

Beyond Glasgow – what happened at COP26 and where we go next

It is a month since Alok Sharma as president, fighting back some tears, brought down the gavel on the 26th Conference of the Parties – the United Nations climate summit in Glasgow. The initial flurry of reactions and comments has subsided. Here in Scotland we have already seen some early signs of the impact – with the beginnings of a victory against the development of a new offshore oil field at Cambo. On Saturday, 4 December, activists in Glasgow held a first gathering to take stock and plan future steps.

So this is intended as a contribution to that process of weighing up what happened, both inside the official talks, and outside in the struggle for climate justice. We need to do this as fully and accurately as we can, to provide a guide for what we do next.

This is perhaps most urgent in Scotland, where the huge protests on the streets of Glasgow on the 5 and 6 November have had a major impact on the political and ideological landscape, and could have a lot more in the years to come if we are able to learn the most useful lessons, and build on them. But it is also important for the climate movement in England and the rest of the UK, which faces a possible moment of refoundation.

And it is not without significance at a global level, where, as a representative of one Indigenous organisation who made it to Glasgow argued, it is time to be thinking about a new kind and scale of international coordination.

Three outcomes

We can divide the main conclusions from COP26 into three. The most important has to do with the success of those mobilisations outside the official talks, and we'll come back to that.

The second was also immediately obvious to many, and relates to the spectacular failure of the official summit, when measured against its own stated objectives. World leaders definitively did not “embrace their responsibilities” to “act now”, as the UK presidency had asked them to six months earlier, when Alok Sharma stood in front of the huge, commercial Whitelee wind farm, 15 kilometres south of the COP26 venue on the Clyde, and called on them to “pick the planet”.

They did not bring to Glasgow the commitments that would keep global warming at less than 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels by the end of the century. Those were not tears of joy on Alok Sharma's face as he had to close the summit ~~summit~~ with a watered-down target on “phasing down” coal power. The concluding statement by the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, used diplomatic language but left little room for doubt: “unfortunately the collective political will was not enough to overcome some deep contradictions. ...We are still knocking on the door of climate catastrophe. ...We did not achieve these (*ie. the main*) goals at this conference.”

The third kind of conclusion is less obvious. It got little mention in the mainstream media coverage, and for the most part lies buried in the detail of the deliberately opaque discussions on wrapping up the rulebook for the Paris Agreement and related “technical” aspects. Here we find the moves made by governments and the private sector, including fossil fuel companies and big banks, to put in place the procedures and organisational infrastructure to secure the

still evolving, and still contradictory, ruling class response to the climate emergency.

It was not an accident that the largest single delegation at COP26, bigger than any single government, was constituted by lobbyists from the fossil fuel industry. There were at least 503 of them and there have been no reports of tears on their faces.

The second biggest delegation was the Brazilian one. It had 480 members, including many lobbyists from the agribusiness, mining and forestry sectors, all with a special interest in resolving the rules around carbon markets, for example. Their moves made significant progress in Glasgow. But they did not have it all their own way.

They were thwarted, or maybe just delayed, on several key questions by the pressure of civil society on the inside of COP26 – for example the inclusion of forests as tradable carbon credits under Article 6, or the use of nature based solutions as offsets (see below).

It is at the intersection between these three levels that the future of the climate movement, and indeed of humanity, will be decided. So let us look more closely at the last two, before returning to the movement itself.

