

Leaders

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Climate change

Why the COP26 climate summit will be both crucial and disappointing

Such global gatherings remain the best forum to force change

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“The rain it raineth every day,” Feste tells the audience at the end of “Twelfth Night”. And the cop it coppeth every year. Since 1995 the countries bound by the un Framework Convention on Climate Change (unfccc) have missed only one conference of the parties—when the pandemic struck in 2020. These cops can produce action plans (Bali, 2007), mandates (Berlin, 1995), protocols (Kyoto, 1997), platforms (Durban, 2011), acrimonious breakdowns (Copenhagen, 2009) and agreements (Paris, 2015). But the rise in the atmosphere’s greenhouse-gas content and the associated warming of the climate continues in spite of them—even when, as so often, they are hyped as the world’s last chance.

As diplomats, scientists, lobbyists, activists, artists, the media, politicians and businesspeople gather in Glasgow for cop26, which begins on October 31st, it is therefore easy to dismiss the entire affair. That would be a mistake. The unfccc and its cops, for all their flaws, play a crucial part in a process that is historic and vital: the removal of the fundamental limit on human flourishing imposed by dependence on fossil fuels.

One reason cops matter is that some of them do in fact make a difference. Despite rules on consensus, meaning that the pace

is set by the least willing, the agreement in Paris committed all parties, rich and poor, to keep the rise in Earth's temperature since the mid-19th century well below 2°C. Glasgow will bring fresh national pledges promising increased efforts towards the Paris temperature targets—though they will not be ambitious enough to make meeting those goals likely.

The main reason the unfccc and cop process matters is that the science, diplomacy, activism and public opinion that support it make up the best mechanism the world currently has to help it come to terms with a fundamental truth. The dream of a planet of almost 8bn people all living in material comfort will be unachievable if it is based on an economy powered by coal, oil and natural gas. The harms from the cumulative emissions of carbon dioxide would eventually pile up so rapidly that fossil-fuel-fired development would stall.

As our special report in this week's issue sets out, nowhere is this logic more pressing than in Asia. About 1.5bn Asians live in the tropics. Hundreds of millions of them live near the coasts. For their economies to continue to grow, they will need ever more energy. If this comes in the fossil-fuelled manner of past decades they will have to bear the mounting costs of adapting to and living with floods, storms, heatwaves and droughts long before they get rich. As the world heats up, they will have to run faster just to stay in the same place. Zero-emissions technology could free them from this dismal bind: in principle, they can tap into a supply of development-promoting energy that is, in effect, unlimited.

In the long run, therefore, the only way to keep growing is by leaving fossil fuels behind. That requires Asian countries, in most of which emissions are still surging, to forgo much more by way of future emissions than the countries of the developed world, where emissions are already declining. India is vocal in

pointing to the unfairness of this, so far refusing to embrace carbon neutrality. Let others with more responsibility for historical emissions do more, it says.

However just that may be, the problem for India—and for everyone else—is that the daunting cost of limiting emissions is falling on a few generations, most of whose members live in developing countries. All of them live in a fractious world where there is a dearth of leadership. America's government is not suddenly a reliable partner just because it has now rejoined the Paris agreement. Nor is China, the world's largest emitter. Though its capacity for action is great, its pledges thus far are more about posturing than substance. The multilateral institutions created to spread the cost between countries equitably are weak and hostage to procedures based on consensus and unanimity.

For all their disappointments, the unfccc and its repeated cops are the best forum to force change. But until the arguments sink in, the wisest response is bold, prompt action from willing countries in Europe and elsewhere that others cannot frustrate.

As so often in climate change, the task is not choosing between options so much as finding how to press ahead with all of them at once. A commitment to large, fast reductions in methane emissions is vital. More money for developing-country decarbonisation, in which government investment can lower risks for the private sector, must flow alongside increased aid for adaptation. Innovation should be encouraged in various ways. America's 45q tax incentives for carbon capture could be expanded at home and copied by Europe.

Investment in fossil fuels has fallen faster than replacements have come on line, aggravating the dramatic recent price rises. In the long term it is necessary that fossil fuels become

increasingly expensive, but peaks and volatility are destructive. Governments need to build more buffers into the current system as well as hasten alternatives. When prices fall, those still subsidising fossil fuels will have an excellent opportunity to stop.

Anyone who dreams of a reprieve for fossil fuels must be disabused. It suits Narendra Modi, prime minister of India, Scott Morrison, prime minister of Australia, and Joe Manchin, a senator from West Virginia, never to speak of an end to the fossil-fuels age. But for them to duck the responsibility of planning a transition is rank cowardice. True, oil and gas cannot vanish overnight, but their day is closing. And coal's day must be done.

Then there are the unanswered questions. Meeting the Paris targets will require carbon dioxide to be withdrawn from the atmosphere: who will do it? And who will pay? Some countries may one day seek to ward off disaster with solar geoengineering, which reduces the amount of incoming sunlight. Might that help? If not, could it be stopped?

Feste laments an unchanging world. The climate crisis stems from change which is out of control. Yet by responding to it, the world can become a place where long-run prosperity for all becomes possible. It is a noble future that the fossil-fuel age, despite its illusory plenty, could never have created. ■

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