Week 2

Many delegates consider the French Presidency have pulled a master stroke by reversing the normal sequence of events at a COP. Usually the Ministerial delegations beaver away the first week and then their bosses arrive to take the hard decisions at the end of the meeting. Not always being as clued in as their Ministers, the leaders have tended to shy away from hard choices at the last minute, prolonging the agony of the atmosphere for another year. This year the leaders came the first week and made their noble speeches. Some appear to have escaped their ‘handlers’, causing consternation back home when their true attitude towards the climate change problem was revealed as less convincing than their rhetoric. But they’ve gone home now and the real graft can begin. It would have been too much to expect the Ministers charged with delivering an agreement the second week, however, to allow their profiles to be completely invisible back home. Accordingly the opening of the ‘high level segment’ on Monday had a sprinkling of Ministers eager to make their case to the world.

The business end of the conference is now in full swing, carefully chaired by the French Foreign Minister, Laurent Fabius. His approach has been to set up facilitator teams to tackle the negotiations on a thematic basis. Themes such as ‘Means of implementation’, ‘Differentiation’, Ambition and ‘Pre 2020 Action’ may sound pretty bland; but they are code words for a plethora of conflicts between the Developed and Developing World. So the Chair’s strategy has been to nominate two facilitator countries to each task, one from the Developed World and one from the Developing World. Thus Germany and Gabon are paired, Singapore and Brazil, Norway and St. Lucia, and the UK and Gambia. The formula seems to be working, and at the Plenary feedback session on Monday night the mood music was good, with some delegates urging an acceleration of the process towards an agreement on Friday. Having now attended 5 COPS, it seems to this writer the legacy of Copenhagen has at last been consigned to history. Genuine goodwill appears to be the order of the day. The Developed World has at last shown willingness to accept its historic responsibilities for the problem and the Developing World has realised this is as good an opportunity for deal as it is likely to get. Of course the opportunities for dialogue to break down over the next few days remains, but so far the omens are good. However, the devil will be in the detail and what concessions each side is making behind the scenes is not clear.

Outside of the main negotiating halls, the carnival that is COP continues. It is impossible to report other than on only a tiny fraction of events and activities. Despite the best efforts of corporate entities to present themselves as sustainable good guys, the main impression is one of serious engagement on the part of civil society, business and a host of other actors Thus while the main negotiating hall had speeches from the likes of the Prime Minister of Tuvalu and the new Chair of the IPCC, Hoesung Lee, the Observer Hall had excellent talks from the head of UNEP, Achim Steiner, climate scientist Myles Allen and First Minister of Scotland Nichola Sturgeon. The latter was particularly impressive as she outlined Scotland’s target of greenhouse gas reductions of 42% by 2020, and then announced that 38% had already been achieved. For a country with a similar population and climate as Ireland, it was an eye opener as regards what well informed political leadership can do.

A word that was widely used today was ‘convergence’: convergence of positions, convergence of ambitions, convergence of interests. The convergence of interests was perhaps best exemplified by the offer of African countries to develop their electricity infrastructure along sustainable lines if the required finance and technological assistance could be obtained from the Developed World. With an inevitable increase in population of around 2B, failure to develop a sustainable energy infrastructure would undo any pretence of the world staying below 2degrees of warming. Developing Africa sustainably is therefore a vital interest of the Developed World. Convergence of interests in action! Maybe the Pope did hit the right note when he entitled his Encyclical : Caring for Our Common Home!