The Glasgow Get-out

The final “agreement”, officially called the Glasgow Climate Pact, but dubbed by some in the climate movement as the Glasgow Get-out, is a laboriously constructed work of smoke and mirrors. In some ways, it is ambitious. It is certainly longer and more wide-ranging than such “cover decisions” (the technical term for these interim negotiated texts) usually are. In line with the latest scientific reports from the IPCC, it focuses much more sharply than the 2015 Paris Agreement itself on 1.5 degrees maximum warming as the key goal. It

stresses the need for “accelerated action in this critical decade”. It even has a few seemingly specific promises, like developed countries doubling by 2025 their financial contributions to the Adaptation Fund, to help countries in the global south adjust to the climate change that is already on the way [[This was seen as a gain for developing countries made during the talks. No such provision had been on the formal agenda, and when it first appeared in the draft texts the language had been much vaguer. The final text takes 2019 as the baseline, meaning that developed countries are *urged* to come up with an additional US\$40 billion a year for adaptation by 2025. However, this is still well short of what is needed. The UN Environment Programme estimates the current annual need at US\$70 billion, and suggests this is likely to quadruple by 2030. It also remains unclear that developing countries accept this is not part of the US\$100 billion a year that they promised back in 2009 and have still failed to deliver.]]

Some of this sharper language is the result of hard-fought battles by poorer countries and civil society delegates, over the position of commas and this or that adjective. But more than anything it reflects the understanding by most imperialist governments that, at the very least, they have to be seen to be taking the climate crisis seriously. They know that the level of concern among their citizens has increased very significantly in just the last few years, even the last few months, as floods and fires have ravaged Europe and North America as well as India, China or Bolivia. People expect their governments to act. And these governments in turn fear that public concern will deepen. When their discourse of vandalism or even terrorism leveled at direct action groups largely falls flat; when very large numbers of people actually sympathise with people gluing themselves to motorways, or Indigenous communities occupying oil wells and blocking mines, the authorities know the situation is serious.

The gaping hole in the Glasgow Climate Pact is the almost

total absence of detail. There is virtually nothing specified about who will do exactly what by when, and how anyone will be able to verify it, much less enforce it. In the English language, a pact usually means an agreement to do something. In that sense, this is not a pact at all – more of a political statement about a series of things the parties agree (more or less) that they would like to see happen.

The two main, overlapping, texts of the Glasgow Climate Pact have 71 and 97 points respectively. [[In characteristically confusing fashion, there are three versions of the main cover decision text, one for each of the three meetings that officially took place in parallel under the ~~the~~ umbrella of COP – firstly the COP26 itself, that is the 26th Conference of the Parties of United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change; secondly the CMP16, the 16th Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol, which is largely irrelevant and whose texts say very little: and the CMA3, or the 3rd Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement, which actually has most detail in relation to the implementation of the Paris Agreement.]] Almost all of them begin with words like *recognizes*, *expresses*, *notes*, *stresses*, *emphasizes*, *urges*, *invites*, *calls upon*. Only one point in the COP.26 version of the Pact begins with *resolves*, while the longer, CMA.3 text has 6 points that begin with *decides* and 3 with *resolves*. These very few “decisions” all refer to organisational questions of arranging future meetings and work processes and mechanisms. None of them refer directly to the substantive issues of emissions cuts or climate finance.

From Binding to Voluntary to Proclamation

This illustrates one of the two overarching developments in

the UN climate negotiations that we need to note if we are to make sense of what happened in Glasgow. This is how the process has moved away from any kind of binding commitments, of the sort contained in the Kyoto Protocol that came into force in 2005. During and after COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009, the U.S. and the EU systematically assaulted this approach. This meant that the Paris Agreement in 2015, while achieving advances in some respects, contained only voluntary commitments to cutting greenhouse gas emissions. These were the core of the famous NDCs, or nationally determined contributions. The whole point of COP26 – the reason it was hailed as a make or break moment – was that this was the time, five years on from the Paris Agreement, by which the 193 signatories were meant to have come up with their enhanced NDCs, their plans to make the bigger cuts and provide the greater finance, that would allow global warming to be kept below 2 degrees Celsius, and preferably below 1.5 degrees. But it was entirely up to each party to announce whatever it wanted, whenever it wanted. There was never going to be, and never could be, given the nature of the Paris Agreement, a deal negotiated in Glasgow to ensure this outcome.

