

Talking Climate: The Path to COP26

Article by Paul Brown

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Alongside the scientific understanding, the rhetoric around climate change has undergone profound shifts over recent decades. One of the factors influencing this has been the role of the media, and the way it covers climate issues. But how crucial will communication around COP26 be in determining its outcome? Climate journalist Paul Brown explores this question and takes a look back at how far we've come.

It hardly seems credible that it has been only 30 years since the primary objective of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) “to stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic (human induced) interference with the climate system” were first typed into a news story.

That sentence was part of a dispatch to *The Guardian*, one among many other topics, from the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, when the danger of burning fossil fuels to life on Earth and human food supply was first formally acknowledged in a treaty.

It took only three years for enough countries to ratify the UNFCCC, as it became known, to allow the first Conference of the Parties (COP1) to take place. That meeting of 150 countries in Berlin 1995 was to start the process of cutting fossil fuel use – with the rich countries that had caused the problem shouldering the main burden.

Everyone knew it would be difficult, but the optimistic delegates pointed to the success of the Montreal Protocol of 1987 that had already limited the discharges of ozone-depleting chemicals into the atmosphere – and was already showing signs of mending the ozone holes over the poles.

But the UNFCCC was a different animal. It was clear from the start that oil-producing countries in the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia, aided and abetted by the United States with its giant oil and coal interests, were intent on slowing progress down. In the vast conference hall in West Berlin, the fossil fuel lobby was constantly on its feet, objecting, obstructing, and questioning.

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To speed things up, meetings were set up in side-rooms, working groups thrashed out various texts, sessions went late into the night. In the main hall, politicians made inspiring speeches about the need to prevent disaster for “our grandchildren.” The rhetoric of Dr Helmut Kohl, then German Chancellor, has been echoed, sometimes word for word, by every host of the climate talks ever since. Later, presidents and prime ministers began to talk about the next generation – “our children” – and now they talk about the fear there is “clear and present danger” to all of us.

But there was also a pattern that was to become familiar to journalists and delegates. The rhetoric ended with an agreed text on the last day that was inadequate to the task. Every politician accepted that to reach the consensus that the convention demanded, agreed actions would be less than perfect – some wanted more, some less but it was the best possible at that moment.

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Talking at cross-purposes

At COP1 there was an unknown youngish blonde woman in the chair, the environment minister from the former East Germany. She took firm control of the proceedings. When the agreement to take the first steps to reduce emissions came to the floor of the conference to be ratified, on the final day, we all expected the Saudi delegation to jump to their feet and object. They had no opportunity. The chairman’s gavel went down with a thump before they could rise. There was a cheer for the chair. Angela Merkel beamed. It was her first appearance on the world stage. Our UK Press bench turned to each other and said: “That woman could go far.”

By the standards of international treaties, it was a racing start – a momentum that continued through to the Kyoto Protocol in 1997. In between, the science of climate change was also progressing fast. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) ran in parallel alongside the COPs producing deep analysis of the growing climate crisis, melting poles, loss of forests, and the warming of oceans.

Through this process too, the fossil fuel lobby was pouring billions of dollars into obstruction and delay. Every country had a right to appoint scientists to the IPCC and for the oil and coal producers their scientists’ objective was to water down the language, to emphasise the uncertainty.

The reports were a synthesis of all the scientific papers in the world produced on climate change – of necessity the results being often years out of date before they were published. Perhaps worse was the fact that the IPCC reports were so long that a summary for policy makers was produced that seriously undermined the science.

I discovered how this worked when writing the first of three books about climate change. A

friendly scientist in the review process sent me all the papers. They were truly frightening. Across the world we were destroying our life support system and the signs were accelerating and growing ever more ominous. I wrote my book.

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When a summary for policy-makers compiled from the same papers was subsequently issued to journalists at a press conference, including me for *The Guardian*, none of that alarm was reflected in the text. It emphasised the uncertainties, the unknowns, the whole problem sounded far off and remote. The fossil fuel lobby's black fingers were all over it.

