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False Transitions and Global Stocktakes: The Failure of COP28



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The time has come to treat the sequence of UN Climate Change Conferences, the latest concluding in Dubai, as a series of the failed and the abysmally rotten. It shows how a worthless activity, caked (oiled?) with appropriately chosen words, can actually provide assurance that something worthwhile was done. Along the way, there are always the same beneficiaries: fossil fuel magnates and satirists.

COP28, which featured 97,000 participants, including the weighty presence of 2,456 fossil fuel lobbyists, was even more of a shambles than its predecessor. Its location – in an oil rich state – was head scratching. Its chairman Sultan Al Jaber, taking advantage of the

various parties who would attend, had sought to cultivate some side business for the United Arab Emirates, notably for the state oil company ADNOC.

This did not deter UN climate change bureaucrats and negotiators, who seemed to equate climate change policy with an account of goods held by a business. Consider the wording of the COP Agreement released on December 13: “The global stocktake is considered the central outcome of COP28 – as it contains every element that was under negotiation and can now be used by countries to develop stronger climate action plans due by 2025.” It was a “global stocktake” supposedly signalling the “beginning of the end” of the fossil fuel era, to be facilitated by “laying the ground for a swift, just and equitable transition, underpinned by deep emission cuts and scaled-up finance.”

These words have been treated as sacerdotal by many of its participants, the be all and end all, the event’s great culmination. But long hours of deliberation can confuse effort with achievement, and this proved to be no exception. Tinkering with meaning can be taken as a triumph. Recognising words such as “fossil fuels” and “science” can make delegates weak at the knees. Promises to set targets for a Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA) make others swoon.

It was such tinkering that led to the call for a “transition away from fossil fuels in energy systems in a just, orderly, and equitable way with developed countries continuing to take the lead.” The emphasis here is on a “transition away” from their use, not their “phase out”, which is what 130 of the 198 participating parties were willing to accept.

The term “phase-down” was used regarding “unabated coal power” while “inefficient fossil fuel subsidies” would be phased out, presumably leaving the question open as to what, exactly, efficient subsidies might look like. Parties were also “encouraged to come forward with ambitious, economy-wide emission reduction targets, covering all greenhouse gases, sectors and categories and aligned with the 1.5°C in their next round of climate action plans (known as nationally determined contributions) by 2025.”

Jaber was in a gleeful mood at the outcome. The naysayers’ warning that the summit would be an unmitigated failure had been disproved. “Together, we have confronted realities and we have set the world in the right direction. We have given it a robust action plan to keep 1.5°C within reach. It is a plan that is led by the science.”

US climate change envoy John Kerry thought the document convincing: it sent “very strong messages to the world” providing a much firmer statement on preventing global warming from exceeding the 1.5°C limit. Danish Climate Minister Dan Jørgensen seemed to angle for praise in noting that his country, being “an oil rich country surrounded by oil

countries that are now signing a piece of paper saying we need to move away from oil” was “historic”.

The agreement had an eager audience desperate to identify signs of progress. Prof. Petteri Taalas, Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Organization called the COP28 agreement “historic in that – for the first time – it recognizes the need to transition away from fossil fuels for the first time.” Even the *Scientific American* made the observation that none of the previous 27 climate change conferences had even mentioned fossil fuels and its link to a rise in global temperatures.

A good gaggle of climatologists and geophysicists were less enthused. “The lack of an agreement to phase out fossil fuels,” opined Michael Mann of the University of Pennsylvania, “was devastating.” To use such an expression as “transition away from fossil fuels’ was weak tea at best. It’s like promising your doctor that you will ‘transition away from doughnuts’ after being diagnosed with diabetes.”

An editorial in *Nature* was also steely in rejecting the way science had been manipulated at the summit, noting Jaber’s own declaration on November 21 that there was no scientific basis that would necessitate phasing out fossil fuels to restrict global warming to the agreed limit. While the editorial had gone to press before the release of the final agreement, the journal was correct in assuming that it “would not include language on phasing out fossil fuels. That is more than a missed opportunity. It is dangerous.”

The dangers are considerable, given the number of transitioning states. They include, for instance, India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who seeks the expansion of renewable energy while building coal-burning power plants, and the current US administration, whose Bureau of Land Management approved more oil and gas leases on federal lands in the first two years and seven months than the previous Trump administration did over the equivalent period. In the usual doublespeak of the Biden administration, such a policy could comfortably exist alongside its overall green strategy.

As weak tea as the document is, it’s not even binding. Countries can still pursue fossil fuel projects, at the behest of strong coal, gas and oil lobbies, even as they claim to be pursuing abating technologies that supposedly minimise emissions. In Australia, opposition spokesman for climate change and energy Ted O’Brien provided something of an exemplar of this. “While the final communique names fossil fuels, it also promotes carbon, capture and storage as abating technology for such fuels along with nuclear energy which can be a zero-emission substitute.”

The record of actions taken to such agreements is not promising. For one, COP28 seemed riddled with pledges and gestures, a matter of theatre. The heralded “loss and damage fund” received commitments to the total of US\$700 million, but this is wretchedly meagre when compared to the annual US\$200 to US\$400 billion required by Africa alone, let alone the US\$400 billion a year for climate change adaptation.

Debates of herculean obstinacy over word changes in a text can spell the doom of its object. In future experiments in hot air summitry of the sort witnessed at Dubai, the powerful and wealthy will have room to stretch and delay meaningful change, adopting that famous plea by St. Augustine: “Please God, make me good, but not just yet.”

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