The scale of the shortfall left by these voluntary contributions on the core issue of emissions cuts, or mitigation as it is called in the language of the UNFCCC, is tucked away in paragraphs 22 and 25 of the CMA.3 version of the final text. The first *recognises*, what the IPCC Report on 1.5 Degrees had brought to the fore of the climate change agenda in 2018, that “limiting global warming to 1.5 °C requires rapid, deep and sustained reductions in global greenhouse gas emissions, including reducing global carbon dioxide emissions by 45 per cent by 2030 relative to the 2010 level and to net zero around midcentury, as well as deep reductions in other greenhouse gases”. Now the climate justice movement centred around the COP26 Coalition has questioned, at length and in depth, the scale, timing and distribution of these IPCC targets, including especially the new and very

unscientific mantra of net zero by 2050. And not of course because they are too ambitious.

However, even against these inadequate targets, paragraph 25 "*Notes with serious concern* the findings of the synthesis report on nationally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement, according to which the aggregate greenhouse gas emission level, taking into account implementation of all submitted nationally determined contributions, is estimated to be 13.7 per cent above the 2010 level in 2030". The failure of COP26 to achieve its main objective could hardly be clearer. If you add up all the new, more ambitious plans (enhanced NDCs) submitted by 151 parties up to day 3 of the COP (2 November, 2021), they project not a cut of 45% in CO2 emissions by 2030, but an increase of 13.7%.

This is not a small discrepancy that we can make up later. It is a colossal move in the wrong direction.

Carbon Action Tracker, a well-respected research body, calculated that these pledges would, at best, keep warming to 2.4 degrees Celsius by 2100. More probably, given the recurring failure to meet even inadequate promises, we would end up with 2.7 degrees. Others regard even this as over optimistic.

The fact that the Glasgow Pact does call on countries to submit new, more ambitious NDCs by COP27, in Egypt next year, and on a yearly basis after that, was held up as evidence of greater ambition. It is certainly an improvement on the 5-year cycle agreed in Paris. But the fact this call was made at all only highlights the spectacular failure to meet the targets needed by COP26.

The UK presidency knew well in advance the dimension of this failure. Its strategy was to seek to bury it in a welter of rhetoric about keeping 1.5 alive. That is the function of the more ambitious language in the final text. The same concern,

to be seen to be taking action, characterised the flurry of announcements made during the World Leaders Summit, which took up the Monday and Tuesday of the first week of the COP.

First there was the pledge by 130 countries to “halt and reverse forest loss and land degradation by 2030”. Then it was 109 countries promising to cut 30% of methane emissions by 2030, 190 countries announcing commitments to phase out coal power, and 30 countries and financial institutions to stop financing fossil fuel development overseas. Beyond the headlines, it was never perfectly clear who had agreed to do quite what.

And some of the announcements began to unravel as soon as they were made. For example, critics immediately pointed out that most of the deforestation pledge was the same as the 2014 New York Declaration on Forests, which had produced no results at all. The environment minister of Indonesia, which had been touted as one of the key signatories, took to twitter to call the pledge “clearly inappropriate and unfair”. Bolivia, one of very few countries taking a firm climate justice stance inside the COP26, was also listed as a signatory; but when we interviewed the Bolivian president, Luis Arce, on the day of the announcement, he told us his country had not signed and was still evaluating the pledge.

As Alex Rafalowicz from Colombia told one of the daily Movement Assemblies in Glasgow that week, the COP process has moved from binding agreements through voluntary targets to the rhetoric of grandiose but unverifiable announcements.

Forget Equity

This shift in the shape of the UN climate talks – to abandon binding agreements – goes hand in hand with another – the shift away from the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. (CBDR) This principle of CBDR was enshrined in the UNFCCC by the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. It means that

those countries who historically have been most responsible for putting greenhouse gases into the atmosphere since the beginning of the industrial revolution, the industrialised countries of the global north, the Annex 1 countries, in the terminology of the Convention, should take the major responsibility to address the climate change that has resulted. It became an important part of the movement to demand climate justice.

