

"We're so proud - he's the first in the family to go to university and get two negatives."

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Ahead of COP 26, Scotland has much to teach the world



ALASTAIR
McINTOSH

If the vaccine kicks in, and if the world kick-starts again in 2021, Glasgow will host the biggest gathering of world leaders to assemble on British soil. COP 26, rearranged for next November, is the 26th Conference of the Parties of the UN's convention on climate change.

These meetings bring the governments of the world together to agree on action. The previous COP, held in Madrid last year, attracted 14,000 government delegates, 10,000 observers, 3,000 journalists and half a million demonstrators on the streets.

But why Glasgow? Glasgow ranks fourth in the Global Destination Sustainability Index. It's the only British city to have made the top 10.

It consistently scores relatively highly on such indicators as social progress, minimising corruption and the UN's 17 sustainable development goals that include quality education, gender equality, climate action and peace, justice and strong institutions. Indeed, these goals are formally the backbone of Scotland's National Performance Framework.

The formal agenda of COP 26 is to agree on measures to implement the Paris Agreement that emerged from COP 21 in 2015.

This aspires to limit the world's overheating to well under 2C, and aiming for 1.5C. Such is the bare minimum necessary for a relatively safe world. It requires cutting carbon dioxide emissions by 45% by 2030, and getting them down to net zero by 2050.

With the UK and Italy as co-hosts, the formal business will revolve around getting the world onto a green energy and economic footing. Rich countries need to support low income countries to make a 'just transition'. Expect the talk of the day to be green new deals and trade regimes and green subsidy provisions.

The greatest challenge is what can be done quickly and in ways that dovetail with democracy. Consider the scale of the task, the 'emissions gap' between where we are now, and where we need to be. A recent paper in scientific journal, Nature Communications, concludes that even under Covid restrictions, the first half of 2020 saw global CO2 emissions fall by only 9%, amounting to 1.5 billion tons.

By way of a rough comparison, the world's overall emissions of all greenhouse gases, expressed as CO2 equivalents, need to be cut by 32 billion tons a year by 2030 to be on track for the Paris Agreement's target. As the UN's 2019 Emissions Gap Report puts it in a masterstroke of understatement: "The summary findings are bleak.... The emissions gap is large."

For the Earth to have a decent future, we must decarbonise our energy sources. Imagine when the first petrol engine was invented. Imagine back then, not so very long ago, thinking to make it dominant you'd need to build an entire global infrastructure of oil extraction,

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refining and distribution networks. We did it then. That's what we've got to do again with green energy.

However, gentle living on the planet is not just tinkering with the hardware of technology, politics and economics. We've also got to lift the bonnet. We've got to look inside our minds.

I turned 65 this week. Since that day in 1955, world population has trebled. But CO2 emissions from consumption have increased six-fold. While population is beginning to take care of itself in many countries because of women's emancipation, consumption rates are booming. Economic growth to benefit the poor is one thing. But consumerism is quite another. I define it as consumption in excess of what is needed for dignified sufficiency of living.

The problem with consumerism is that it tries to buy the stairway to heaven. Marketing hooks in to our psychological vulnerabilities. But it sets us on a planet-destroying treadmill.

What can be the antidote? And what, if anything, might Scotland have to showcase to the world next November? "We must be humble," said the poet Hugh MacDiarmid, but we have some patterns and examples.

I'd point to Scotland's many hundreds of land and development trusts - most see a dignified sufficiency of living where communities have gained control of their environmental assets.

Both the North and West Harris land trusts have built new villages that provide affordable and energy-efficient housing. The Eigg Trust runs an entire community electricity grid, powered by wind, rain and sometimes even sunlight. Outside of Glasgow, the Fintry Development Trust generates revenue from its wind

turbines. And the umbrella group Community Land Scotland, in Greenock, is working to transfer such skills from rural into urban areas.

I end my most recent book, *Riders on the Storm*, looking at the human qualities that we need to face the future. I tell of taking community leaders from West Papua Province in the Indonesian part of New Guinea to my home island of Lewis.

Last year was the centenary of the Iolaire tragedy. Women from the Point and Sandwick Development Trust - that generates the best part of a million pounds a year from its three wind turbines - took them to the place where the ship had struck the rocks.

A coiled rope cast in bronze represents the means by which some 40 servicemen returning from the war were pulled to safety - before the wreck lurched, and 200 perished.

But it was the rope, and the survivors, that enraptured the Papuans. They too are a sea-faring island people. They too suffered in world wars. They too see their farming land gradually being eaten by the rising seas of global warming.

Mama Enggelina reached down and touched the sculpture. "That rope," she said, "is how they pulled life back into the community."

As COP 26 approaches, perhaps we might think about that rope down by the Iolaire. What qualities might card and spin its threads, and plait them into strength? How might Scotland help to pull back life into the world?

Alastair McIntosh holds an honorary professorial position in the School of Education at the University of Glasgow. His latest book is Riders on the Storm: the Climate Crisis and the Survival of Being (Birlinn, £9.99).

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