**[Down but not out](https://www.dawn.com/news/1658550/down-but-not-out)**

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THERE isn’t a great deal to be said for sprawling international conferences, at least as far as outcomes are concerned. Perhaps everyone represented gets to have their say on the conference floor. You can rest assured, though, that most of the words — particularly words of wisdom — will fall on deaf ears.

There was no reason to expect that the UN-sponsored Conference of the Parties in Glasgow, COP26, would be any different.

It was hyped up as the last chance for humanity to preserve its habitat. But even that is hardly a novelty. Similar slogans have echoed since the first COP in Rio almost 30 years ago. That does not mean they are unduly alarmist. If anything, it is a reminder that the world would be in a rather different place had it seriously begun heeding the warnings back in the early 1990s.

The value of action was already apparent during that decade. The ban on chloroflurocarbons (CFCs) was eminently effective. Depletion of the ozone layer has barely been a concern in the 21st century. That’s obviously welcome, but it barely qualifies as tinkering on the edges of a vast problem.

Banishing CFCs did not threaten the broader supremacy of global capital. It was an easy compromise. Fossil fuels are in a different category altogether. They are seen to sustain certain nations as well as some of the world’s largest MNCs.

The Glasgow gabfest failed to forestall a catastrophe.

Some of the biggest offenders have known for more than six decades that their relentless quest for oil, coal and gas deposits, and the deployment of these fuels, entailed deleterious environmental consequences. That damning information was successfully sequestered for a long time. It’s much harder to bury carbon, which continues to be bandied about as an emissions reduction mechanism.

Even if this could technically be part of the solution, it’s again tantamount to tinkering on the fringes. Alongside ‘clean’ or ‘green’ coal, gas and oil, it’s part of the effort to deflect criticism of fossil fuels by pretending that their exploitation for decades to come will progressively become ‘safer’ alongside token efforts at mitigation.

Remarkably, until the Glasgow conference the emissions reduction agenda all but ignored fossil fuels. When it came to formally pronouncing a long overdue death sentence on coal, India and China stood in the way. The delayed final declaration was eventually watered down to seeking a phase-down rather than a phase-out of coal.

At one level, the semantics are superfluous. Nations routinely fall short of their commitments. Besides, there’s a certain logic behind India and China’s resistance: the developed West has relied on fossil fuels for much longer than developing nations to power its growth, and historically bears responsibility for a far higher level of emissions.

The West’s ambitions on climate action rarely reflect this advantage. Even the $100 billion promised by the North to the South at the Paris conference in 2015 has not been delivered so far. That is anyhow paltry compensation for decades of colonial robbery, followed in many cases by neocolonial exploitation — and a plethora of criminal actions to ward off democratic developments that threatened to halt the plunder of natural resources.

If that’s a bridge too far, the very least developed nations could do would be to rapidly reduce their own dependence on fossil fuels before they pressure India or China to catch up. Let’s also not forget that even though China is today the world’s largest greenhouse gas emitter, its per capita carbon footprint is considerably smaller than that of the US — and India’s is minuscule in comparison.

Comprehensive climate justice wasn’t on the Glasgow agenda, though — even if even Western activists acknowledge its importance. But activists were mostly on the fringes, while the corridors were crawling with fossil fuel lobbyists keen to parade their recently acquired cre­­­dentials as conv­erts to environ­­­men­­talism.

At least some of the oil, coal and gas conglomerates are happy to wear a green mask, provided it proves profitable in the short run. If the prospect involves delayed gratification, they would rather not risk their own resources. But even public funding is seen as unacceptable if it involves higher taxes for those who can easily afford them. The fate of Joe Biden’s Build Back Better bill speaks for itself.

In the unlikely event that the half-baked pledges made at Glasgow are religiously adhered to, the planet is headed for 2.4 degrees Celsius of warming this century. That may well be a conservative estimate. The consequences could deteriorate far more sharply than anticipated.

Many young people at the forefront of climate agitation seem to understand that systemic changes in the way the world is organised will be necessary to shift the global trajectory. But there are older generations relentlessly paving the path to disaster. Wasting the crucial present decade in greenwashing and related blah, blah, blah would be the biggest crime ever committed against humanity.

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