During the discussions on a new treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol, at Copenhagen and the COPs that followed, the U.S. and its allies attacked the principle of CBDR on the grounds that *all* countries needed to do their bit, just as it sought to overturn the practice of binding agreements. In part this opposition was due to the predictable reluctance of imperialist countries to pay for the harm they have done. But it also had to do with the growing obsession in Washington, under Obama and since, with the threat posed to U.S. hegemony by China.

The Paris Agreement retained some of the language about CBDR. But the practice had already moved on. And without any mechanism to enforce commitments, any differentiation between the amount done by rich countries and poor countries would also be entirely voluntary.

This accentuated move away from equity was a hallmark of the Glasgow COP, in every area and at every step, even if developing country delegations did manage to get a few references to CBDR re-inserted into the Glasgow Climate Pact. It is inscribed in the dominant narrative of "net zero by 2050", which the UK presidency tried so hard to impose. Many global south delegates described this as carbon colonialism. That is because it completely contradicts any idea that there is a finite carbon budget, an amount of carbon dioxide and equivalent gases that the human race can still afford to emit while keeping warming to 1.5 degrees, and that the rich countries *have already spent all of their share* of that

budget. What is left, about 600Gt of CO2 equivalent, should therefore be reserved, as far as possible, for countries of the south so that they can combat extreme poverty.

Net zero is centred on the notion that rich countries and major corporations can continue to emit greenhouse gases, either because they will pay someone else not to (offsets), or because they will use some untried or non-existent technology to remove those gases from the atmosphere in the future. So in addition to these two bogus premises (that offsets can lead to real cuts in emissions, and that we will eventually be able to count on negative emissions technology), the net zero narrative depends on jettisoning any pretence of justice for those in the global south who are the main victims of climate change. It calls on all countries to pursue this common goal of net zero by the middle of the century, while glossing over the fact that the route envisaged to get there is conceived entirely with the financial and technological capacities of rich countries in mind.

It was this sleight of hand that allowed the UK presidency, and the mainstream, northern media to blame India, and indirectly China, for that last minute watering down of the wording on “phasing down” instead of “phasing out” unabated coal power. Of course, India, like China, does want to get off the hook of its own dependence on coal. But the point it was making was that it is not fair – and it is not in line with the CBDR principles of the UNFCCC – to expect developing countries with high levels of poverty to implement the same scale of mitigation at the same speed as rich countries. In fact earlier in the week, India had proposed language suggesting that all fossil fuels should be phased down, not just coal. But the ~~the~~ U.S. and Europe were having none of that.

The other side of this shift away from equity was clear in the attitude displayed by rich countries in Glasgow to climate finance. After shuffling numbers and dates backwards and

forwards, they still ended up with ~~still~~ no commitment on when they would come up with the US\$100 billion a year they had promised back in 2009 to provide by 2020 to help developing countries transition to clean energy and green technologies – a figure that had been pulled out of a hat at Copenhagen to placate governments in the South incensed by the assault on CBDR, and which had been woefully adequate even then. Another UN report recently suggested the amount needed would be more like US\$6 trillion. The important thing to understand here is that such significant sums of climate finance are an absolute prerequisite for a just transition at a global level. Without such support, most countries in the South would have no way of moving towards zero carbon by investing in renewable energy, recycling, clean public transport, electric vehicles and so on.

Even worse, rich countries steadfastly resisted the attempts by developing countries to agree a common definition of climate finance. That may sound bureaucratic, but governments in the South wanted to make it clear that to qualify as climate finance it should be new money, given in the form of grants or other kinds of concessional finance (eg. loans at below market level interest rates). By rejecting a common definition, rich countries signaled their intention to continue fudging their already paltry commitments, by re-labelling existing development aid as climate finance and including commercial loans that will only increase the debt burden of the south and the profits of northern banks.