Despite this clear interference, progress was being made politically in terms of acknowledging that greenhouse gases had to be cut and that the industrial countries had to cut them. After much horse-trading in Kyoto and real leadership by Al Gore, then vice president, leading for the United States, each industrial country agreed to a reduction target.

With hindsight this was a remarkable achievement in so short a time – only five years after the Earth Summit. Progress was never going to be as fast again. The more subtle and sinister battle had begun. The constant intervention to tone down statements and make words bland in every open session and committee room had morphed into a clever worldwide campaign to set up think tanks to produce false climate science, pay spurious experts to appear on radio and television, and plant stories undermining proper scientists. The idea was simply to hamper any attempt to slow down or stop the ever-expanding exploration and use of fossil fuels. Scientists, fearing for their jobs and their reputations, found themselves roundly attacked and “exposed” by right-wing newspapers. It was a re-run of the successful campaigns and tactics of the tobacco industry in delaying action on smoking and lung cancer.

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As a result of this outstandingly clever and morally corrupt campaign, several of the COPs hardly produced any forward momentum at all. At COP6 in The Hague in November 2000, after two weeks of hard graft the negotiators agreed to give up and try again at COP7 the following year. Then, in March 2001, the new president of the United States, George W Bush, like other Republicans before and since, heavily in hock to the fossil fuel lobby, pulled out of the Kyoto Protocol altogether.

There were other disasters. There were high hopes for 2009 COP 15 in Copenhagen, with Barack Obama having become US president, but the meeting collapsed without agreement. It was clear that months of careful preparation are needed to get a consensus at a COP and

just electing a sympathetic US president was not enough.

But scrolling forward through the troubled early years of this century, despite the unrelenting campaign of the fossil fuel lobby, the science began to get firmer and some other players with clout more alarmed. Insurance companies, important in financial markets, began to get nervous about their own future because of the destruction caused by extreme weather.

Turning points

The *Stern Review* into the “Economics of Climate Change” of 30 October 2006 was a game changer. It was led by Nicolas Stern, then Head of the UK Government Economic Service and an unlikely ally for environmentalists, yet the report’s stark conclusion was: “From all perspectives, the evidence gathered by the Review leads to a simple conclusion: the benefits of strong and early action far outweigh the economic costs of not acting.” Lord Stern, as he became, was a heavyweight in the economic world and convinced many doubters, not least because he has never been silent since, reinforcing the original message by saying if anything his report had underestimated the economic disaster that climate change would cause.

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Perhaps even more important in the economic sense was a dramatic and surprising rapid renewable energy revolution that began about the same time. The price of first wind energy and then solar began to plummet. It happened so fast that renewables went from needing expensive subsidies to becoming cost competitive. By 2015, in some windy and sunny places it was becoming cheaper to create electricity with renewables than with coal, gas, and particularly nuclear. In 2021, this is now true over most of the planet.

At the same time, it was becoming clear that climate change was no longer some distant threat to politicians’ grandchildren, but events were happening that could already be scientifically linked to climate change; heat waves, floods, and wildfires were inflicting real economic damage. The small island states, which had always been very vocal about sea level rise, were joined in their concerns by the developing country giants: China and India. Their leaders now realise that climate change is a serious threat to their economic development and stability too.

This led to a landmark decision at COP 21, in Paris in 2015, to set a demanding limit on temperature rises. The result was met with huge jubilation at the time. However, we realised well before 2021 that it is one thing to agree to not to let world temperatures rise by more than 2 degrees and aim for a more demanding target of 1.5 degrees, and quite another to put the policies in place to achieve either goal. Despite all the hope that Paris engendered: the promises, targets, and investments in new technologies it produced, the

world has kept on burning fossil fuels, chopping down forests and adding more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere at an ever-increasing rate.

Yet the fossil fuel lobby has also been constantly losing ground. Academic institutions and local authorities have been divesting from oil and coal. Shareholders have been ganging up on oil company boards and demanding change.

