

World climate conference moving, optimistic - but challenging for activists 'shut out' of talks

by Wendy Elliott/The Advertiser

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Article online since January 11st 2010, 10:16

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There was an arc of time over the two-week period Kings County's Thea Whitman was in Copenhagen for the United Nations' Climate Change Conference.

As one of 30 members of the Canadian Youth Delegation, she went in with a general air of optimism.

"At the beginning, you could feel hope in the air. Of course, youth especially tend to be optimistic, and we hoped something significant would happen."

The conference turned out to be a roller coaster of emotion for the delegation of about 30 young Canadians, under the coordination of the national Youth Climate Coalition.

Whitman says they were intent on representing the interests of young people, lobbying elected officials and negotiators, working with international youth, communicating their experience back home and doing actions inside and outside of the conference.

Early on, they organized one about Alberta's tar sands. Using an oil-splattered banner reading "Stop tarring our image," they tried to reference both the problems behind the tar sands and how the Canadian government was blocking negotiations at the conference.

According to Whitman, it was obvious our country has lost its strong international reputation, even picking up multiple Fossil Awards.

"It was sad to see that we're not respected. I was embarrassed that other countries thought we made them look better," she said. "But, 75 per cent of us want to be proud of our stand."

One day, Whitman recalled, young people from around the world lined the hallway wearing T-shirts asking: "How old will you be in 2050?"

The aim was to flag the long-term target year for emissions reductions being negotiated. Holding national flags, the youth represented areas of the world already impacted by climate change.

Whitman marched with tens of thousands of people through the streets of Copenhagen. She was thrilled to know more than 4,000 actions occurred December 12 around the world, in 400 in Canada and one in her home town, Wolfville.

"People really care about this issue and came out to show it."

While the Copenhagen actions displayed a strong sense of fun, Whitman says it became obvious there were huge north/south divides, and conference negotiations appeared to shut out while civil society representatives got increasingly shut out.

The Canadian youth delegation could not gain the ear of Environment Minister Jim Prentice; Whitman says they felt their suggestions fell on deaf ears.

"Canada's emissions reduction target is completely inconsistent with what we need to do, based on science, to safeguard our future, and our negotiators seemed unwilling to negotiate."

The delegation did meet with a number of influential Canadians - Naomi Klein, Elizabeth May and Jack Layton. Whitman herself spoke with Nova Scotia Premier Darrell Dexter.

"There is so much that Nova Scotia can do to become a leader in clean energy, green jobs and climate change action."

Overall the issues at stake in Copenhagen are scary, Whitman believes: there is so much at stake. She wanted to see significant progress made to "ensure that we have new legally agreements and commitment on the table before the Kyoto Protocol's first commitment period is finished in 2012."

Whitman was moved by some speeches at the conference, particularly the speakers from the Maldives and Tuvalu, islands that expect huge climate change impacts.

"There are few who won't be touched by climate change," she notes. "It's going to be a different way of life."

Obviously, Whitman points out, the job isn't finished.

"I don't think anyone is pretending it is."

Sometimes, she becomes so focused on the environment, Whitman questions continuing with her graduate studies in carbon and soils at Cornell. But, her aim is to continue both career and schooling.

"The leadership isn't coming from our government; it has to come from citizens. I don't mind an activist label. This is about the children of the future. So, call Stephen Harper or any MP free. Talk to your friends."

"Now is such a critical time."



Thea Whitman, with fellow youth delegat Ghomeshi (left) and Caroline Lee (centre) Saturday climate march. Submitte