Led by the U.S. and the EU, they also refused to apply a 5% levy on the buying and selling of carbon credits between governments, which developing countries wanted as a reliable source of finance for the Adaptation Fund.

Perhaps most tellingly, the U.S. flatly refused to countenance a separate stream of funding to pay for Loss and Damage, which has been one of the most pressing demands of many southern countries for the last several COPs. This means money to pay

for the damage already caused by climate change, including extreme weather events like hurricanes and floods. The prime minister of Antigua and Barbuda, Gaston Browne, told leaders on the second day of the COP that countries like his may be forced to seek redress in the international courts, if no loss and damage funding were agreed. The country's second island of Barbuda was rendered uninhabitable by Hurricane Irma in 2017. The U.S., however, terrified of admitting liability for such costs, would only accept a minimal move of funding the operations of the Santiago Network, set up at COP25 but not activated, to advise and give technical support to nations facing such losses. As another southern delegate wryly commented, what we don't need is more consultants flying around the world to tell us what loss and damage is.

Article 6 – the architecture of climate capital

These apparently obscure details all feed into that third kind of conclusion we mentioned above. Somewhere just below the radar of the mainstream media, COP26 made significant advances towards putting in place the structures and procedures by which a significant section of international capital is seeking to put the climate crisis at the centre of its business model for the decades to come. The centrepiece of this project is Article 6 of the Paris Agreement.

Article 6 deals with three kinds of what is called, euphemistically and misleadingly, “voluntary cooperation” between countries aimed at allowing “higher ambition in their mitigation and adaptation actions”. Essentially, this means offsets and carbon markets. In other words, Article 6 establishes the mechanisms by which high-emitting countries (mainly in the global north) can massage their promises to cut emissions (their NDCs), by continuing with some of those emissions (or even most of them), if they pay someone else

(mainly countries in the global south) *not* to emit (or to absorb) an equivalent amount. Paragraph 6.2 refers to such “cooperation”, or trade in carbon credits, bilaterally between parties or countries. Paragraph 6.4 refers to such carbon trades on a wider basis between public and private entities, in other words to carbon markets as such. Paragraph 6.8 refers to “non-market” approaches to such exchanges, mainly involving the aid programmes of rich countries.

These mechanisms are absolutely central to how imperialist countries have approached the climate crisis and the need to cut greenhouse gas emissions. They are what makes it possible for them to “commit to” the goals of “net zero by 2050” and the like, because they make it possible, in theory, for capitalism to look like it is taking bold steps to confront the crisis, while in fact only making comparatively modest changes to how it operates in the foreseeable future. That is, they seem to offer the possibility of pushing off into the future the existential contradiction that confronts capitalism, between its inherent obligation to grow and the environmental imperative that we consume less.

In the mean time, they also hold out the offer of a major new area of accumulation to a sector of global capital, especially finance capital. This is what David Harvey would call accumulation by dispossession – in this case the dispossession is of vast swathes of “nature” in the global south, bought up (or seized) from local, sometimes Indigenous communities, by northern governments and companies to offset their failure to cut emissions at home.

Not surprisingly, discussion of the precise rules that would govern how this vital piece of the jigsaw operates have been complicated and fractious. The battles have been shrouded by impenetrable jargon, but mostly they had to do with accountancy – with who would be able to include what, and when, as part of these carbon trades, and consequently who would benefit most. Successive COPs following Paris failed to

reach an agreement. Civil society groups argued that no agreement would be better than a bad one, and almost any agreement on these terms would be a bad one. At Madrid they staged a last-minute protest that helped to block a deal. The problem was kicked down the road to Glasgow.

In Glasgow, there was an agreement on the rules for Article 6. The logjam seems to have been broken by a clever accounting suggestion from Japan. This is undoubtedly a significant victory for those banking on the future of offsets and carbon markets. Alongside the agreements reached on the timeframes for reporting emission cuts and standards of transparency, it means the rule book governing the Paris Agreement is now, in general terms, complete. However, not all the details are resolved. The example of forests illustrates how battles will continue to be fought over this market-driven agenda for the climate crisis.

