

UN Climate Summit - COP26: ‘Much ado about nothing’ or ‘Nothing ado about much’?

Paul C. Sutton¹

¹Department of Geography and the Environment/ University of Denver, United States

ABSTRACT This Is an Commentary on the United Nations Climate Summit (COP26) in Glasgow Scotland
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Is climate change an ‘existential crisis’ or is it merely a nuisance which will slow improvement in human well-being and diminish inevitable economic growth? My experience at the COP26 suggests there are two very distinct perspectives on the social and economic impacts of climate change. While there finally seems to be consensus that climate change is taking place it certainly has taken at least three decades since James Hansen’s 1988 warning for us to reach this consensus. Undoubtedly, the vested interests and financial support of the fossil fuel industry slowed the achievement of this consensus [1]. I understand that significant change can take time and I take heart when I consider the women’s suffrage movement in the United States. The 1848 Seneca Falls ‘Declaration of Sentiments’ was seventy-two long years prior to the 1920 passage of the 19th amendment to our constitution that had the audacity to allow women to vote. This hard-fought change took time but was implemented quickly through fiat legislation. Climate change has an inexorable momentum that will not respond immediately to constitutional amendments. It appears that the vested interests opposed to regarding climate change as an ‘existential crisis’ have engaged their ‘merchants of doubt’ [2] in a strategic pivot from climate change denial to minimizing the consequences of climate change and encouraging fatalism about the impacts of climate change. We are now faced with an old ‘Wizards vs. Prophets’ [3] debate about the nature of the progress of civilization.

The ‘Wizards’ or optimists at COP26 were mostly inside the Green Zone. It struck me that most of the government people, venture capitalists, and businesspeople saw growing concern about climate change as a business opportunity in a future that will be moderately impacted by climate change. President Biden stated: “*When I think of climate change, I think of – and the answers to it, - I think of jobs.*” [4] Some scientists provide support for this vision of climate change as merely a nuisance. In a recent article in the Atlantic [5], Brian O’Neill (Director of the Joint Global Change Research Institute and lead architect of the ‘Shared Socioeconomic Pathways’ or SSPs that feed the IPCC models), states that IPCC scientists expect that average life expectancy will continue to rise, that poverty and hunger rates will continue to decline, and that average incomes will go up in every single plausible future, simply because they always have. “*There isn’t, you know, like a Mad Max scenario among the SSPs,*” O’Neill said. Climate change will ruin individual lives and kill individual people, and it may even drag down rates of improvement in human well-being, but on average, he said, “*we’re generally in the climate-change field not talking about futures that are worse than today.*” I find it striking that ALL the SSP scenarios in the IPCC report result in increased average life expectancy, increased GDP, and increased average levels of human well-being. A layperson might ask: “*What are we so concerned about?*”. In stark contrast, many of the scientists at the COP26 and most of the street protesters were much more in the school of thought that climate change was an existential crisis more in line with the ‘Prophets’ of doom.

The ‘Prophets’ have a divergent view as to the consequences of climate change. One particularly interesting session I attended at the COP26 was presented by Tim Jackson and Ed Gemmill on a new paper titled: World Scientists Warning Into Action [6]. There are many papers with a similar message dating back to 1992 that have been signed by tens of thousands of scientists from around the world [7,8,9]. This paper stated that the time for empty commitments for the distant future of 2050 is over. The paper argues that we need large-scale, rapid, trans-formative changes in our economies, societies, cultures, and politics. The paper makes recommendations in the following areas: Energy, Atmospheric pollutants, Nature, Food Systems, Population Stabilization, and Economic Reforms. The sense of the message I got at this session was that the protesters on

the street had a more realistic understanding of the urgency of the climate crisis than the politicians and negotiators within the COP. One pair of protesters I met at the COP26 were handing out a card that said: ‘*War causes climate change and climate change causes war.*’ This presents a theory of ‘positive feedback’ we’d like to avoid. Scientists are increasingly engaged in the development of plausible scenarios of future social, economic, and environmental realities. Capturing the feedbacks between these phenomena is challenging and is likely a source of the divergent opinions as to the social and economic consequences of climate change.

David Attenborough is a beloved figure who featured prominently at the entrance to the COP26. This Attenborough quote was plastered throughout Glasgow: ‘*It is important, it is true, it is happening, and it is an impending disaster.*’ I suspect Attenborough’s ‘Prophet’ stance is attributable to his amazing ability to engage in holistic thinking and systems thinking. Attenborough, the street protesters, and most scientists are concerned not only about climate change but also many other human impacts on our environment that interact with the climate and one another in complex ways many of which do not bode well. To wit, we are experiencing the 6th mass extinction in earth’s history [10]. Since 1950 we have caused the loss of half of the world’s coral reefs [11]. Humans and domesticated animals (e.g. cows, sheep, pigs) account for 96% of mammalian biomass on the planet [12]. Changes to earth’s land surface (including the loss of roughly half of the world’s coastal wetlands) have resulted in annual losses of ecosystem services valued at over \$22 Trillion [13]. Debating causes, consequences, and appropriate responses to climate change is clearly a highly contested issue. In some respects it reminds me of a raging debate on the trajectory of poverty in the world. There is little agreement regarding the seemingly simple question: ‘*Has global poverty declined dramatically?*’ The truth may be somewhere in between the visions of the Wizards and the Prophets. Climate change is not likely to cause *homo sapiens* to go extinct; however, my sense is it will make most of our lives and most of our descendant’s lives more nasty, brutish, and short.

My interactions with people inside the Blue Zone of the COP and at the street protests was that this is a political challenge at this point. Voluntary, individual efforts will have minimal impact on climate change going forward. The governments of the world need to lead by engaging in serious monitoring and enforcement of greenhouse gas emissions, ending fossil fuel subsidies, and providing assistance to the developing world in meeting current challenges and mitigating future impacts by enabling zero or reduced emission development. No-one I spoke to was confident that billionaires, corporations, venture capitalists, or market forces were going address our climate challenges unless they were incentivized to do so by government policies and regulations that were strictly enforced. In fact, there was a significant sense both inside the COP and on the street that unfettered capitalism had to be reined in and the governments of the world were the only institutions with the capacity to do so.

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