Biden and COP 26

It is better to produce an article on the outcome of the UN’s COP26 climate summit now, whilst it is still taking place in Glasgow, as by the time it ends on 12 November my predictions will stand in retrospect. But the first question to ask is, what is it? Why are these summits being held, other than to make world leaders feel important, and give them the opportunity to do side deals which have nothing to do with the ostensible reason for the gathering?

Asking what these summits are about will take you down the yellow brick road to see the Wonderful Wizard of Oz. Or so we are told. In reality, we already know what lies at the end of that road - “A BIG Powwow where nothing got done”.

What is COP 26 and why does it matter?

COP stands for the conference of the parties, or stakeholders or whatever you want to call them - the people who want to portray themselves as innocent bystanders in the climate crisis unless it gives them an excuse for pump priming and grandstanding. Supposedly the conference is to demonstrate that countries are on board with slowing global warming and curbing the growth of greenhouse gas emissions, provided it doesn’t cause too much difficulty for the worst offenders.
We are already seeing what is being described as the impact of climate change, with rising sea levels, the decline of coral reefs, weather changes and all the other baggage which goes with worse case scenarios. As in most areas, the science supporting the climate change orthodoxy is disputed. But even if we accept the official argument, what, if anything, can really be done about it?

This is a topic which has been talked about for years. The “26” in the conference title signifies that this is the 26th such conference. So what did the previous 25 achieve, apart from patting the participants on the back at public expense?

Green technology, if you want to take that leap of faith, is not living up to its billing – especially when the wind does not blow and the sun does not shine brightly. Reports about the proposed solutions often sound more like a sales pitch than reality, strongly echoing all the Soviet Union Five Year Plan reports, whose contents were so driven by corruption and fear that they often bore little relation to reality.

The “progressing rapidly technology” is not as good as proffered. The only intervention which may have any hope of slowing the burning of high polluting fossil fuels is to make them so expensive that people substantially reduce their appetite for them. It is as if they are slashing and burning the planet in their effort to use it up while they still have it to burn.

The detractors are already lining up, and are making valid points. Greta Thunberg calls COP26 ‘a failure’ & ‘global greenwashing festival’ – she would say that, but she is spot on the money.

“It is not a secret that COP26 is a failure,” Thunberg said at the very start of her address to thousands of young activists who gathered in the Scottish city for her ‘Fridays for Future’ rally. The “Global North” is “refusing to take any drastic climate action,” she went on, and all the politicians gathered at the conference want is to “continue to fight for the status quo.”

What next when there was nothing before?

Name calling and finger pointing abounds at the summit, with Joe Biden taking exception to the presidents of China and Russia for failing to attend in person, accusing them of a lack of leadership. It is ironic that Biden feels himself to be looking down from some moral high ground, considering his long governmental service, in which he has only provided lip service for any REAL initiatives for REAL climate change legislation, or for social marketing to bring the topic to the forefront.

There have been so many fads in terms of energy policy. Hydrogen was big under the younger Bush, but kind of disappeared under Obama and Trump; now it is big again. It reminds me of the days when alcohol from corn and plant material was going to reduce pollution and make farmers rich. No one talks about that anymore, as only those getting Department of Energy Grants were ever able to cash in on it.

After Chernobyl people were down on nuclear energy. Then Japan had its incident. But France gets almost all its electricity from nuclear reactors. Germany is also likely to postpone its nuclear shutdown.

Many developing countries shut down their nuclear power plants because the important countries told them they had to win diplomatic favour. Now those same important countries are pushing emissions targets these countries cannot meet without reopening their nuclear power stations, once considered the ultimate crime. Countries such as Armenia are asking, “what else are we supposed to do?”, feeling they are the only ones having the make sacrifices, because they are considered inferior.

European Union countries use a mix of gas, coal, hydro, nuclear and renewable energy to generate electricity, as they are not convinced of the sugar pill of green energy. Eastern Europeans seem more used to and accepting of nuclear power, despite the political conflicts this can create. In fact the EU’s belligerents, such as Poland and Hungary, are likely to develop nuclear industries of their own as a matter of national sovereignty, which may then provide alternative revenue streams threatening the dominance of other energy players.

OPEC will save us all!

It is ironic that Biden now suggests that Russia and OPEC pump more oil to reduce the pain of high energy prices, as these are the direct result of energy policies which are half-baked.

“I do think that the idea that Russia and Saudi Arabia and other major producers are not going to pump more oil so people can have gasoline to get to and from work, for example, is not, is not, right,” Biden
said, as quoted by Russia’s TASS.

In the light of comments such as these, it is even more laughable that the US is trying to portray itself as the world leader in alleviating the impact of burning of fossil fuels. Its policies are causing insecurity in the energy market and raising even more serious questions of the continuity and consistency of supply. The rhetoric behind those policies is even worse – the basic argument is that it is bad for other people to do certain things, but doing the same thing must be good if the US does it, or the US approves it.

