We'll Always Have Paris

With the Glasgow COP postponed to 2021, Mike Hannis asks whether 2015's Paris Agreement was the highwater mark of international co-operation on climate change.

The big environmental event of 2015 took place in Paris. High-level delegates from almost every country on Earth attended the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – more snappily known as COP21, or the Paris Climate Conference.

While there's usually at least one COP every year, every five years or so there's a big one, generally reported as 'the last chance to save the world'. 2009's COP15 in Copenhagen failed to live up to its cringeworthy branding as Hopenhagen. A goal of limiting temperature increases to two degrees above pre-industrial levels was agreed that year (subject to review in 2015) but no progress was made on any practical steps towards achieving this, or on the hoped-for legally-binding agreement.

Paris 2015 did arguably see a genuine breakthrough, though this was achieved by abandoning the attempt to create a legally binding system, and instead adopting a voluntary Agreement. This upheld the two degree target, and even adopted an 'aspiration' of keeping warming within 1.5 degrees. Each country agreed to set out its planned reductions in emissions or Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC). Reviewed every five years, NDCs can be amended to be 'more ambitious' but are never supposed to be revised downwards. This review process is intended to 'ratchet up' individual countries' commitment to emissions reduction. Detailed discussion of how this new system would actually work in practice was deferred.

Before everyone's diaries were ripped up by the pandemic, 2020's COP26 in Glasgow was to be the next big COP on this five-year cycle. In time for this COP, countries had been asked to set long-term 2050 goals to decarbonise their economies, as well as undertaking the first five-yearly review of their shorter-term NDCs. This process was to be governed by a 'Paris rulebook', details of which should have been agreed and finalised in advance of COP26. These rules are supposed to make NDCs transparent, fair and robust by ensuring that all countries calculate them using agreed common methodologies, rather than doing the sums in whatever way works to their advantage. Standardisation would also allow the IPCC and others to effectively translate these NDCs into global temperature change forecasts.

Carbon Trading Rules

Intermediate COPs since Paris saw fudges and grandstanding rather than real progress, but nonetheless the Paris rulebook was largely agreed by the end of COP24 (Katowice 2018), with the significant exception of rules on voluntary carbon trading. These are known as Article 6 rules, after the apparently obscure but critically important part of the Paris Agreement they relate to. This issue of trading is much more significant

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than it ought to be. As *The Land* reported at the time, the Paris Agreement explicitly allows countries, in calculating their NDCs, to include emissions reductions elsewhere which they have somehow gained 'ownership' of, as well as those actually achieved within their own country.[1]

This legitimises a wide range of existing dubious practices whereby richer countries offset their polluting activities by paying for allegedly emission-reducing or carbon-capturing activities in poorer ones. So for instance, if the Norwegian government pays for some reforestation in Indonesia, or a British company pays to install a scrubber in the chimney of a chemical plant in India, the resulting greenhouse gas reductions will be reported as part of the Norwegian or British NDCs.

One problem immediately arising is that the 'host Party' (in this example Indonesia or India) might want to report the resulting reductions in their own NDC. Article 6 is fairly clear that such double counting would not be allowed, which at first sight seems fair. But is it? Should the host really have to also identify and enact a second set of reductions which *will* count towards its own target? Wouldn't this mean it was taking on a disproportionate share of the overall work?

This kind of argument has been forcefully put, especially by Brazilian delegates whose unique interpretation of what constitutes double counting relies on the idea that private sector schemes (as opposed to government actions) should not be counted as part of NDCs. This apparently technical dispute masks a bitter standoff between countries hoping to offset their own activities by funding preservation of the Amazon, and a Brazilian government insisting on full sovereignty over the area's resources. Neither is on the side of the angels.

Oli Scarff

Little progress has been made since this polar bear sculpture floated down the Thames in 2009, the year of COP15 in Copenhagen.

Overall Mitigation

There are also tricky practical questions about standards and verification. Who is supposed to make sure that any given scheme is not counted twice? How exactly might this be done? The answer may well be different for bilateral deals between two countries (covered by Article 6.2), and for trades undertaken within the regulated global carbon trading market mechanism envisaged by article 6.4, but neither is clear.

The latter mechanism will supersede the earlier Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), a dysfunctional voluntary trading scheme established by the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. Some countries hold vast numbers of old CDM credits, and insist that they should be able to count these against their future NDCs. In the case of Australia, cashing in these CDM credits would at a stroke achieve (on paper) more than half the emissions cuts required to meet its current target of reducing emissions to 26-28 percent below 2005 levels by 2030.

Perhaps most important of all though is the overarching issue of whether trading actually results in "overall mitigation in global emissions" (OMGE), meaning a genuine net reduction, rather than just serving as a way for emissions in one place to be offset elsewhere, thereby allowing business as usual to continue. This was discussed at Paris, and while detail is lacking, the principle of OMGE is acknowledged in Article 6.4 as an objective of the proposed global trading scheme.

Worryingly however, no such objective is included in Article 6.2 on bilateral trading. As things stand there appears to be no obligation to ensure that any given offsetting transaction between two countries actually results in a net emissions reduction. It has been largely left to the Association of Small Island States, whose territories are already literally disappearing under the waves, to point out how disastrous this could be.[2]

Better Late than On Time?

