

# COP26 President Alok Sharma's keynote speech to Columbia University World Leaders Forum

Good morning everyone.

And can I first start by thanking President Bollinger and Alex for the very warm welcome I've had today.

I am now into the final weeks of my time as President of the 26th United Nations Conference on Climate Change, or COP26.

It has been a near-three year journey in the thick of international climate politics and the maelstrom of wider geopolitics.

And it remains an absolute privilege to have opportunities like this one, to speak as part of your World Leaders Forum,

and to celebrate Columbia's pioneering climate school, the first of its kind in the United States.

Your school has had an auspicious start.

Not least with your roundtable, at COP26, with President Obama.

I understand the former President, and of course Columbia alumnus, noted the energy, and remarkable potential, of participating students.

That is coming from a man who knows what it means to mobilise, and to inspire action.

I have felt that same force when I've met youth climate activists around the world over the past few years.

And I do understand the anger of young people.

It is your future most at risk.

You and your generation will have to live with the consequences of the actions, or inaction, of current world leaders.

I have been directly challenged by young people on the need to push the world to go a lot faster to tackle global warming.

I convened an international meeting for ministers, on implementing the Glasgow Climate Pact, in Copenhagen in May. We saw youth protesters make their feelings and frustrations plain.

Every Minister saw that as they came into the meeting.

And at the end of the meeting, I encouraged Ministers to leave the meeting with the voices of those young people ringing in their ears.

Hearing those voices every time they made government decisions affecting the future of the planet.

And that brings me to the focus of my address.

You all know this, but it sometimes needs to be repeated.

We are facing a climate crisis.

The scientific evidence is absolutely clear, it's unequivocal.

We know that we are running out of time to avert catastrophe.

The reality is that if we do not bend the curve of global warming downwards, in this decisive decade – eight and a half years left – we will go beyond the limits of our ability to adapt.

Around the world, we are already seeing what that future could look like.

And that future is absolutely terrifying.

For some people across the world, it is here right now.

In recent weeks, an area the size of the United Kingdom has been flooded in Pakistan.

A monster monsoon bringing in its wake death, destruction and displacement of millions of people.

Hurricane Fiona has barrelled through the Caribbean.

This summer we have seen the US experience its worst drought in over a thousand years.

Europe has experienced its worst drought in 500 years.

And China its worst ever drought, as record temperatures have dried up key parts of the Yangtze River.

I could go on.

You will all have examples as well.

I was with the new UNFCCC Executive Secretary Simon Stiell earlier this week, and he made the point that the reality of these events is a cycle of disaster, rebuild, disaster, rebuild, for millions of people around the world.

We need to do better.

And we also know that the increasing frequency, and ferocity, of these

extreme weather events is set to worsen.

So, in the context of the pressing need for more urgent climate action,

I want to talk about my role, and the COP Presidency.

Our drive to implement the outcomes of the Glasgow Climate Pact.

The ability of global coalitions of the willing, including the United States, to deliver change.

And, most importantly, the capacity of the young climate leaders in the room this morning to hold governments and businesses to account.

The primary role of the COP President is to oversee a COP Summit, deliver a negotiated outcome, and then drive its implementation in the post-summit Presidency year.

I am proud that, when the world came to Glasgow last November, the UK Presidency shepherded nearly 200 countries to forge the historic Glasgow Climate Pact.

But the outcome of that Pact was not an inevitability.

There was huge scepticism in the international community at the start of the UK Presidency about whether we really could make progress on the road to, and at Glasgow.

And personally, COP26 was my very first COP – I had never been to one before.

But because of that, very early on, I sought the advice of past COP Presidents.

And from my very first day as COP President Designate, I sought to meet world leaders, ministers, chief executives, youth and civil society groups, and communities on the front line of climate change, around the world.

This was all about ensuring an open and neutral Presidency.

Underpinned by the principles of transparency, inclusivity, consistency of message and trust,

And trust, I have to say to you, is an incredibly fragile commodity in climate negotiations.

I wanted to ensure that those four principles would be the foundation on which we built an ambitious COP26 outcome.

But, having spent two years talking to governments around the world, trying to craft the key elements of the Glasgow Climate Pact, we almost fell short in the final hours of COP26.

We had an opacity in those one-minute-to-midnight negotiations.

China and India raised objections to key language on coal and fossil fuel subsidies.

We went behind the stage to negotiate.

As we negotiated, I wrote out word-by-word the minimum changes which China and India could accept.

I can tell you it was fraught.

I still have the marked up piece of A4 paper at home on which we wrote out the text.

For me, that is an eternal reminder that things could have turned out very differently.

Because there were critical moments in those final hours when I was really concerned that a global deal, effectively two years in gestation, was about to collapse.

For anyone watching, you will have seen me crossing the plenary floor, showing the proposed revised text to the Chairs of the UNFCCC negotiating groups.

Yes, I did become emotional, when I put the final text to the floor.

I was disappointed that, after such effort to run a transparent Presidency, the COP26 negotiating process was ending in hushed and rushed conversations.

But I was, and continue to be, incredibly proud of what my UK COP Presidency team achieved in delivering the Glasgow Climate Pact.