Contrary to what some climate activists assume, forests have not so far been part of the UNFCCC's carbon trading regime. In the Paris Agreement they come under Article 5, not Article 6. So there have indeed been programmes like REDD+, which provide for what are called "results-based payments" to countries that reduce their emissions from deforestation and conserve forests as carbon sinks. But such forest protection has not been able to generate carbon credits that could be traded on carbon markets, and which could therefore be bought by other governments or companies to offset their continued emissions and therefore help those countries meet their NDCs. Of course, many forest communities and others in the global south thought this was clearly the direction of travel, and feared the aim of many northern delegations was to turn the world's forests into one more thing that could be bought and sold so that they could avoid making the emissions cuts that are needed.

In the run-up to Glasgow, a concerted campaign in this direction was mounted by the ill-named Coalition for Rainforest Nations (CfRN), supposedly represented at COP26 by

Papua New Guinea. The CfRN claims to include 50 rainforest nations. However, the give-away is in the preposition. Because this is not an alliance *of* countries, but a “not-for-profit”, set up “*for* rainforest” nations by two graduates of Columbia Business School, from the U.S. and Italy, one of whom was brought up in Papua New Guinea. Its offices are in Manhattan, its board and staff are almost all investment bankers, and since 2005 it has been *the* main proponent of putting a price on the world’s rainforests, in theory as a way of compensating countries for conserving them. Since then it has led the promotion of RED, REDD and REDD+, each of which took a step closer to making forests one of the most important offsets on sale in the world’s carbon markets.

The CfRN, supported by several northern country delegations, pushed hard for COP26 to include emissions reductions from REDD+ to be included as carbon credits under Paragraph 6.2. This would cover both past REDD+ reductions, from 2015 to 2021, and a fast track for such reductions in the future from 2021, thus for the first time allowing the governments of high-emitting countries to buy up such “forest credits” as a way of achieving their NDCs. They also supported draft wording for Para 6.4 that would define carbon “removals” as relating specifically to the agriculture, forestry and land-use sector, thus putting forests directly into the carbon markets for the first time. Environmental campaigners from Brazil and elsewhere argued strongly that these moves would be disastrous for forest communities in Amazonia and elsewhere, and for the forests themselves, because they would unleash an even more intense wave of land grabs and commercial pressure on their territories, as rich countries and big corporations scrambled to buy up the rights to keep on polluting.

In the end, these campaigners won a small victory. REDD+ reductions were not mentioned in relation to 6.2, and the reference to forestry in 6.4 was replaced by a more generic definition of removals. However, these may be temporary stays

of execution. Forests are not excluded under either mechanism, and there will surely be new attempts to include them explicitly when some of the further definitions come up for discussion.

Some initial conclusions for the movement

These three kinds of outcome from COP26 point to three kinds of conclusion that may help to orient our future action.

1. It is increasingly unlikely – one could say it is increasingly close to excluded – that the 197 parties to the UNFCCC will ~~not~~ take the action needed in the current decade – either ~~neither~~ in terms of emissions cuts or ~~nor~~ in terms of climate finance for the global south – to ensure that global warming will remain below 1.5 degrees Celsius. At least not unless there is a dramatic shift in the political balance of power that forces their hand.
2. There will continue to be mass pressure, from public opinion and from protests on the streets and in communities, to demand that those governments do take such action.

This is not because most of these people trust their governments to do what is needed. Most of the 100 or 150 thousand on the streets of Glasgow certainly don't. The same goes for many of the millions more who watched with sympathy. Almost certainly, most of those protesters already think "system change" is needed, although they may not be clear what that might involve.

But for the moment, they still see putting pressure on governments as the best available option. The more those governments don't take such action, and the more the impact of

extreme weather events is felt in major population centres, the more the movement may radicalise.

