

Comment

Get angry about Cop26 but don't be cynical

While a lot of the summit is indeed blah, blah, blah, change is coming and science offers us hope

Tom Whipple



Climate conferences can be depressing. Last week, Greta Thunberg dismissed all the efforts in Glasgow as “blah, blah, blah”. Worse still, this week the French pavilion organised a performance of sustainability-inspired slam poetry.

On days like this, I think back to Copenhagen. It was 2009, it was billed as a climate summit to save the world, and I was embedded with the protesters. They thought, quite rightly, that the world was not going to be saved.

On the last day of that Cop they had something special planned. It was bitterly cold, and they were marching en masse to storm the conference hall. They were stopped and kettled long before that happened. On three sides were police with pepper spray and fierce Alsatians. On the fourth side was a canal, just above freezing. The conference hall was across the water.

Eight of the British protesters took off their rucksacks and pulled out inflatable beds. Then, their breath misting in a light snowstorm, they blew them up, tied them together and pushed them on to the canal.

Slowly, this pontoon bridge inched across. Rather more rapidly, the police redeployed to greet it, their dogs snarling. Just as it was about to reach the other side, from the

protester at the front came a call, “Send forward the sausages!”

All struggles require ideological sacrifice. Despite being vegans, a barrage of pork products volleyed across the canal. Now these were well-trained dogs. But not that well trained. There was pandemonium, the protesters made it across — and all were promptly arrested.

I have often thought of that Cop and that protest. It seemed to me to sum up so much of what we have done tackling climate change. It was a righteous cause, it involved so much ingenuity. And it was utterly futile.

In the years since, I have been to other such climate jamborees and shared the cynicism of the readers in

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the comments below my articles. I have balked at the private jets, the expensive pavilions, the delegates who met here when young and now in middle age reminisce about the Cops of their youth: Bali '07, Kyoto '97. Some have since got married; carbon dating, they call it.

I went to Cop 18 (Doha '12), where on the night of the agreement — a non-binding agreement to reach a non-binding agreement in the future — I spent the early hours roaming the conference hall with a member of the British delegation who had heard a rumour that, in this dry country, the Russians had booze. They did, but weren't sharing.

At the Rio Earth Summit +20, my

most uplifting story was that a Nigerian delegation was staying in a “love hotel” whose room service menu included “Penis grande com cinto”.

Then, this year, I arrived at the Glasgow Cop to see that the Qatar stand — the stand of the country with the highest per capita emissions in the world — was especially popular because it had the best coffee. The Indonesian stand had the best food but a stern sign saying you had to listen to a talk before eating. The Tuvalu stand, just beyond it, inexplicably has a diorama of polar bears lynching a penguin.

It is, as I say, easy to be cynical. In 30 years of Cops, of so many initiatives and agreements, of so many business-class flights to conference centres in attractive locations, there is a graph you can see of carbon concentration in the atmosphere. It is linear. Each year it increments by the same amount. It is as if nothing has happened.

This was billed as the conference to “keep 1.5 alive”. This week the most comprehensive assessment was that on the basis of current pledges we will reach not 1.5C of warming but 2.4C.

And yet. I read, now, the reports from Copenhagen — and the corresponding assessment then was an apocalyptic 3.5 to 3.9C.

So much feels the same. The same fatalism of NGOs, the same terrible agitprop theatre of protesters. But so much has changed. Three years ago 30 per cent of countries had net zero targets. Now, 90 per cent do. Ten years ago electric cars were milk floats. Now they are the luxury choice. Solar power costs pennies and is getting cheaper.

Last month the US National Intelligence Council published its assessment of the state of the climate. It concluded 1.5C was to all intents and purposes not alive, but with one caveat. In its annexe, it pointed to the recent spike in private funding for nuclear fusion, “a near endless source of energy”, and the possibility of a breakthrough in a technology that would be a genuine *deus ex machina* for the climate crisis.

It is right to look at the messy sausage factory of Cop and be depressed. It is right, even righteous, to be angry. It is not right to be cynical. The pandemic taught us that humans are terrible at making sacrifices now for gains in the future. It also taught us what we can achieve with science. So much technology and sacrifice is needed to make climate change work. So much has been done already.

Succeeding in science is easy, though, compared with politics. And political success is rarely so dramatic. In this lacklustre hall with its lacklustre ambitions and sometimes empty rhetoric we have a process, we have 196 nations with 196 competing goals and ambitions still here, still together, still (generally) going in the same direction.

Of course Cop is depressing. It is taking a generation to solve a generational challenge, and we are doing so slower than we need to. But it is the only process we have. And beyond the lanyards and the placards there is a quiet, infuriating glory in it.

Tom Whipple is science editor

Emma Duncan is away



You cannot please everyone all the time on free speech

Keir Bradwell

One way to look at the controversy over Andrew Graham-Dixon and the Hitler impression he gave at the Cambridge Union last week is to see it as an issue of fairness. Graham-Dixon made a speech in exceptionally poor taste in the oldest free speech society in the world; as president of it, I permitted it. Yet only one of us is in the national eye for our actions — and for addressing the backlash that followed — and that seems to be me.

