

Government Hypocrisy: Cumbria and Cop26



What is COP26 and why is it important?



Last year, the UK government announced that due to the pandemic, the UN Climate Change Conference scheduled for November 2020, would be [delayed by a year](#). The summit, an opportunity for representatives of every country to meet and discuss climate issues on a global level, has been held every year since 1995. In 2021 it will finally be Britain's turn to host COP26 in Glasgow. The whole world will be watching, and the event will be covered by the international political press, so our Government needs to appear strong and coordinated on climate policy.

Boris Johnson will be present, as well as other prominent members of the cabinet, and they will be under a lot of heavy scrutiny. This is perhaps why the Conservative government has recently made such an effort to keep climate policy in the headlines with new measures and pledges, promising to cut emissions and invest in renewables. The US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry will attend, as well as President Joe Biden (who is [not the prime minister's biggest fan](#)) to celebrate the [American return to the Paris Climate Accord](#). It is key for the British government to put on a good show; impress the Americans and generate a good press response to the summit. The pandemic, and subsequent damage to the British economy, has provided the opportunity to ["build back better"](#) using a 'green recovery' that prioritises investment in renewable energy sources. It is always difficult to trust conservatives on climate issues, however, and activists suspect that the government's new commitment to green policies may not be entirely trustworthy. Traditionally, the conservatives are the party of business, and favour profits over any regulation that slows growth and protects natural resources.

As part of the green recovery, Boris Johnson announced a ten-point plan to create green jobs, as well as a [commitment to cutting carbon emissions by 68% over the next decade](#). Of course, actions speak louder than words. Here are some of his words: ["We will host Cop26 in Glasgow in November, and rally as many nations as possible behind the target of net zero by 2050, leading by example, since the UK was the first major economy to accept this obligation in law."](#) Overseas aid will be aligned with the Paris Agreement goals of keeping global heating to 2 degrees Celsius by the end of the century. Maintaining biodiversity in the UK will be a priority, as well as protecting the ocean from pollution and overfishing. Since this announcement in December, the government's actions have told a slightly different story. Two different reports have been published that contend the statements made by the Prime Minister. The first, published [by the Public Accounts Committee \(PAC\)](#), claims that the government has no actual plan to help them meet climate change targets and that no strategies for reducing emissions have yet been agreed on. The other, published by the [Business Committee](#), predicts that the COP26 summit will be a failure unless the country sets clear goals and works towards Net-Zero.

MPs describe these reports as [inaccurate and unfair](#). Yet scrutiny of government policies that aim to cut domestic carbon, finds poorly organised plans and unmet goals. According to the Labour PAC Committee Chairman Meg Hillier, this is worsened by the fact that the ["government is not yet ensuring that its activities to reduce emissions in Britain are not simply transferring those emissions overseas - where so many of the carbon-intensive goods bought in Britain's](#)

[shops are made.](#)” Cutting carbon domestically, whilst exploiting unsustainable industry abroad is not good enough, and will not survive scrutiny from the UN in Glasgow. Green recovery pledges make the headlines, but in the meantime, corporate greed and fossil fuel lobbying continues to run the show behind closed doors.

Banks and Businesses

Even as the UK is supposedly replacing fossil fuels with clean energy sources, the world's banks are still financing the hydrocarbon industry. [An investigation compiled by six NGOs into the unethical practice of lending money to oil and gas corporations](#), recently revealed that the world's biggest 60 banks have provided \$3.8tn of funding since the Paris Accord was signed in 2015. The industry is supposed to be in a managed decline, and despite the reduced demand for energy during the COVID pandemic, investment in fossil fuels increased in 2020. This demonstrates the disingenuous nature of corporate green pledges, as [17 out of the 60 banks](#)



[had previously made a commitment to the goal of net zero by 2050.](#) The worst offenders are JPMorgan Chase, Barclays, and BNP Paribas, the latter a bank that [“never loses an opportunity to boast of its clean, green credentials.”](#) despite investing \$41bn over the last 5 years.

