

# William Marsden's book Fools Rule: About the politics of climate change

BY WILLIAM MARSDEN, EXCERPTED FROM FOOLS RULE: REPRODUCED BY ARRANGEMENT WITH KNOFF CANADA. OCTOBER 22, 2011



Heads in the sand: Members of the Sierra Club demonstrate on a beach in Cancún in December 2010. The next United Nations Climate Change Conference takes place in Durban, South Africa, Nov. 28 - Dec. 9.

**Photograph by:** Ronaldo Schemidt, AFP/Getty Images file photo

William Marsden's new book takes us to United Nations climate talks in Copenhagen and Cancún, and on expeditions to Canada's Arctic. Here is an excerpt from Fools Rule: Inside the Failed Politics of Climate Change:

The journey to Cancún began six months earlier in Bonn, Germany, home to the UNFCCC and a half-dozen other UN environmental agencies. It was here that delegates met for the first time since Copenhagen to begin repairing the wreckage and getting the talks back on track. At least that was the stated desire. Given the jagged pattern of advance and retreat as the game plays out, it's impossible to know the true intentions of each one of the 192 countries involved in the negotiations.

In Bonn, the charged atmosphere of Copenhagen had melted away, leaving behind exhaustion and confusion. Delegates arrived still wrapped in the fog of forgotten purpose. "The confusion is, where is this going in the end?" a senior European Union delegate told me. "Is this leading to a treaty, and what does it look like? What about the Kyoto Protocol? What is happening in the United States? I think what you see is that there is a big realization that very little has happened in terms of shifting positions of

countries since Copenhagen. Positions haven't changed. It is funny, because you still hear on the floor people saying, 'Oh yeah, a legally binding agreement.' Then at the same time you also hear people saying in bilateral discussions, 'It's not going to happen.'"

A year earlier the narrative had been the epic march to Copenhagen, where world leaders would finally construct the deal that would rally the world around a single global treaty powerful enough to steer us clear of the risks posed by man-made climate change. For whatever reason – chronic distrust, arrogance, selfishness – that story became a tragicomedy. The political failure of Copenhagen put the entire multilateral process on trial. For this reason the Cancún meeting was pivotal. Without substantial progress, the nascent carbon markets would collapse. The cure for a global ailment would then fall to individual countries, cities and regions, whose success would be uneven at best. Meanwhile, with each new day, the climate picture worsened on all fronts. Time was running out.

Signals coming from the United States House and Senate were increasingly negative, confirming the Copenhagen warnings of Senator James Mountain (Jim) Inhofe that America would never sign a climate treaty. Too many American lawmakers appeared almost giddy with delight at the failure of Copenhagen.

For many developing and poor countries, the problem is American intransigence. The United States is their main target and the Americans won't budge. "It's that sort of debate in which the U.S. is saying, 'We will comply the way we decide to comply. We will do whatever we decide to do whichever way we decide to do it,'" a vice-chairman of the Kyoto Protocol working group said.

I asked him in Bonn what would happen if America was taken out of the equation – if America was simply expelled from the talks.

"Then the whole thing would be much easier, of course. Then you wouldn't even need two tracks, given that the Americans are not part of Kyoto."

As talks continued in Bonn and then moved to Tianjin, China, and finally to Cancún, the topic of the United States and what the talks would be like without the U.S.A. at the table was openly discussed in the corridors. The belief was that the Americans, knowing they could never get a climate change treaty through the Senate, were too constricted by domestic politics to negotiate anything more than the lowest common denominator; in a consensus process, they were leading everyone in a race to the bottom. The hallway strategy was that if the Americans were isolated, they would come back to the table with more agreeable proposals.

The United States, however, had gone to ground. Gone was the exceptional bravado of 2009, when Todd Stern and Hillary Clinton had wagged their fingers at everyone and blamed China for Copenhagen's failure – an attack strategy that proved remarkably successful. That game plan, however, would work only once. Faith in the United States' ability to back up its words with domestic legislation had been lost. So the Americans turned silent and invisible. In the run-up to Cancún, Stern was nowhere to be seen and his second, Jonathan Pershing, was mute. It was hard if not impossible to take aim at them when nobody could find them. Behind the scenes, the United States worked closely

with the Mexicans to make Cancún the conference of the unambitious.

