Impressions of COP21: Instalment 2

VIPs walk significantly faster than us common mortals. As they and their entourage race from their last engagement to the relative tranquillity of the impenetrable VVIP section here at COP21, they are accompanied by a posse of photographers cantering backways in front of them with their cameras running, and frantic interviewers trying to extract the last sound bite before the doors close. Getting caught on the wrong side of this backward-running posse constitutes a pedestrian hazard. Having now been nearly mown down by Ségolène Royal’s posse and later by John Kerry’s I can recommend seeking the nearest wall and breathing in hard.

Today was a day for the big names to contribute to the various side events. Today was also Gender Day and several events were held to emphasise the importance of a gender statement appearing in the final agreement. Mary Robinson was particularly well received by a packed audience in a panel hosted by Ségolène Royal which reminded everyone that the empowerment of women is essential in tackling climate change. A majority of the world’s farmers are women. Women farmers currently account for 45-80% of all food production in developing countries and women farmers account for more than 90% of the female labour force in many African countries. Some 40 Billion hours per year are spent by African women merely collecting water. Yet the reins of power are largely male dominated. Mary Robinson was particularly encouraging of young women to have the confidence to challenge the status quo.

The real highlight of the day for most I suspect was the inspiring hour-long talk by Al Gore. Using graphics most lecturers would give their right hand for, and an articulacy level most would envy, he held his audience spellbound and earned a standing ovation at the end. It wasn’t simply a ‘stock’ lecture, but one that was right up to date with dramatic footage from around the world, including the floods associated with Storm Desmond this week which produced a new record daily rainfall total in Cumbria in the UK of over 340mm. (In 1887 Glasnevin recorded 356mm in the whole year!) Changes in the frequency of extreme events, often with catastrophic human consequences in countries not significantly complicit in causing global warming, are now being experienced widely across the world as climate changes.

The Pope’s Encyclical ‘Laudato Si’ was one of the key components in the ‘choreography’ leading up to COP21 and one of the key authors involved in this, Cardinal Turkson, held a press briefing today to emphasise the moral imperative of addressing climate injustice. Cardinal Turkson is the first Ghanaian cardinal and President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. Many will recall his visit to Maynooth in March when he delivered the Trocaire 2015 Lenten lecture. Climate justice is the driving force for an agreement now that the science of climate change is largely settled and small but noisy demonstrations have been organised by NGOs to remind delegates of this as they shuttle between venues.

Out with the side events above, the hard graft of negotiations continue. For small delegations like Ireland, the demands on the negotiators are many. The French President of COP acknowledged the work being done by the multiple teams involved, continuing to a late hour in most cases. The reports back from the various sub groups was in my opinion slightly less upbeat today as the initial flexibility shown by countries now begin to entail hard choices as decisions loomed for the final text. Indeed M. Fabius has begun to force the pace a bit by promising a new draft of the potential agreement by lunchtime on Wednesday. Undoubtedly this will provoke some soul searching and discussion. The publication of such a draft is always a tricky step and was something that was partly responsible for the derailment of the Copenhagen COP in 2009. But general support for the strategy was voiced from the delegates. The negotiating blocs are represented often by one country spokespersons e.g. Angola for the Least Developed Countries, South Africa for the G77 and China, and the Maldives for the Alliance of Small Island Developing States. For the moment, these are all supportive and optimism continues to reign. Some interesting new terminology is surfacing. Countries have started referring to negotiations leading to a range of ‘landing zones’ deemed acceptable. The runway is clearly approaching. But one suspects some turbulence may still be expected if touchdown is attempted too soon.