Britain's wealthy corporations are as irresponsible as its banks when it comes to climate policy. It has been recently established that [31 members of the FTSE 100 \(the list of the biggest companies in the UK\) are emitting CO2 at a rate consistent with a global temperature increase of over 2.7C.](#) This means we are failing to meet the goals set out in the Paris Accord, which are necessary for us to reach net zero by 2050. If global temperatures rise by 2.7 degrees, it will pose a significant threat to wildlife, natural resources, and human life. It is the point of no return.

Oil companies like BP and Royal Dutch Shell are [some of the largest emitters](#) of CO2 in the UK. The mining sector is also extremely polluting, with businesses such as Fresnillo,

Anglo-American, Polymetal, Antofagasta, Evraz, and BHP responsible for a large proportion of our greenhouse gas emissions. If the British government is serious about meeting the goal of Net Zero by 2050, then it must seize the opportunity provided by COP26 to publicly shame the reckless banks and businesses that continue to abuse the planet's natural resources, while making false commitments to sustainability. If the government does not introduce enforceable decarbonisation targets, as well as punitive measures for corporations that break them, then it's clear that big oil will never be phased out while it is still profitable.

False Promises and Failed Schemes

Alongside dubious corporations, the government continues to make vague promises to protect the planet which remain at odds with its actions. The [budget](#), published at the start of this year, was strangely absent of expected climate policy, but did detail new investment in defense spending, as well as several other policies that will directly add to emissions. Policy director at Greenpeace UK Doug Parr reacted to the budget with the remark: "[It's welcome that the government says climate is its 'number one priority', but increasing nuclear warheads and upgrading high-speed missiles is a funny way of showing it.](#)" Another interesting decision was to [halve the current air passenger duty of £13 per domestic flight](#), one week after [rail fares in the UK increased by 2.6%](#). Despite the fact that train travel is considerably more green than flying, these policies mean it is often cheaper to travel across the UK by air than by rail. Of course, driving is by far the most common method of transport, as rail fares are generally increased annually, unlike the fuel duty on petrol and diesel, which [remained frozen this year by the chancellor for the 11th year in a row](#). The predicted increase was "canceled" last minute in order to "keep the cost of living low." It is estimated by Carbon Brief that [the freeze in fuel duty alone has increased Britain's carbon emissions by up to 5% over the past decade](#). Whatever the government claims to be its number one priority, these policies reveal that in reality, it is, and always will be, the economy.

This is further reflected in the [sweeping cuts recently made to the foreign aid budget](#), which will this year be reduced from the established figure of 0.7% of national income. The cuts are expected to [reduce spending by 50-60% in countries like Syria, South Sudan, Nigeria, and Somalia](#), nations that rely heavily on our financial support for the funding of climate infrastructure. South Sudan in particular, is [drafting plans for mass tree planting and new renewable energy sources](#), which most likely will not be able to go ahead after the cuts go into

effect. Environmental groups expressed frustration in an [open letter](#) in November (after the plans were leaked several months early), insisting that the cuts to foreign aid will worsen the climate crisis and strongly undermine the message of COP26.

The west has a moral obligation to financially compensate the developing countries we are putting at risk with our reckless consumption, and the government is shunning that moral duty to invest in nuclear warheads that we will never use. This redirection of funds is shameless. The domestic schemes the government is using to help meet net zero goals are already collapsing. The [2 billion dollar Green Homes Grant](#), a flagship scheme that was proposed to decarbonise heating for 600,000 households and create 100,000 green jobs, was dropped in March 2021. The scheme would have allowed people to apply for vouchers that cover the expense of home renovations to improve efficiency. Nearly [70,000 applications were received](#), but the government met only 8% of its target distribution, and the scheme was axed and replaced by a £320 million funding pot. The remainder of the promised two billion dollars was repurposed.

