

COP21: EU must show moral leadership, says Ida Auken

Written by Rajnish Singh on 11 December 2015 in News
News

Former Danish environment Minister says "huge paradigm shift" has taken place in Paris compared to previous climate change talks.



Ida Auken believes there has been a "paradigm shift" in the negotiation style and process at COP21 in Paris compared to previous global climate change extravaganzas. Auken was in town for the sustainable innovation forum (SIF15), taking place alongside the climate summit.

The Former Danish environment Minister says the biggest noticeable difference has been the way the French have chaired the talks, describing the Parisian style as a more "bottom up approach", which, "instead of telling countries what to do... asks them what they can contribute."

Another key shift according to the Dane has been the type of people attending the talks, "Instead of seeing mostly people wearing sweaters, I have seen more suits."

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Auken added, "In the early days of the talks there were many wonderful people from green NGOs who drove the agenda. But now I see a lot more businessmen and women looking to invest in business opportunities around the climate change agenda."

With more companies viewing climate change as an important economic opportunity, and not just a threat to commerce, Auken believes this has brought about a 'tipping' point in achieving an agreement in Paris. She also considers that the fact that renewable energy is now becoming less expensive than fossil fuels, as a very important factor in attracting more investment.

With the EU pushing hard for a deal, Auken compares Europe's position in the talks to "the nice kid in class, which has its position sorted out months in advance." However for the Dane, the disadvantage with being so transparent is that in any later stage of the negotiations, it doesn't leave Europe much room for negotiation with no "ace up its sleeve".

Auken knows a bit about getting deals at high level environmental talks. As environment Minister during Denmark's 2012 EU Council presidency, she was head of the European delegation at the UN conference on sustainable development (Rio+20) talks. She negotiated hard to win a deal. "At Rio, where I led the European delegation, we actually threatened to block an agreement, and that is why we ended up with a better one."

But Auken is not sure that the EU has such a strong negotiating position in Paris. "I don't think we are in a position to block an agreement this time." If an agreement is not reached in Paris, she says, it will be the G20 countries, China and the US that will set the agenda for any future agreement, with Europe left on the side-lines.

With the French having the presidency of the COP21 talks, there was more pressure on the EU to be more flexible. However Auken says the EU could still play a major role by "leading by example and morally, while also setting high standards for carbon cuts, as well as giving financial aid to help countries adapt their economies to climate change."

One of the biggest challenges to agreeing any deal was always going to be persuading developing countries to agree to cut their carbon emissions, especially as they rely on cheap coal power stations to fuel their economic growth. But Auken feels that they too are changing their minds; "It's also becoming clearer to developing countries that the damage caused to the environment has both social and economic costs."

Technological innovations hold the key to economies adapting, she believes, especially in the poorest countries. "Also I think it is becoming very clear to developers of green tech solutions that they cannot be successful without taking on board the needs of the people in the developing world."

Having been involved in a number of environmental negotiations, Auken says she has come to the conclusion that it's important to find ways of using the private sector to raise finance and to also invest in poorer countries, to open up access to new green innovations and renewable energy.

As somebody who originally had a traditionally left leaning political perspective on development policy, Auken says that her realisation that business can have an important role in dealing with climate change was "eye opening."

She is also quite positive regarding China's position in the Paris talks. Previously they were seen as playing a mainly negative role. Auken believes their stance has changed due to the "shift in the emphasis of the talks from telling countries what to do; to asking what they can contribute has helped China play a different role".

Where they see themselves as world leaders and they know that the rest of world is looking for them to lead, "she added "I think they will live up to their political responsibilities."

Auken is also a very keen supporter of the EU's push for a circular economy, seeing it as 'game changing' in achieving a sustainable economy. Both businesses and politicians were now buying into the concept, she says.

"The world is going through a transition towards a circular economy. The question is whether Europe is at the forefront of that or is going to have to be dragged kicking and screaming by its hair."

She commended the Jean-Claude Juncker Commission's recent proposals saying "I think the EU has taken a huge step forward with its new circular economy package which has now received wider political support within the current commission than the previous draft."

The Dane also praised previous environment Commissioner Janez Potočnik for being one of the circular policy initiative's "champions". After meeting with Commission Vice Presidents Frans Timmerman and Jyrki Katainen, Auken said "I am convinced they both understand the importance of this and that they are going to champion the circular economy."

However following the recent referendum results in Denmark, where voters rejected closer EU cooperation on security, justice and home affairs issues and on adopting the euro, Auken warned that the EU was losing popularity in Denmark, saying, "we can't over play that everything is perfect or we will lose people and credibility."

But she added, "we have to remember the EU has given us so many benefits and freedoms." The problem, she explained, has been the inability of Danish and European leaders to "persuade and show voters that this is indeed the fact, so we lost them in this referendum."

About the author

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