around the world began meeting this week in Copenhagen to try to work out a new U.N. pact to address global climate change. Henry Jacoby, co-director of the MIT Joint Program on the Science and Policy of Global Change and professor of management at the Sloan School of Management, talks about what to watch for at the December 7-18 conference, and what the repercussions may be from the recent release of hacked e-mails and other documents from the University of East Anglia relating to climate-change research. Climate-change skeptics have dubbed the affair “Climategate” and say the

materials show a scientific conspiracy to exaggerate the risks of climate change. Many in the scientific community, however, say the release of documents represents a smear campaign.

Q. Expectations about the Copenhagen climate meeting seem to have been on a roller-coaster ride. What is your sense at this point of what will come of this meeting?

A. The original objective and expectation, back when the negotiating text for this meeting was agreed in Bali, was that they would have some kind of binding commitments by developed countries, some agreement to actions by developing countries, and agreement on financial transfers. That's what they were supposed to do. We aren't going to be able to do that, for a couple of reasons.

First, one of the key facilitating developments to have that happen would be for U.S. Congress to have taken action, and to have put something in the hands of the Obama administration that would allow them to take greater leadership in this area. That's not going to happen.

The other thing is that it's just extremely complicated — the number of issues, and the intersection of coalitions and interest groups, make this a difficult task. It's nobody's fault, but that's how it is. They're not going to be able to resolve a lot of these issues at this time. The hope is there might be some things they can agree on around the edges that will be progress — there may be some progress on monitoring and verification, on financial issues, maybe something on forests.

The main thing they will need to do is not have the whole thing blow up in frustration and anger, and to come out with a clear roadmap for what is next in the negotiations, because this is going to go right on. It's going to take a long time, and this is just one step in a long process.

Q. How serious are the revelations in the so-called “Climategate” release of e-mails, and what effect do you think that may have on Copenhagen or on other attempts to deal with climate-change issues?

A. There are several ways of thinking about that. Is it a serious challenge to the science of this issue? The answer is no. This is kind of a peek under the blanket of a discussion that went on 10 years ago, about the analysis of tree rings and other data, to try to reconstruct temperature histories over the last thousand years. The work led to the conclusion that the current temperature rise over the last 50 years is both unique in its pace, and has produced temperatures higher than we’ve seen in the last thousand years.

There has been a lot of analysis of that issue since, by other groups, reaching similar conclusions. Also, the basis of our work, as we develop our impression of the risk, does not depend on that data. It depends on much more firm temperature information from the last 150 years. So in terms of its effect on the science, I don’t believe it’s serious.

It is unfortunate, however, that this has an effect on politics in the U.S. It makes it appear that there’s some conspiracy of scientists here. Scientists talk to each other in informal ways. A lot of words they use appear different in public than what they were intended to be. And to some degree this email file is being purposefully misinterpreted, creating an impression that’s really unfortunate. But it is true that these scientists should have been more careful — they didn’t understand, I think, when they were doing this original work, how important this would be in the political discussion. It provides ammunition to people who argue climate is not a problem, and confuses the public. How serious that is, I don’t know.

In terms of its effect on Copenhagen and the rest of the world, I don’t think it will have any effect at all. This is U.S. domestic politics. It’s a

scandal in Britain, but I don't think this is going to change the view in Britain or the rest of Europe about this issue. It's in the U.S. that you have, let's say, a loud voice of contrarians on this issue.

Q. How urgent is the need for action on [climate change](#), in your view? That is, if the world fails to adopt specific, binding targets for reduction of greenhouse gases at this meeting, how serious could the consequences of that be?

A. This is a century-scale problem, so it's not exactly a matter of what you do this year. But we've been at this for 20 years, and we haven't done very much yet. What's important is to get started. We have a lot to learn about the costs of mitigation, and we have to learn even more about the climate system, but waiting to find out before taking action can be costly.

We need to do something to reduce the impact of human activities over a timescale of many decades, but the decades are going by. It's not crucial what we do in 2009 or 2010, but it's quite important that we get started on some serious measures to decrease emissions, and create the international structure, and domestic policies, to have some chance for sustained action over many decades. It's just a matter of lifting one foot to take the first step now. Long-term targets, say for specific reductions by 2050, have their purpose in terms of motivating people. But the main thing is we've got to agree to do something in the short run, on critical issues like what the United States is going to do, and what the relationship is going to be between the developing and developed countries. So achievements this year or next year are not crucial, but failing to get the process on track would be very serious.

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