When last week Biden pressed OPEC+ to bring oil prices down by means of a large output hike, he warned of consequences if the cartel rejected his appeal: “What we’re considering doing on that, I’m reluctant to say before I have to do it.” If this is how the US treats its strategic partners, there must be no holds barred for its enemies.

But even Saudi Arabia is not heeding Biden’s “demands” to increase output, treating them as the double standard they are to undercut the US diplomatically. OPEC+ is not only refusing to boost output by more than the 400,000 barrels a day it had already planned, but also declined to make even a token gesture to placate Washington, a most uncommon occurrence since the Gulf War magically tilted oil diplomacy back in the US’s favour.

OPEC is closing ranks, and its members see higher prices as a way of bringing stability to the market. The 22nd OPEC and non-OPEC Ministerial Meeting, held via videoconference, concluded on Thursday November 4 2021 with a declaration:

The meeting reaffirmed the continued commitment of the Participating Countries in the Declaration of Cooperation (DoC) to ensure a stable and a balanced oil market, the efficient and secure supply to consumers and to provide clarity to the market at times when other parts of the energy complex outside the boundaries of oil markets are experiencing extreme volatility and instability, and to continue to adopt a proactive and transparent approach which has provided stability to oil markets.

How can Biden actually punish Saudi Arabia? Stop selling it arms, as many have called-4 and for years, or to 'Cry havoc, and then let slip the dogs of war' over the 9/11 report? The same Biden has just given Saudi Arabia enough cash flow to keep buying American weapons, with the latest deal signed worth $650 million.

Given the resilience of the Houthi faction in Yemen, US weapons sales will keep flowing - but it appears oil cannot flow in the same way despite the incentive of these sales. Not even Trump was willing to shut his eyes to the war crimes in Yemen, but Biden seems to not only be doing so, but getting nothing out of doing so apart from more funds for a military-industrial complex obliged to spread them increasingly thinly.

Not adding up

Even Biden admits the irony of calling on OPEC+ to increase oil production whilst heading for COP26 to discuss the reduction of global emissions. It is even more confusing that he claims ... “but the truth of the matter is ... everyone knows that idea that we’re going to be able to move to renewable energy overnight ... it's just not rational.”

So exactly what point will he be trying to make at COP 26?

Motorists and consumers back in the US have to pay higher energy prices as a result of this two-faced and self-defeating strategy, based on show rather than calculation. With winter coming, heating costs will skyrocket. When this is buttressed with the blowback over other policies - parents should have no say in how their children are educated, etc. - it should come as no surprise that many states are now escaping back to the Republican camp.

It is not as if the Democrats were not warned - but now their eyes are fully opened they may see a bloodbath at the polls during the midterm elections, as has been in the case already in Virginia, and to a lesser degree New Jersey.

Biden’s options are limited, and anything drastic will be perceived as weakness, considering what he once did in office is what has got us where we are today. Reducing or banning energy exports would be one option, but that would not go over well with those who are sold on the principles of the free market.

A big release from the strategic energy reserve may in effect be a bellwether to failed energy policies. But Biden himself knows he has painted himself into a corner by trying to go green on the one hand whilst simultaneously fuelling higher energy prices, which have had an across the board impact on consumer prices and driven inflation like wind drives a wildfire.
The lessons learned from the COP26 climate summit may be that the old adage, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions”, also applies to energy policy. Considering that asphalt is basically a controlled oil spill, as it is an oil-based product, even that road may be wearing thin sooner than expected.

It is doubtful if much will come of the get together of tens of thousands of people from every corner of the globe for a two-week United Nations summit. A least in theory the outcome could shape how — and whether — the world effectively slows climate change in the years ahead.

But COP26 is a typical international meeting. The point is to be seen in the same place, with the implication that everybody agrees with a particular agenda. No one wants to ask too loudly what that agenda is, as long their countries remain on the inside of something they know or care little about.

Glasgow’s COP26 summit is hosted by none other than Boris Johnson. He turned up drunk, and had to be helped up the steps, at the same time he has made his country an international embarrassment. At the same time he suffered a humiliating defeat in parliament, despite his large majority there, when an attempt to change the rules of parliamentary scrutiny to protect one of his crooked ministers was abandoned following a public outcry.

If the G20 summit can clue us in, at least somewhat, we can expect the story after the event to read something like this: “after talks at the COP26 summit, world leaders released a symbolic joint statement agreeing that “meaningful and effective” action is needed “by all countries” to prevent global temperatures from reaching more than 1.5 degrees Celsius, as previously set forth by the Paris Agreement”.

Greta Thunberg may be totally correct in calling the he UN climate conference in Glasgow just “blah blah blah” and a failure. But we can expect more of the same at other such conferences, including the G20, as long as protecting unelected vested interests and looking good are what political leadership is believed to be about.

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