Coal Mining and Oil Drilling

The scandal that truly exposes the government's hypocrisy is the [plans for a new coal mine in Cumbria](#). The Woodhouse Colliery would employ up to 500 people to produce coal for industrial uses like steel production, in obvious contradiction to the net zero pledge. Approved by Cumbria County Council in October of last year, and then by Housing Secretary Robert Jenrick in January 2020, it is the first proposed project of this type for 30 years. It was met with outrage from Green groups and activists; even [David Attenborough](#) and [Greta Thunberg](#) expressed specific criticism of the plan. The project has since been delayed pending a year-long inquiry into its viability, so it protects Cop26 from being affected by the issue.



The government's duplicity has not gone unnoticed by rival politicians. The former Liberal Democrat leader Tim Farron responded by saying "[It just smacks of utter rank hypocrisy. We will](#)

get laughed out of town by other countries if we try and tell them they should be doing more to move away from coal.” A Green Alliance Think Tank report estimates that the mine would create 8.4 million tonnes of excess CO2 yearly, or the equivalent of the output of 1 million homes. Yet there are still Conservative party members defending the mine against “climate alarmists,” claiming it brings an environmental benefit by reducing the need to import coal for steel production. This is a complete contradiction of the written plans for the mine which state that 85% of the coal would be exported for use in Europe, where there is no shortage of coal whatsoever. Once again, it’s a money grab that shuns the opportunity for real investment in the green industrial revolution, losing out on creating up to 9,000 jobs in the same area (much more than the coal mine would provide). The government could still approve the mine, and most likely will do so once the summit is over, to prevent any awkward questions being asked at COP.

As if attempting to open a new coal mine weren’t enough, the government has also announced plans for more North Sea oil and gas wells, when they should be refusing all new drilling licenses. Once again, the priority is “safeguarding jobs and the economy,” and ministers claim that “checkpoints” will be deployed, that limit consumption following targets to cut the UK’s emissions by up to 60 million tonnes by 2030. This deal includes a £16 billion joint private and government investment over the next 10 years - worth it, apparently, for the potential provision of up to 40,000 jobs across the energy industry. The question remains as to why the government doesn’t opt to invest in renewable energy and clean jobs instead, something the prime minister committed to only a few months ago. After years of financing fossil fuel projects overseas with deals that have only served to harm the planet, the government’s only option for credibility before COP26 is to repurpose this money for environmental uses. The oil and gas industry is no longer in peak demand, and we have already surpassed the limit of oil and gas consumption possible in compliance with the terms of the Paris climate agreement. There is no reason that the government should not end oil and gas licensing in totality if it is sincere about reducing Britain’s carbon emissions.

Net Zero Targets versus Real Action

Anybody who takes the time to compare the government’s climate rhetoric with actual policy will see the extent of the double standard. The government is making a show of committing to climate goals ahead of the COP26 summit, while simultaneously making deals that put the planet at risk by protecting the fossil fuel industry. Net-Zero by 2050 is a great target to work

towards, but we cannot allow the government to use it as a smokescreen while evading the real action necessary to prevent ecological collapse. Johnson's claim that reducing emissions is his number one priority, is an outrageous lie. His political career is propagated on a string of falsehoods that he hardly even bothers to disguise as sincerity; he is [currently being investigated for lying to his own MPs](#). One statement being investigated is the claim that emissions had been cut by 42% in the UK since 2010, when the real figure is 38% since 1990.

In this time of misinformation and conspiracy, transparency is the key to the managed decline of fossil fuels. Green groups want to know who is financing the oil and gas industry, and which businesses and politicians are taking money from oil companies in exchange for defending their interests. A government that was serious about tackling the climate crisis would also need to address the disparities in consumption between the rich and poor in Britain. They could do this by penalising the "polluter-elite" (the super wealthy [for whom carbon emissions are rising every year](#)), as well as regulating the farming industry with emissions laws and carbon taxes. The [top one percent of the world's population is responsible for half of global emissions](#). By forcing the super-rich to fly less, eat less meat, and pay levies on second homes, SUVs, and yachts, we could save [15 billion tonnes of carbon before 2060](#). Johnson's government will never do this because they rely on the super-rich to fund their party through donations. Climate change will never be Boris Johnson's priority, the conservative party will always choose to protect the interests of wealthy and their lies must be exposed before it is too late.