But the United States was not the only hurdle. Its fellow members of the so-called “Umbrella Group” – Australia, Canada, Iceland, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, the Russian Federation and Ukraine – were equally stubborn in their lack of commitment to significant GHG reductions. In all cases their stated priority was maintaining strong economic growth. Their foot-dragging was no doubt anchored in the belief that they are among the countries where climate change will have the least-negative effects, although that is strictly relative.

The peer-reviewed Climate Vulnerability Monitor 2010 (<http://daraint.org/>), released just prior to Cancún, reinforced this belief. The monitor rates a country's vulnerability to the four main impacts of climate change: health, weather, habitation and the economy. The vulnerability rating ranges from low, which is graphically represented by a small green dot, to acute, a large blood-red dot. Moderate to severe vulnerabilities are shaded in various hues of yellow.

Pages devoted to African countries are blood-red. The same is true of most of Asia. Pages devoted to Europe, Australia, New Zealand and North America run green and light yellow, indicating moderate to low negative impacts. Australia may suffer increased drought – already a problem – and a degree of habitat loss, but the dots never turn red and negative impacts won't upset its economy until after 2030. There is a similar prognosis for Canada, Norway, New Zealand, Japan and Ukraine. Of the Umbrella Group, only the United States is headed into blood-red territory. The study projects it will suffer acute habitat loss after 2030. Low-lying states such as Florida, Georgia and the Carolinas will be flooded, as will their coastal communities. Desertification will spread in the West.

In other words, at least until 2030, these umbrella countries may be inconvenienced by climate change to various degrees, but they believe their wealth will allow them to adapt to the changes in order to reduce their impact. In contrast, almost all of Africa, most of Asia and the Asia-Pacific region, as well as all small island states will suffer dramatic consequences. These countries have neither the financial muscle nor the technology to deal with the impacts of climate change, and by 2030 large areas will begin to become unlivable. About thirty to forty states of the United Nations will disappear. This picture, however, does not move the Umbrella Group. Faced with a danger that appears remote, it is easy to be complacent.

Canada, in particular, speaks of climate change as if it's a good thing – bringing it longer growing seasons and opening its northern regions to agriculture and resource exploitation. Going into Cancún, Canada won the temperature rise jackpot. The World Meteorological Organization said that over the past few years the country had experienced the highest jump in temperatures – on average three degrees Celsius – in the world. Mean temperature rises of three degrees Celsius or more above normal were found throughout the eastern Canadian Arctic and subarctic. “Temperatures averaged over Canada have been the highest on record,” the WMO stated.

Canada did not bother to send an official climate ambassador to Bonn after its chief negotiator, Michael Martin, was promoted to deputy secretary to the cabinet. Not until early autumn did Canada appoint his replacement. The country also refused to donate money to the Copenhagen Accord fast-track financing

to help poor and vulnerable nations adapt to climate change. It said it would only loan money to the fund.

Meanwhile, Canada's diplomatic efforts on climate change were geared primarily to lobbying foreign governments not to impose environmental barriers that would hurt Canada's tar sands exports. These included joining an attempt – unsuccessful – to kill California's low-carbon fuel standard and to repeal U.S. restrictions on the use of dirty fuels by the U.S. military and other government agencies. Canada also campaigned – again unsuccessfully – against Europe's Fuel Quality Directive, which is designed to reduce emissions by promoting the burning of cleaner fuels and thereby help the continent reach its 20 percent reduction goal by 2020.

Then, one month before the Cancún negotiations, Prime Minister Stephen Harper allowed an unelected Senate to kill a private member's climate change bill that had been approved by Canada's House of Commons on its third reading. The bill would have required Canada to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to at least 25 percent below 1990 levels by 2020, and set a 2050 target of 80 percent. In other words, it required that Canada shape its legislation according to the science of climate change. The voice of the people had spoken. The voice of the appointed Conservative senators silenced it.

Canada, like Australia, had become delusional. Its path to this psychiatric disorder was particularly tragic because its vision had once been lucid.

