

## **Time's Up For Business as Usual at COP24**

### **An interview with Bas Eickhout**

November 29, 2018

The upcoming COP24 climate summit in Katowice, Poland, is an crucial opportunity for world governments to commit to action that will keep the planet at a 'safe' level of warming. With climate scientists urging that a more radical energy transition than anticipated is needed, the European Union must accept its historic responsibility and work with other countries to urgently decarbonise the economy.

### **Green European Journal: How important is this year's COP24 to the climate summit process and the wider struggle to contain climate change?**

**Bas Eickhout:** 2018 is the most important COP since the Paris Agreement was agreed in 2015. The summits in 2016 and 2017 were intermediate COPs but this time around there are clear deadlines. And unfortunately politicians only make difficult decisions when they are pushing against a deadline. Before the Paris Agreement comes into force in 2020, the rule book, which is a technical but important part of the talks, and the Talanoa Dialogue must both be decided upon at this year's COP.

The Paris rulebook sets out how we are going to measure the emissions reductions the world agreed upon in 2015 to limit global temperature rises at a certain level. From how we report progress to how forestation is accounted for, it is quite technical but very important. Without a good rulebook, everyone will be able to report great progress. Summits in [Bonn in May](#) and [Bangkok in September](#) took these negotiations forward during 2018 and now the final political agreements are expected at the COP.

it is common knowledge that we are not doing enough and are heading towards 3 or 4 degrees of warming

Most of the attention at COP will be on the Talanoa Dialogue, which looks at whether we are doing enough to counteract climate change. Between 2015 when the world made the Paris Agreement and today, policies worldwide have not changed much, certainly not in Europe. Countries have largely carried on with the plans they already had. In Europe, we have been working to get laws adopted to commit the EU to a 40 per cent reduction in carbon emissions by 2030. But politically the EU committed to that target in 2014, a year before Paris, so the success of Paris had no impact on Europe's decision-making machine. This year in Katowice all the parties of the convention look at each other, take stock of what commitments have been made, and ask whether this is enough.

All the negotiating parties will look at their Nationally Determined Contributions, which are emissions reduction and climate adaption plans, and decide whether they will be updated before 2020. As it is common knowledge that we are not doing enough and are heading 3 or 4 degrees of warming, it would be a bit strange for countries to stick to the same plans as in 2015. The IPCC report published in October concluded that, while we are totally off track for the 1.5 degrees of warming target, there are really good reasons to stick to that target and that it can still be done.

### **That's what is at stake. What would be the ideal outcome of the talks in Katowice and what would be a nightmare result?**

The nightmare result would be that we will have a rulebook, for which everyone congratulates each other, but that the Talanoa Dialogue concludes by admitting that we are not doing enough but nevertheless confirming that the Paris Agreement will start as planned in 2020 and that we should wait until 2023 to review it. If the world is going

to postpone difficult discussions until 2023, which is the next review point set out in the agreement, then before that is translated into laws, let alone action, you can give up 1.5 degrees of warming.

### **And an ideal scenario?**

I can give you an ideal scenario, but we all know that we are not living in an ideal world. Let's look around the world. The United States is out the Paris Agreement, the Australian government is pretty conservative, and now there is Brazil too. Where is the leadership? If you look at China, there is a willingness to do more, but they have good reasons to wait for Europe to make the first step. If Europe is just going to put proposals on the table already agreed upon in 2014, Europe is giving the signal that it is giving up on 1.5 degrees. EU countries set out their positions towards Katowice this October in Environment Council conclusions (page 7 of the [conclusions](#)), which were quite disappointing. The conclusions acknowledged the 1.5 degrees but that's more or less it.

For Europe to be serious about 1.5 degrees, the Commission should have opened up a discussion on targets for 2030 in its [long-term strategy](#) published this week. The European Parliament has already voted in favour of increasing the emissions reduction targets to [minus 55 per cent by 2030](#). That resolution is a success but it is a non-binding resolution. Now the Commission has set out scenarios between a minus 80 per cent reduction by 2050 and zero emissions by 2050 in its long-term strategy. But scenarios are for free. If the Commission will not make the political point that we need to reopen discussions on 2030 objectives, then we'll be debating scenarios for years.

### **The COP will be held in Poland, an EU country that depends heavily on coal for energy. France and Germany have leaders who like to portray themselves as climate friendly but their actions have often not matched their words. Which European countries are pressuring Europe to do more as a bloc and which are holding it back?**

European countries are split in three main groups. You have a small group that want the EU to reduce emissions by 55 per cent by 2030, and are explicit about it: Sweden, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. Two of the three have Greens in government. Then you have a bloc of bigger countries who acknowledge that more needs to be done, but have not yet been explicit about what. That group will be key to how Europe's position will evolve. Finally, you have the group that is not willing to acknowledge that we need to do more. This group, led by the Visegrád coalition, may accept slightly higher targets because the Commission has already calculated that efficiency savings and energy policies will help us go beyond our current targets. But that group, led by Poland but including Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary supported by Romania and Bulgaria, will not accept substantially higher ambition for now.