Gathering forces for change

At the grassroots, in August 2018, a remarkable 16-year-old Swedish girl, Greta Thunberg, decided that instead of going to school on Fridays she needed to make a personal statement by sitting outside the Parliament to demand action on climate change. Greta has inspired a worldwide movement of young people demanding that the older generations do not continue to destroy their future by carrying on business as usual.

In tandem another group, Extinction Rebellion, has sprung up across major countries in the world, disrupting city centres by blocking roads and attacking offices of companies and banks exploiting fossil fuels. In Britain, an offshoot of brave protestors, Insulate Britain, have blocked motorways demanding government action to improve the homes of millions of people.

Not all this protest has gone down well with ordinary drivers and the right-wing press, but it has achieved its objective, drawn attention to the continuing failure of governments, banks, and companies to tackle the climate crisis. Public opinion shows that only a few ordinary citizens now cling on to the belief that climate change is not an urgent problem that needs immediate action.

At the same time, scientists have become bolder through a sense of duty and panic. This is partly because the science has become more certain and the extremes we are seeing this year are at the worst end of their predictions. They can point with certainty and without fear of contradiction or a backlash to the fact that the wildfires, floods, hurricanes, heat waves, and other climate-related disasters are the direct consequences of our political inaction.

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Telling the story

From the media point of view, climate change has also become both easier to report and an issue seen to be directly connected to our everyday lives. To give some idea of the uphill struggle reporters once had, it was at one time the policy of the UK's Daily Mail to ban its reporters from using the phrases "global warming" and "climate change" in stories because it was against the paper's political line. This edict held sway for about five years but a backlash by concerned readers, who wondered why important IPCC scientific reports were not being covered, forced a change. That was 15 years ago. Gradually even the Mail has conceded that climate change is real.

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While I personally thought from the 1990s onwards climate change was the most important story a journalist could ever cover, my environmental colleagues and I had trouble persuading even more liberal news desks of that fact. Not any longer.

Every decision we make is affected by climate change, from what sort of car we buy, how we heat or cool our homes, where and how we go on holiday, and even what we eat. Lifestyle and fashion features never mentioned climate change 30 years ago; now it is a central issue. Carbon taxes can hit us directly in the pocket. It is not a subject that will ever disappear from the daily news lists.

It is also true that the Covid-19 pandemic has interrupted negotiations and taken political energy away from the looming crisis. Some of the poorest and most vulnerable countries may not even make it to Glasgow. However, the issue has not faded from the public mind. Looking at political and opinion polls in 2021, the mood has undergone a sea change. The large majority of all generations are in favour of more rapid action on climate – and believe that it has to start immediately.

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Still pushing back against this are the oil nations and fossil fuel interests that have enormous political clout, embedded in governments and trade unions. Among them there are communities who make their living on fossil fuels that return members to divided parliaments and hold the balance of power in some countries. They remain an enormous deadweight holding back policy actions.

Despite inaction from some central governments there have been great strides at city level, in companies and among small communities across the world. They have demonstrated that carbon neutral is both possible and desirable. But as all eyes have moved to Glasgow and COP 26, it is clear that the mainstream political progress since Paris in 2015 has been slower than a sleepy sloth. And most crucially of all, measured in greenhouse gas emissions, the sloth is running backwards. The amount of carbon in the atmosphere is increasing week by week at an alarming rate. However, in the public mind there can no longer be an excuse for inaction because apart from the danger to life and limb, the economic opportunities of energy efficiency, renewables, and job creation are clearly so great.

Many politicians and businessmen also declare they have now "got it." They repeat an overused quote: "I can no longer look my children in the eye and still do nothing." But as

Greta says: “Blah blah” to that. So COP 26 is finely balanced and the signs are not good, but that was true in Paris in 2015 and there was a breakthrough at the 11th hour. The politicians have this opportunity to prove Greta wrong. Let us hope for all our sake they take it.



Paul Brown is a former environment correspondent for The Guardian newspaper. He has written 10 books – eight on environmental subjects, including four for children – and written scripts for television documentaries. He regularly trains journalists by running workshops and has now conducted more than 40 workshops in 20 countries. He is co-editor of Climate News Network.

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