



THE CURSE OF HIGH EXPECTATIONS

BY JULIANNE MALVEAUX

I went to Copenhagen as part of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies Commission to Engage African Americans in Climate Control. The Commission – led by Carolyn Green formerly of Sonoco, included environmental justice guru Robert Bullard, Dillard University professor and environmental justice leader Beverly Wright, Frank Steward of the Association of Black in Energy, Leslie Fields of the Sierra Club, and me. We spent a week alternating between exhilaration and frustration, exhilaration at connections and opportunity, frustration at long lines (6 hours for me on Monday to get a credential that soon proved worthless), the marginalization of NGOs (nongovernmental organizations like the Joint Center), and further frustration at the way negotiations were progressing. All of us waited with bated breath to hear President Obama speak to the issues. We were heartened that he had come to present the United States position, and excited that he not only spoke, but was actively involved in negotiations for several hours.

Part of the Joint Center group gathered at Klimaforum09, which is described as “the people’s climate summit”. It’s a large, sprawling space with dozens of meeting rooms, and on Friday, a big screen television where hundreds of people gather to watch the Obama speech. The space has flava, too, as a group of folk rehearse for entertainment that they will present in the early afternoon, and another television screen shows a panel of leaders who are meeting even as President Obama speaks. We have gone to Klimaforum09 because we want to hear our President in the company of others. Some of our group are part of other groups and some have been asked to sign statements or letters condemning the united states position, even as we see a President who has gone further than anyone else has on this issue of climate change. He has not gone far enough for some, and I suppose this is the curse of the high expectations that President Barack Obama has brought to the international stage. He is so much better than our leadership of the past. He is not, however, the progressive icon, nor should he be expected to be.

My sense of the Obama speech is that our President is frustrated, maybe even angry. There is none of his lofty rhetoric in this speech. He is straight up, firm, almost biting. He says it is time to stop talking and move to action. He has gone out on a limb, but he can go no further without Senate approval. We live in a democracy, not a dictatorship. He wants to move the process of a climate change agreement along, and so he makes promises that he can keep, and ignores the ones he cannot keep. He says that we will commit to help raise \$100 billion a year to help developing countries with climate change, but he doesn’t say how much the US will give, or exactly where the money will come from. The \$100 billion falls short of numbers I’ve heard developing countries request – as much as \$400 billion. This tepid agreement is an imperfect one, but it is a step forward.

The group at Klimaforum09 receives the Obama message differently. There is mild applause, and there are boos. We from the Joint Center are sitting in the front row in a section, and immediately behind us there are three white activists from

California booing. We ask them why, and one says that Obama is “no better than Bush”. Would Bush have been here, in Copenhagen, with no results guaranteed, but fighting for what is right? Hardly. The California group consists of two men and one woman, a lawyer whose mouth is drawn into a taut line. She doesn’t even bother to engage with our group, grabbing her backpack and rushing out, her two colleagues following and shaking their heads. As I walk out of the hall, I talk with a British woman who shares that she had also booed. She says President Obama has not met her expectations. She thought he would flex his muscles and push G20 countries closer to what the developing world needs. We speak for an intense 10 minutes, and I explain that our President cannot override the Senate, which is why the agreement is nonbinding. She nods and says she understands, but she stands by her booing.

Daily, the Copenhagen Post distributes the COP15 Post, the Daily Climate Conference news. For the last 3 days of the conference, an ad appears from the Advocates from Environmental Human Rights in New Orleans (www.ehumanrights.org). They urge our president to take 10 key steps to protect our human right to live in a healthy environment. Rooted in the reality of New Orleans dislocation, this is a message that supports President Obama and reminds why a climate change treaty is important. We know that President Obama knows how and why to do the right thing. And we know, all too well, that his ratings have plummeted because he is not superman. He can’t do everything, not given the political realities. He moves the agenda forward, and he deserves applause for that.

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