Madrid 2019 was supposed to see all these arguments settled. To the dismay of many but the surprise of few, this did not happen. Newly minted climate celebrity Greta Thunberg captured the mood when she told a restive plenary hall that the COP seemed to have "turned into some kind of opportunity for countries to negotiate loopholes".[3] The failure to agree Article 6 rules means that although the moment for the first five-year review of NDCs has arrived, there is still no agreement on crucial elements of what these can or cannot contain.[4]

But the Glasgow COP has now been postponed due to the pandemic. New dates in spring 2021 were initially mooted but the meeting is now scheduled to take place in November 2021. Given the sorry outcome of preparatory negotiations, could this be a blessing in disguise?

Many have expressed relief that the postponed COP will now take place after the US election this November. As things stand, the US is due to formally withdraw from the Paris Agreement on November 4th this year, coinciding almost exactly with the original Glasgow dates. The current US administration's contrarian refusal to co-operate on emission reductions has of course been an elephant in every COP negotiating room ever since 2017, when Trump announced his intention to withdraw.

Should Trump be defeated, an incoming Democratic administration would cancel this move. Democrat talk of Joe Biden "re-establishing US climate leadership"is surely over-optimistic, but he would no doubt begin the long journey back to a position of constructive international engagement on climate issues. This would happen very publicly in Glasgow, providing a much-needed boost to morale as well as to the flagging credibility of the whole Paris process.[5]

On the other hand should Trump be re-elected, this would at least bring clarity to the current sorry situation. As one senior member of a US NGO put it, "other countries will have had time to absorb that information by the time of the COP, and know definitively that they have to move on without the US".[5]

The End of Multilateralism?

Climate economist Nicholas Stern claims the delay also gives time to prepare for a big push at the Glasgow COP towards ensuring that rather than propping up business as usual, the massive funds being poured into pandemic recovery fund a transition to a sustainable and resilient economy.

Is his optimism realistic? How will the new world of post-corona international relations handle the need to co-operate? It is still too soon to say whether Stern's vision of pandemic recovery funds kick-starting a new global economy "in closer harmony with the natural world" will come true, but it must be said the early signs are not good.[5]

While there have been encouraging noises from the EU about making sure its recovery plans fit with its ambitious NDC targets to halve emissions by 2030 and reach net zero carbon by 2050, there are already questions around whether this rhetoric will be matched by action. Elsewhere, countries including the US and UK are unashamedly giving massive bailouts and loans to airlines and fossil fuel companies, without even attaching conditions on improved environmental performance. This risks locking in business as usual for decades to come.[6]

Researchers are already identifying a growing global trend towards 'cutting green tape' as politicians accept arguments from business that climate-related regulation is hindering recovery. This is happening in many countries but again the most egregious example is the US, where the current administration has wholeheartedly grabbed the opportunity to rescind or weaken an alarming number of environmental regulations.[7]

The context here is not only climate denial and cronyism, but also a wholesale repudiation of international agreements of all kinds. Trump has withdrawn the US not only from Paris, but also from many other international treaties on issues from nuclear arms control, to human rights, to the militarisation of space. His administration has recently quit the World Health Organisation and is now considering leaving the World Trade Organisation too. In the era of America First, internationalism of any kind is clearly off the table.[8]

This trend could potentially be reversed in the US with a new President, though it would take time. But Trumpism is bigger than Trump. Other countries such as Brazil, Australia and India – all major players in climate negotiations – are explicitly following his example. China is not exactly noted for its altruistic stance on global affairs. This is not an auspicious time for Paris-style voluntary co-operation.[9]

No Sleep 'til Glasgow

Closer to home, of course, the UK has a Government obsessed with the idea that the country should make its own buccaneering way in the world, beholden to no-one. This myopic ideology has not equipped it well to deal with real-world problems such as pandemics or climate change, neither of which respect national borders.

'Reclaiming sovereignty' apparently means refusing to be bound by any EU regulations, on environment or on anything else. Meanwhile, as we reported in the last issue, the desperate scramble to sign trade deals with anyone other than the EU seeems to have led UK negotiators to accept a US demand that any US/UK trade deal must not even mention climate change.[10] One way or another it seems likely that plenty of British green tape will be getting cut in the near future, and the post-pandemic recession will only accelerate this process.

So are there any grounds for optimism at all? One unexpected upside of the retreat from global co-operation might be that the projected global carbon trading mechanism may never get off the ground. As discussed above this might just encourage poorly regulated bilateral offset deals, but a more positive reading would be that countries might actually take responsibility for their own emissions.

There's nothing in the Paris Agreement to stop each country producing a more honest NDC, based on genuine reductions in emissions, with no reliance either on carbon trading or on fanciful 'negative emission technologies'.[11] Such honesty would also mean including emissions associated with everything the country consumes, no matter where it was produced. Plenty of credible work has already been done to map out what this could mean for the UK, though the Government has so far shown little interest.[12] If it really wants to claim a leadership role as the host of COP26, perhaps it should start now.

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