

The politics of COP 26

The 26th COP conference to save the planet takes place in early December. Like its forbears they tell us this is the last chance and that much is riding on the results. Clearly they are right that as the previous conferences have not agreed sufficient action to even begin reducing the total carbon dioxide produced in many places nor to start to cut the total amount of fossil fuel burned around the globe this conference needs to be more successful than past ones to wean the world off fossil fuels as they wish. World oil demand at 85 m barrels a day in 2006 is forecast to exceed 100m barrels a day again as world recovery from the pandemic continues, and to stay there for the next decade. As the Conference approaches we are told that it will be an extremely difficult task to get an Agreement. I would be surprised if it is allowed to break up without one. I would also be surprised if it is the last such conference, declaring job done. In practice the world is nowhere near getting to net zero any time soon all the time China, India, Brazil, Pakistan, Bangladesh and other heavily populated countries see the need to burn more coal, oil and gas to grow.

The UK as joint chair with Italy has set out four crucial areas to get agreement – coal, cars, cash and trees. They will need to negotiate the question of grants and loans from the rich countries to the lower income countries, as they are making this an essential part of co-operating with the general green revolution. A recent meeting of the 20 country strong Like Minded Developing countries (includes China, Saudi, Pakistan, Malaysia, Bangladesh) issued a tough communique saying the advanced countries as a whole needed to cut their carbon output more quickly as they had put plenty of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere during their industrialisation. The rich countries needed to be tolerant of the developing world's need to grow using fossil fuels, and to offer far more financial support for green transition by them. They pointed out that many developed countries had failed to make their full contribution of cash under the Paris promises, and had not met their own carbon dioxide reduction promises either.

It seems likely the Conference will have to proceed without either President Xi, or President Putin being present. China is by far and away the largest producer of carbon dioxide, at 28% of the world total, and Russia is in fifth place at 4.5%. It now seems likely Prime Minister Modi of India, in fourth place with 7%, will attend but it is unlikely he will be able to pledge cuts in Indian use of fossil fuels and will understandably want more financial support. China and Russia will send delegations and will offer national plans of sorts, but they will fall far short of what green campaigners would expect. There is unlikely to be an early phase out of coal by emerging countries, with China aggressively adding coal mines and coal power stations to her energy mix.

It will be easier to agree more trees, though difficult issues remain in parts of Latin America and Asia over cutting down forests to grow crops and graze cattle. Everyone will be sympathetic about electric cars.

The central Agreement will therefore rest on further pledges of progress from the world's second and third largest emitters, the USA and EU. The UK will assist as the one larger advanced country that has already done the most to cut its own carbon dioxide output. Getting a better commitment from Germany to cut out coal would help them. There are rumours that a possible new coalition government there might want to bring forward the elimination of coal from 2038 to 2030. The EU will doubtless find it more difficult to get an improved commitment from Poland, another large coal user.

Without larger and faster contributions from the first, fourth and fifth largest producers of CO₂ in the world it is going to take more such conferences to chart a reliable path to net zero for the world.