In April 1990, Canada's Parliament held a series of hearings into climate change during which prominent scientists and senior civil servants testified about the dangers of inaction. Dr. Digby McLaren, a geologist and former director of the Canadian Geological Survey as well as president of the Royal Society of Canada and co-author of *Planet Under Stress: The Challenge of Global Change*, argued that mankind had become so powerful a biological force that it was destabilizing the planet. He told politicians that human activity was compromising the earth's life-support system. "Such behavior surely implies an incapacity to recognize that we live inside a sealed room with limited air and limited resources." Many other scientists, economists and technical experts discussed related issues, such as sustainable development. They testified, for instance, that it would be easy to reduce Canada's emissions by 20 percent of 1990 levels by 2005 and still maintain a robust economy, as one of the government's own studies had already demonstrated. The debate ultimately questioned the too-often unquestioned belief that the absence of economic growth means collapse. The fact that this discussion occurred at all and in a parliamentary forum was truly historical. It demonstrated a political will to address the pressing issue of global pollution and climate change. Out of these discussions, Canada and its provinces began not only to develop new environmental policies but also to contemplate new ways of managing its economy.

In the background, however, was the emergence of the oil sands development into a dominant economic force and the beginning of an equally powerful and fiercely uncompromising political constituency designed to protect its growth. Within ten years this constituency ruled Alberta politics. It soon took control of the federal Progressive Conservative Party, changing its name to simply the Conservative Party. Within sixteen years it had seized power in Ottawa and controlled Canadian

politics. It had all the hallmarks of far-right conservatism. But its Conservative Party affiliation was a mere convenience. In the end, it was simply the politics of the oil sands. By Cancún, any hope of a new, cleaner world had long since vanished from the Canadian political landscape. Canada had entered an age of denial.

U.S. ambassador David Jacobson spotted it in a meeting he had on November 5, 2009, with Canada's then environment minister, Jim Prentice. In a subsequent cable to Washington, Jacobson appeared to make fun of Prentice, intimating that he was delusional. He noted that Prentice expressed surprise at the international opposition to the oil sands, admitting that his government "failed to grasp the magnitude of the situation." Prentice then talked about his "love for the outdoors" and how he considered himself "conservationist minded."

As Cancún approached, the oil sands' political constituency was international. The sands had become an integral part of U.S. energy policy in the short and long term. British, French, Italian, Chinese and Norwegian oil companies had invested or were investing billions of dollars in the sands. Canada had like-minded allies.

The same national and international political base had emerged to support Australian coal. Despite increasing homeland evidence of catastrophic climate change, Australian politics remained in a state of denial. Four months before Cancún, a Royal Commission in the state of Victoria issued a report on the bushfires that on February 7, 2009, had caused "one of Australia's worst natural disasters." For the first time on record, temperatures in Melbourne had been above 43 degrees Celsius for three consecutive days, peaking at 46.4 degrees. More than three hundred grass and forest fires broke out across the state. Fanned by a fierce windstorm, they destroyed whole communities and killed 173 people, many of whom died trying to save their homes. The commission estimated the final damage at about AU\$4 billion. The report warned that Australians should expect more such events. "It would be a mistake to treat Black Saturday (when four hundred bushfires were recorded) as a 'one-off' event. With populations at the rural-urban interface growing and the impact of climate change, the risks associated with bushfire are likely to increase."

Once again, Australia's government took no action. Its emissions had increased 31.4 percent over 1990 levels by 2008 – well above its Kyoto commitment of an 8 percent increase. Its Copenhagen Accord 2020 target, which is not binding, was a meager 5 percent reduction on 2000 levels, with a promise to increase its reductions to as much as 25 percent if other nations made equivalent commitments. "The world is acting on climate change, with over thirty countries including the major nations of the European Union and Japan operating or implementing emissions trading schemes like Australia's Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme," Senator Penny Wong said when the country announced its target in January 2010. Her words were pure fantasy. The proposed reduction scheme has never been implemented. (Neither has Japan's.) In other words, Australia had no plan to reduce its emissions. Happy that its role as spokesperson for the Umbrella Group lent it a major voice in international climate talks, Australia remained obsessed with expanding coal exports to China. Australian coal would continue to help drive the engines of China's export economy, which is primarily responsible for the accelerating growth in global greenhouse gases.

Australia soon paid the price for its conceit.

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**FOOLS RULE BOOK LAUNCH:** Author William Marsden will be at Paragraphe Books, 2220 McGill College Ave., Nov. 2 at 5 p.m.

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