There is already widespread sympathy for others taking direct action. That sympathy may increase. In some specific circumstances, the mass movement itself may resort more to direct action to block mines, power plants or whatever.

But overall, and unless there is a dramatic shift in the political balance of power, the mass movement will not take upon itself the task of shutting down the fossil fuel industry, as some are suggesting it should.

3. While governments in the global north will continue to claim they are working to keep 1.5 alive, the most coherent sectors of the capitalist class, especially in the financial sector, will be working hard and fast to put in place the mechanisms that can turn the climate and biodiversity crises into a new, core domain for capital accumulation. Of course, much of the ruling class in the global south is already well integrated into this project. Governments and civil society organisations that are not will continue to fight their corner within the framework of the UN climate talks. They don't have much choice. There may be increasingly sharp contradictions between some of them and the way the governments of the global north are driving the process forward at their expense. But there will also be many occasions where these representatives of the global south, both governments and sometimes movements, buy into the short term benefits apparently on offer from global capital and its market mechanisms for addressing the climate crisis. One example of this is how even some radical sections of the Indigenous movement in Brazil have been tempted to sign up to aspects of the commodification of forests, as a way of getting much-needed cash to their communities.

It is understandable that point one above will lead to, indeed has already produced, calls to radicalise the movement. In part those calls are right. But it would be a bad mistake to misinterpret this. The temptation to “disengage from the COP” altogether and “set our own agenda” risks driving a wedge between some of the more radical sections of the climate justice movement, still a relatively small minority, and those much bigger forces that were both on the streets in Glasgow and were represented, in a mediated form, by some of the governments of the global south and many of the civil society groups that operate and fight within the UNFCCC process. Many Latin American Indigenous organisations, to take that prominent example again, were very active both on the streets of Glasgow, and inside the Blue Zone.

When 1000 delegates walked out of the Blue Zone on the final Friday, it was the biggest such revolt in the history of the COPs, at least since the Alba countries banged the table and rejected Obama’s stitch-up in Copenhagen. 750 civil society delegates packed out one of the main halls for an impromptu People’s Plenary, which ended with them singing “power to the people”. Then they were joined by several hundred more who couldn’t get in, to march through the Scottish Events Campus venue singing “the people are going to rise like the water... I hear the voice of my great grand daughter, calling climate justice now”, and finally to exit the blue zone and link up with the movements protesting outside the gates. It was a powerful and moving illustration of the kind of links that are possible, and necessary.

What we need to find, in Scotland as in other parts of the UK and around the world, are the particular organisational forms that can bring these different component parts together – into a more lasting, consistent and potent force – not to drive them apart.

Climate Justice, Social Justice and Independence in Scotland

Here in Scotland, the aftermath of COP26 presents us with a special opportunity. This can be illustrated with one short story, told backwards.

At the time of writing, the private equity-backed oil exploration company, Siccar Point Energy, has just announced it is “pausing” its project to develop the Cambo oil field, located 1,000 metres below the North Sea to the west of the Shetland Islands. Although not a big field, and economically a marginal one, for campaigners and the UK government alike, Cambo had become symbolic of the confrontation between an official strategy of maximum fossil fuel extraction on the road to a low carbon future, and the demand to leave it in the ground, now. For the campaigners, Siccar’s announcement feels like a big victory.

Siccar’s decision came 8 days after Shell pulled out of its 30 percent stake in the project, saying “the economic case... is not strong enough at this time”.

Just over two weeks earlier, on 16 November, Scotland’s First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, for the first time expressed open opposition to the new oil field, saying it should not get the green light and was incompatible with targets for “net zero”. Previously she had only called for a reassessment of the project by the UK government, which has the power to approve oil exploration licenses.

Ten days before that, Glasgow hosted the biggest climate demonstration ever seen in the UK, and one of the biggest protests of any kind ever held in Scotland.