In taking this job I knew I would never be far from big questions about the limits of public expression. So I think a better way to look at Hitlergate is as a question of values. I got involved in the Union because I believed free speech was a value worth spending endless hours of my life on, and the Union was the place to do it.

We don't do “blacklists”; I spoke in haste and should never have used the term. I will suggest that my successors don't invite Graham-Dixon back, not because of what he said but because of what he did: he spoke over our last debater and sent our event into chaos; he made it more difficult for me and our society to uphold the principles we have worked so hard to pursue.

A belief in free speech has motivated my time at the Union. But anyone who believes in free speech ought to be analysing this controversy in terms of responsibilities, too. Being president carries one responsibility above all else: to our members, who have forked out for membership and deserve events they'd like to come back for. If we ignore that and make no effort to address the initial outcry at Graham-Dixon's speech we will not have regular crowds. There will be nobody left to run the place; there will be no platform left to give, let alone controversial people to use it. In the long run, my values and my responsibility to members cannot really be picked apart.

Few seem to take this view. From the left, I have been criticised for valuing free speech too highly and making members uncomfortable in doing so; by some on the right, I have been criticised for ignoring my values in not coming out in Graham-Dixon's defence. As a result, Louis de Bernières and John Cleese have “blacklisted” themselves from the Union. It seems I am damned if I do, damned if I don't.

I am 21, and doubtless I will make judgments in the moment that people on one side or another see as calculated ploys to take a side in the culture wars. But if you believe in free speech, as I do, you ought to let those like me do our best to tread the path between two imperatives that sometimes conflict. Our objectives are the same — I just have to deal with the messy complications of reality, too.

Keir Bradwell is president of the Cambridge Union

Ann Treneman Notebook

‘Cathedrals of stuff’ should be buried away

I do not live on the M1, at least not permanently, but sometimes it feels like it and I can report that there is no end to the building of huge, boxy product warehouses on either side of it. These, not churches or skyscrapers, are the real built reflection of our age.

They are our “cathedrals of stuff” and, though it is futile, I object to them. They are ugly and should be at least partially buried and surrounded by trees or meadows. They are soulless. I can't say that I don't use Amazon — because it has been known — but I am determined, post-Covid, to use real shops if possible.

The husband, on the other hand, uses Amazon regularly. For Christmas, he wants a pair of headphones for the man cave (the bass guitar lessons continue and who am I to object?). He tells me he can get them £25 cheaper on Amazon than at his favourite music shop. I told him I would purchase the

headphones but not from Amazon. Stalemate.

A thrum beats a click

It may not be a surprise that, a week later, we found ourselves at his favourite music shop. Rich Tone Music in Sheffield is more emporium than store. It felt a bit like visiting a convention of guitars. (By the way, there is no accepted collective noun for guitars but surely a “thrum” would work.) We ordered the present but also had a good chat about open-mike nights and other guitar topics. The whole experience was so much better than going “click click click” on a keyboard.

Special Constable

To the Royal Academy of Arts on Piccadilly for the *Late Constable* show. Can there be a less fashionable painter? You only have to say *Hay Wain* to see the smirks start. Yet this show of his landscapes over his final years feels modern and, in some ways, wild.

He loved weather and time. “Noon 27 Sept, very

bright after rain wind West” is the sub-heading of one billowy 1821 cloud study. (Indeed, *The Hay Wain* was originally called simply: *Landscape: Noon*.) You will need a mac because it rains often in this show. My only complaint: I wanted the temperatures, too.

In his time, Constable was a radical with his love of landscape and dislike of “dull” portraits and the Royal Academy refused him entry for decades. In the end he was admitted, aged 52, by one vote. He died in 1837 at 60. It has taken the RA almost 200 years to give him a solo show. It's marvellous.

Enchanted spot

Abbracing autumn walk above Ladybower Reservoir in the Peak District reveals two things, macro and micro.

Looking over the scene, the reservoir is down,



depleted, thirsty, its dirt banks revealed for all to see. You can't quite see the ghost villages that float beneath the waters, but almost.

The autumn and winter rains should top it up but it does make you feel anxious about the progress being made at the Cop26 climate change conference in Glasgow.

Looking down, then, under a pine, I spy a whole “family” of red and white mushrooms. These are fly agaric, poisonous and hallucinogenic, home to fairies and a shroom snack for Alice in Wonderland. They are rumoured to be the reason behind Santa's red and white outfit (something to do with shamanic rituals near the North Pole). See what you learn on a walk?

Fiction as fact

My word of the week is mountweazel, which refers to fictitious entries placed as copyright traps in reference books. Deliciously, it refers to a biographical entry in the 1975 *New Columbia Encyclopaedia* for one Lillian Virginia Mountweazel.

She was an (entirely unreal) fountain designer turned photographer who died in an explosion while on assignment for *Combustibles* magazine. Brilliant.

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