

Letter from Scotland

The first agreement to emerge from the climate change summit in Glasgow was that the world's forests would be saved by 2030. There then followed pronouncements on limiting methane gas, on ending coal production and on de-investment in fossil fuels. It all sounded great. Our earthly leaders made encouraging speeches and then they all jetted off home. Job done, planet saved.

So why are there continuing demonstrations in the streets of Glasgow from a colourful army of environmental campaigners? Well, let's take trees for example. The COP26 pledge is that de-forestation will be reversed by 2030 in all countries of the world, including Brazil and Colombia in the Amazon rainforest, Indonesia in the forests of Borneo, Russia in the vast Tundras of Siberia and Congo in the great forests of Africa. And the other hundred countries signing the pledge have agreed to provide £14 billion to help fund the project, £8.7 billion of it coming from the twelve richest governments.



We need to talk about trees...and a few other things.
The trouble is a similar pledge has been made twice before at

other COP gathering and nothing has come of it. The same is true of other solemn pledges – like the £72 billion promised by 2020 in compensation for countries already badly affected by climate change. We adults have become so accustomed to such broken political promises that it has taken 18-year-old Greta Thurnberg and her young army to point out, as she did in Glasgow this week, that the politicians are just “pretending to take the future seriously.”

The UK Government, for instance, is still considering opening another coal mine in Cumbria and confirming that the existing licence may be used for a new oil field off Shetland. And The Scottish Government is letting them get away with it. The Minister in charge of our net zero emissions target, Michael Matheson MSP, was insisting this week that an independent Scotland “will still require access to a level of hydrocarbons”.

On forestry, The Scottish Government has recently increased its target to planting 18,000 hectares of new forest a year by 2025. But this is from a shamefully low base of just 19 per cent of our land area covered by trees – well below the European average of 44 per cent. As in coal production, we have a lot to atone for.

We allowed our forest cover to dwindle to just 5 per cent in 1919 and our target now remains modest at 21 per cent by 2032. Thankfully that includes the restoration of our Celtic Rainforest, a thin strip of native oak, birch, ash, pine and hazel along the wet west coast.

Trees, of course, are not just good for the environment, they already create 25,000 jobs and £1 billion in income each year in Scotland. And the same economic gains can come from all net-zero projects – insulating homes, replacing gas boilers with heat-exchange units, electric cars, alternative energy. This week the principal of Glasgow University Professor Anton Muscatelli has been arguing that if Scotland were to invest £5

billion a year in green technologies, we could combine the transition to a low carbon future with real economic growth.

In Glasgow, over the next few days, we will see whether there is the political will to “go green.” It’s strange that the leaders have gone home before that becomes clear. And that’s left the delegates haggling inside the “blue zone” conference centre on the banks of the Clyde, and the demonstrators out on the streets.

We’ve seen daily marches, protests outside the big banks, boys with banners hanging from “the Squinty Bridge”, the Greenpeace ship sailing up the Clyde, lots of traffic disruption and 10,000 police wondering what to do about it all.

Everyone is hoping the congregation of peoples in Glasgow will not result in a spike in Covid cases. The Health Minister, Humza Yousaf, has warned that there are early signs that cases may increase from the current 2,800 a day. And, with around 900 people in hospital with Covid, the NHS “is close to capacity.” Waiting times at accident and emergency units are the longest on record. Only 70 per cent of patients are seen inside the target time of four hours.

But for all the troubles, let’s hope that Glasgow will live up to its Gaelic translation, “the dear green place”. Sadly though, COP26 Glasgow may turn out to be like the melting glacier in the Antarctic, which has just been named after it.



Patricia Espinosa Executive Secretary United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and Archie Young speaking at the Presidency Event; 4th High Level Ministerial Dialogue on Climate Finance at the SEC, Glasgow. 03/11/2021. Photograph: Karwai Tang/ UK Government