

Asinus Muses

Hope → Nope

One year ago Asinus predicted that 2009 would be the geopolitical year of the carrot: with Obama at the helm, I suggested, the stick would diminish in relative importance in diplomatic circles. This prediction was not itself refuted by events. Less robust has been the optimistic corollary that it would usher in a new age of international cooperation. This hope did, indeed, receive a decisive kicking in Copenhagen.

That's right: Hopenhagen ended as Nopenhagen. It started badly: reports of a draft agreement known as the 'Danish text', allegedly drawn up in secret by an exclusive group of developed countries, drew condemnation from NGOs who declared it a conspiracy of the rich. From bad to worse: the involvement of China did not save a later document from denunciation by the Sudanese Ambassador to the G-77, Lumumba Stanislaus Di-Aping, as 'a solution based on the very same values, in our opinion, that channelled six million people in Europe into furnaces'. This opinion was denounced in its turn by Sweden's chief negotiator, Anders Turesson, as 'absolutely despicable'. From worse to *keine wurst*: after two weeks of denunciation and rejection, no agreement was signed, no commitments made.

Treaties and Tongue Twisters

Instead of an actual agreement, the collective resolved to 'take note' of a non-binding 'accord'. Regular readers of Asinus will recall that the device to 'take note' was used last year to defuse a fight between China and France, and is a curious form of acknowledgement that does not imply endorsement. Thus I suppose I may 'take note' of the fact that a robber has entered my house without thereby offering my acquiescence.

This is one of several linguistic conundrums thrown up by the conference. For instance, can a document correctly be called an 'accord' when most of those involved have not actually agreed to, i.e. declared themselves in accordance with, said document?

In a further challenge to Asinus's understanding of the English language President Obama declared that the accord was 'a meaningful and unprecedented breakthrough—for the first time in history, all the major economies have come together to take action.' Asinus is struggling with two questions: is 'meaningful' consistent with inconsequential, and is 'to come together to take action' consistent with not, in fact, taking action? Asinus now understands why diplomats are required to have excellent language skills.

Wind, Gas and Hot Air

With Middle Eastern music playing in the background, Arabic script on a black screen melts into English: *Go back to sleep, America. The oil crisis is over.* Pause. An inimitable Texas drawl declares: "I don't think so!" Yes, T Boone Pickens is back on the offensive with a new TV advert. Having seen his wind plans drift away his current weapon of choice is natural gas, newly abundant in the US owing to recent technological advances, and a potential alternative to oil in domestic transportation. His primary motivation, he claims, is to reduce oil imports from the Middle East. His advert continues: 'Our economy is bleeding billions for foreign oil.' Other observers might have rephrased this as 'killing thousands,' but that would be another story.

Policing the Amazon

Asinus has just seen another environmental thriller. *Crude* records the legal challenge of a group of Amazonian

Ecuadoreans against Chevron-Texaco. The case is made with shots of black goo pulled up from the subsoil under the houses of the locals, babies with terrible skin rashes, and mothers and children with cancer of the liver. The case, ongoing since 1993, received a boost when it attracted the attention of rainforest-lovers Sting and his wife, Trudie Styler. In one of the film's several comic moments Ms Styler enthusiastically tells the Ecuadorian lawyer for the plaintiffs that The Police will be at a fund-raising concert – having to then quickly explain that she was referring to a pop group, not the repressive arm of the state.

But the big change in prospects was due to the election of Rafael Correa as President, a 'humanist and Christian of the left'. In such cases who is best friends with the government is often the deciding factor in any dispute. In one revealing moment Chevron-Texaco's lawyer declared in court that Texaco had operated in Ecuador since the 1960s with the full legitimization of the Ecuadorian government, 'a government that represents *all* Ecuadoreans'. He failed to point out that the government in question, and subsequent governments until 1979, were military dictatorships – not generally associated with universal representation.

Let There be Light

Madonna has been back to Malawi. She has already adopted two children from the southern African country, the second only after receiving the blessing of the country's Supreme Court. But she has returned on a different mission: speaking in the village of Mphandula, where she already funds a child-care centre, she announced: 'I know you work in darkness. I will bring you electricity.' As singer of the hit single and album 'Ray of Light,' the pop legend is clearly an expert on the subject.

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