

COP26: Sharma's Tears

by GWYNNE DYER

Closing the two-week COP26 climate summit in Glasgow on Saturday, Alok Sharma, the British president of the 197-country conference, declared 'We've kept 1.5 (degrees Celsius) within reach, but its pulse is weak.' But he was close to tears several times in his closing remarks.

That was not because the 40,000-delegate meeting was a complete disaster. It wasn't a complete success either, but these things never are. Sharma was upset because a last-minute assault by the world's coal, oil and gas superpowers - Saudi Arabia and Australia as the biggest exporters, China, India and Russia as huge producers and consumers - nearly brought the meeting to a halt.

After days and nights of almost non-stop negotiations, the great majority of the countries present got a commitment to phase out coal power into the conference report for the first time. No timetable, but it's a start.

What? You mean none of the other summits ever mentioned coal in their reports? Coal is the worst fossil fuel by far, in terms of the volume of carbon dioxide it puts into the atmosphere when it burns. Surely, they must have mentioned it before.

Nope. The fossil fuel powers always managed to keep it out of the final documents by threatening to sabotage a process that depends on consensus and unanimity. Ridiculous, of course. Your whole purpose is to stop global warming, but you're not allowed to mention the principal cause?

At the final plenary session, India's climate minister, Bhupender Yadav, stood up and asked how developing countries could promise to phase out coal and fossil fuel subsidies when they have still to deal with their development agendas and poverty eradication?

The answer is that all the development agendas and poverty eradication will shrivel up and die if the warming stays on its current track - and Yadav probably knows that too. But he effectively threatened a veto, and managed to get the phrase 'phase out coal' changed to 'phase DOWN coal'.

It wasn't much of a victory, because the offending word 'coal' is still in the Glasgow Climate Pact. It will be there at all future climate summits, and every year there will be attempts to strengthen the other words around it. Eventually they will succeed.

At this point you may want to join with Greta Thunberg in dismissing the whole process as 'blah, blah, blah', but you would be wrong. This is the only way millions-strong groups of people called countries, most of whose ancestors were hunter-gatherers only a few thousand years ago, can make decisions on subjects that matter to all of them.

Their representatives come together physically, and if the debate is intense and the meeting goes on long enough, their fixed positions tend to start bending towards compromise and consensus. That's how their ancestors did it in the far distant past, and that's how we still do it today.

So the great achievement at Glasgow was to agree that they will all meet again next year and keep worrying away at the problem and 'ratcheting up' the promises. There's no formal agreement to meet again the year after that, but everybody expects that this will be an annual event in the future, no longer a five-yearly one.

What two weeks together arguing about climate issues did for the key delegates at Glasgow was to create a pressure-cooker atmosphere in which hard positions softened and movement finally became possible. Doing it every year, with people more and more of whom you already know from last time, should make the process move faster.

It doesn't mean that human beings will respond fast enough to avoid catastrophic warming. We have left it very late, the special

interests will continue to wage a fighting retreat in defence of the status quo, and some ?non-linear? response to the warming climate may suddenly upset all our plans and expectations. We are in unknown waters now.

But COP26, while not yielding much in the way of enforceable commitments to cut emissions, has actually turned out to be one of the more productive climate summits.

Perhaps it's the extreme weather of the past year or so that has put people into a more cooperative mood, but there is a smidgen of hope in the air.