The End of the Third World

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CLIVE HAMILTON, MAR 29 2010

The tectonic plates of global politics shifted at the 15th Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC in Copenhagen last December, and it was tiny Tuvalu that exposed the rift. Third World solidarity—indeed, the idea of the Third World itself—dates from the Bandung conference in 1955, a meeting of Asian and African nations aimed at resisting colonialism and neo-colonialism.

In the world of UN negotiations, the Third World came together as a bloc in 1964 when, at an UNCTAD conference, it formed the "Group of 77" to represent the interests of developing nations. Since the early 1990s, at every climate conference the Group of 77—or more usually "G77 plus China"—has defended the innocence of developing countries and pressured rich countries to cut their greenhouse gas emissions.

G77 has always been an awkward alliance, especially in climate negotiations where it seeks to represent nations mired in poverty with those industrializing rapidly (with rising emissions), and nations rich in oil with those dependent on imports. At times, the G77 has been led by oil-exporting nations, like Saudi Arabia, whose objective has been not so much to defend the interests of the South threatened by global warming but to protect oil revenues by undermining any agreement to cut emissions.

At the plenary session on Wednesday 9th December Tuvalu finally broke the veneer of solidarity with an intervention over a procedural issue. Speaking for the most vulnerable countries—the small island states and the mainly African least-developed countries—Tuvalu called for the creation of a "contact group" to discuss a "Copenhagen Protocol" that would require large developing country emitters to take on legally binding emission reductions.

The move was blocked on the floor of the plenary by China, India and Saudi Arabia, the developing nations that would be most affected by a new protocol that mandated emission reductions from major developing country emitters as well as rich countries. But Tuvalu would not be cowed and, in a tactic that shocked the conference, moved that proceedings be suspended.

The intransigence of the big developing countries had come up against the desperation of the least developed nations. The stridency of the weak is new to international climate talks, but when the leaders of Tuvalu, the Maldives, and vulnerable African nations declared that Copenhagen would be the last chance for the world to head off the unthinkable they were not posturing.

Morally, there is a world of difference between calls by the United States for China, India and the like to take on binding emission cuts and calls for the same from Tuvalu, the Maldives and Bangladesh. China is now caught in a pincer, but one of its own making, because with economic power comes responsibility. China was a significant player at Bandung, but in recent years it has begun to look more and more like a colonial power, especially in Africa with its huge investments in resources. The ditching of communism and the vigorous pursuit of capitalist growth has made it easier for the Chinese Government to abandon its policy of defending the interests of poor countries.

If Tuvalu, with the population of a small Australian suburb, is at the sharp point of the fracturing of one of the three blocs that defined post-war geo-politics, the man who precipitated it is an unassuming Australian. Ian Fry has for a decade been Tuvalu's lead negotiator. It was Fry who refused to bow to the Chinese juggernaut and called for the

conference to be suspended. It was an act that required a deep knowledge of how these conferences work, a measure of courage and a steely determination not to let the moment pass. He put it very simply: “Tuvalu is one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to climate change, and our future rests on the outcome of this meeting.” The stand earned him an ovation.

For half a century, the Third World remained united in the face of a common threat, the influence of the United States and, to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union. But for least developed countries a greater enemy has now emerged, the threat to their survival posed by global warming, and they are no longer willing to subsume their demand that all the world’s polluters curb their activities beneath the imperative of maintaining the appearance of G77 unity.

They know that the US and China are locked in a struggle in which one will not move without the other, a struggle that is an environmental version of the mutually assured destruction of the Cold War era. Except that it will be the small island states and the least-developed nations that will be destroyed first.

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