When Shell announced its decision to pull out, Friends of the Earth Scotland quite rightly commented that “People power has made the climate-wrecking Cambo development so toxic that even

oil giant Shell doesn't want to be associated with it any more." That was true. But there was a step in between as well. Two steps in fact: government, and the national question.

The fact that so many people demonstrated in Glasgow, and that "Stop Cambo" was one of their most visible demands, no doubt had an impact on Shell. The oil giant can do without this or that new oil field the size of Cambo (170 million barrels over 25 years, about the same as Saudi Arabia produces in three and a half weeks). And it is concerned about its image, especially that it is now publicly committed to becoming "net zero" by mid century. But those demonstrations were probably not the decisive factor in its decision. The threat of climate campaigners waging legal warfare and dragging the project through endless appeals and court delays probably weighed heavier.

However, that huge protest in Glasgow surely did weigh large in Nicola Sturgeon's shift to opposing Cambo. And Nicola Sturgeon's change of heart probably had an even greater bearing on Shell's economic calculations. The Scottish government may not have the power to say yes or no to new oil fields, but it could make the practicalities of access and operations a lot more difficult. And even Shell can probably see that well before the end of the 25-year life span of the oil field and its economic viability, there is a realistic possibility of Scotland becoming an independent country, with a government that may now want to get rid of all such oil fields.

This is one concrete example of how the national question is sharpening the climate question in Scotland, and vice versa.

The combination between the insulting exclusion of Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP government by the Johnson-Sharma UK unionist presidency of COP26, and the historic scale of the mobilisation on Scottish streets, has increased the pressure on an ambiguous SNP government, and already brought some

modest results, like that over Cambo. The Scottish government budget, revealed last week, also makes some partial steps in a positive direction, with addressing the climate crisis made one of its three top priorities. This of course has coincided with the incorporation into government of the Scottish Green Party – significantly to the left of the Greens in England, Germany, or probably anywhere else in the EU. The Scottish government took another very small but symbolic step in the first week of COP26, when it became the first administration in the global north to make a concrete offer, of just £1 million, later increased to £2 million, to a fund for loss and damage in the Global South – an initiative which was promptly trashed by the Biden administration.

In the other direction, the climate question is itself beginning to bisect, and polarise, the national struggle. It may be little more than a footnote, of some interest in Scotland but not much elsewhere, but this has become clear in the attitude of the former First Minister, Alex Salmond. Salmond broke with Sturgeon and formed last year **Alba**, a supposedly more radical nationalist party, backed by a strange amalgam of anti-trans “feminists” and misogynist leftists. After Sturgeon came out against Cambo, he promptly attacked her for selling out Scotland’s right to its own oil and putting jobs at risk.

In other words, the issues of climate justice and climate action now traverse the national struggle in Scotland, just as the issue of closing down North Sea oil and the need for a just transition led by workers in the sector cuts across and polarises the trade union movement in Scotland.

These are potentially explosive combinations. Climate struggles are already stoking national demands, and they could add a whole new dimension to the struggle for independence. At the same time, any advance towards an independent Scotland is necessarily going to pose the issues of climate justice much more sharply. The SNP government has taken some modest,

positive steps, just as it has in various areas of social policy. But its overall “social liberal” orientation and its attachment to market-led policies means it is still wedded to the vision of net zero (by 2045) and illusions about carbon capture and storage, about Scotland as a powerhouse and exporter of renewable energy and so on. Dismantling the net zero narrative and its attendant false solutions therefore takes on a particular importance here in Scotland, both for the climate movement and for the radical wing of the pro-independence movement.

The big challenge in the coming months – and it is a challenge that needs to be embraced swiftly, or the moment will have passed – is to find the organisational forms and the political initiatives that can capture, consolidate and develop the energy, the diversity and the political radicalisation that burst onto the streets of Glasgow in November. This will need some sort of specific initiative here in Scotland, but an initiative that is articulated with similar, appropriate moves in other parts of the UK and internationally.

Iain Bruce, 11 December 2021

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