### **So the European Union's climate action hinges on the countries on the fence...**

If Europe is to move forward, the countries somewhere in the middle will have to shift. The two most important ones are France and Germany, not surprisingly. In Germany, Angela Merkel was once known as the Climate Chancellor but she has completely wasted that title since the Paris Agreement was made. The current governmental coalition of centre-right and centre-left is a grand coalition only in its ability to avoid taking decisions. On coal, the German government has given away decision-making to an expert group, the [Coal Commission](#), showing a total lack of political leadership. And while transport is a sector where emissions are still growing in Europe, German government policy is a literal copy of what the German car industry wants.

Angela Merkel was once known as the Climate Chancellor but she has completely wasted that title since the Paris Agreement was made.

Turning to France, Emmanuel Macron was quite vocal on the Paris Agreement and one of Donald Trump's harshest critics after the United States withdrew. But while Macron has made it clear that France is in favour of

more ambition and that Europe needs to do more, he stops at nice rhetoric. France's strategy appears to be to try and make a big deal with Germany behind the scenes and Macron sees climate within the bigger scheme of cooperation with Germany on questions such as Eurozone reform. But working out a compromise with Germany can take a very long time, whereas France now holds the key on climate. France could say we are joining forces with Sweden, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands and such an alliance backing a minus 55 per cent emissions reduction target for 2030 could attract Spain, Italy, who are both favourable but uncertain, and the United Kingdom too. Showing ambition would put the ball in Germany's court. The question would be put to Germany, are you going to side with the Visegrád countries or with the progressives? It is in the hands of Macron and of France to set the ball rolling, give the Commission the chance to open the discussion on 2030, and to make 2019 a crucial year.

**What about different countries around the world? Which are the countries and coalitions pushing for greater climate action?**

The low-lying island states are asking the world to do more and offer leadership, but of course they lack political clout. Canada is evolving with steps on carbon pricing and would be willing to team up with Europe if it started moving first. Many countries in Latin America and Africa are willing to move further as well and some are already doing so such as Morocco and Mexico.

As a policymaker, you can be sure that if you ignore what represents a conservative consensus among scientists, then you are gambling with the Earth's future.

But Europe is crucial to get the big players moving. China's next five-year plan will begin in 2020, and so if Europe makes a step now to be concluded in 2019, then China will be able to take the next step too. India, even more so than China, is reluctant to take too much action given their economic development but it is investing in renewables nevertheless. If Europe makes a move, then we can expect more from India as well.

**But other countries oppose climate action resolutely such as Brazil under its new far-right government?**

Jair Bolsonaro, the new president, at first was explicit about wanting to pull out of the Paris Agreement. Though he is still not a fan, he has changed his rhetoric somewhat. Brazil will be a test case and Europe needs to be tough and clear: no trade agreements with countries that are not party to the Paris Agreement. That means nothing with the United States too, including Jean-Claude Juncker's agreements with Donald Trump that stop short of formal trade deals. If Brazil stays in the Paris Agreement but goes ahead with Bolsonaro's plans to damage the Amazon, Europe should still use its economic power to its full extent. The inclusion of Paris clauses in global trade deals cannot turn into another empty promise. Macron was the loudest on this point and he has to realise that if you are loud in rhetoric, you also need to be loud in action.

**International cooperation requires both shared concerns but also a spark of initiative. The recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report (read more on the report) by top climate scientists warned politicians around the world that rapid decarbonisation is now essential. How much of an impact will that IPCC report have on this year's COP?**

The report is one thing, but what is always important about the IPCC reports is that negotiating countries must agree to the summary for policymakers. That goes for all members of the convention that makes up the COP climate talks. The United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia... Everyone has agreed to the conclusions so they cannot run away from them. The IPCC report is a powerful tool for that reason and will sharpen discussions on updating national plans for emissions reductions. Everyone has put their plans on the table and the IPCC's analysis is clear that they are not enough for 2 degrees, let alone for 1.5 degrees. But are the negotiators going to update it at COP? That's the key point. The IPCC report helps but the political step still needs to be taken.

**The IPCC report and many other climate science reports have started using language such as ‘fundamental societal transitions’ or ‘irreversible’. These are big statements for scientists who are cautious by nature. What should be the role of climate science in informing politics?**

It’s a difficult question because scientists are always reluctant to go into the political arena. But what scientists need to make clear to world leaders is that the IPCC report is a conservative estimate. Some forces in the world try to present the IPCC as some kind of green institute that is always panicking about the climate, but that is far from the truth. The IPCC report is a consensus document reviewed by scientists all over the world, who looked at it and felt comfortable putting their signature on it, and so, by definition, it is a conservative estimate. As a policymaker, you can be sure that if you ignore what represents a conservative consensus among scientists, then you are gambling with the Earth’s future. Scientists should be more explicit about that.

The difference between this IPCC report and the last one from 2014 is that impacts on ice-sheet melting and ecosystems anticipated at 2 degrees are now expected at 1.5 degrees. Science’s message is becoming increasingly dire and it is important that scientists continuously stress that point for policymakers because otherwise they will read it, take note, but not take action. Scientists cannot enter the political arena and decision-making is not for scientists, but their messaging should be there.



Bas Eickhout is a Greens/EFA Member of the European Parliament from the Netherlands and is a member of the Parliament’s Committee on Environment, Public Health, and Food Safety.

Published November 29, 2018

Interview in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/times-up-for-business-as-usual-at-cop24/>

*The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space.*

*Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.*