Our overall goal, right from the start, was to garner enough commitments to ensure that we were keeping alive the prospect of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels.

And we achieved that goal.

Prior to the Paris Agreement, scientists were telling us that the world was on course for 4 degrees of global warming by the end of the century.

Post-Paris it was 3 degrees.

After Glasgow, we were able to say with credibility that we had kept 1.5 alive.

And whilst 1.5 degrees was our North Star, we made critical progress on adaptation, on finance, on loss and damage, on empowerment, and on so many other issues.

In fact the Chair of the Climate Vulnerables Forum recognised the steps we had taken “on all the priorities of the most climate threatened nations”.

Yes, we achieved a Pact.

But frankly, the Pact is nothing but words on a page.

The pulse of 1.5 will remain weak until the Pact, every element of it, is implemented in full.

And we have to be frank that implementation is very challenging.

First, we did all sign up to an ambitious programme of work.

And second, the world has changed markedly since last November, overshadowed by the Putin regime's brutal and illegal war in Ukraine.

Countries around the world are facing perilous economic and geopolitical conditions, and threats to energy security.

We are grappling with soaring inflation, rising debt, and food insecurity.

For many, climate has not been front of mind.

But I do truly believe there remains cause for hope.

I see climate leaders doing remarkable work.

Take for example the Prime Minister of Viet Nam, who I saw again last month.

He is utterly relentless in driving his country's economic transformation, based on clean energy.

And we as a G7 nation, and other developed nations, are supporting that effort with Viet Nam's Just Energy Transition Partnership, which can be the gold standard for sustainable economic growth for developing countries around the world.

Businesses and financial institutions are radically reimagining what it means to be a responsible, 21st century company.

Bill Gates, who I spent time with earlier this week, rightly noted that COP26 was the COP where businesses came in force.

And you will have seen, just last week, the founder of Patagonia, dedicating his company's fortune to the climate cause.

Now, where are we in this process?

We will get a clearer sense that when the UNFCCC publishes its latest Synthesis Report.

The deadline for countries to make submissions on their 2030 emissions reduction targets is tomorrow.

I am sure that the report will make clear that the job is far from done.

I was in Indonesia earlier this month at the G20 Climate, Energy and Environment Ministers Meeting.

Unbelievably, our negotiators had to fight to simply restate commitments we have all previously signed up to.

Inexplicably, there were debates about the unequivocal science of the IPCC reports.

Some countries sought to push against language from the Glasgow Climate Pact, agreed just ten months ago, and the foundational Paris Agreement, on which that Pact is built.

And there was even rowing back on the collective agreement that was reached by G20 leaders last year to lead on climate action.

So my message here in New York this week has been frank.

The Glasgow and Paris language must be the baseline of our ambition.

We cannot retreat from that.

And this is a critical moment to redouble our efforts, resist backsliding, and ultimately go further, and faster.

Collectively, the world's richest countries, and the biggest emitters, have looked too many climate vulnerable countries and communities in the eyes, and promised too much action,

to step back now.

To do so would be a betrayal.

And the United States is a key player in all of these discussions.

It is the second biggest emitter, and the largest by capita.

The US therefore has a responsibility to lead on climate action.

In all my travels as COP President, and all my time speaking with the world's most vulnerable countries and communities, that is a firmly held view.

They want to continue to see the US leading.

Thankfully, the US also has unparalleled resources, and expertise.

That was evident, as we all watched, with a mixture of hope and trepidation, the machinations surrounding the Build Back Better Bill,

and the ultimate passage of the Inflation Reduction Act,

the largest climate spending package in US history.

I congratulate President Biden, and my very good friend John Kerry for their roles in securing that historic achievement.

So now, I urge the Senate to now press home the advantage.

Match the domestic ambition with international action.

In particular, deliver the billions of international climate finance being asked of Congress for the coming years.

Finance, my friends, is a key ask of climate vulnerable countries and we must all, including the United States, deliver on our promises.

I want to turn now specifically to the role of the students in the room.

I know there is much talk of the midterms right now, and of the partisan nature of climate policy at federal level.

In fact because of this,

I encourage you to run towards the heart of the climate debate, on both sides of the aisle, at national and subnational level.

Of course I know that many of you will be considering the 30-minute hop on the 1 train, to Wall Street.

That work will be pivotal too.

All of the climate action I have talked about today, all the promises that have been made, has one thing in common: it requires us to turn the billions currently flowing in climate finance, into trillions.

We need advocates like you in the boardrooms and on trading floors here in New York, and around the world.

And there are similarly catalytic roles in civil society, particularly recognising climate justice is completely interlinked with economic and social justice for so many people around the world.

In all of this work, I am heartened to know that you will be joined by colleagues from the increasing number of climate and sustainability schools, in the US and around the world.

From the students who hosted me just up the coast at Tufts in March, to those I met last month at Can Tho University, in the Mekong Delta of Viet Nam.

I had the privilege of attending on Monday, the State Funeral of our Late Monarch, Her Majesty the Queen.

In a moment of quiet reflection in Westminster Abbey, I thought back to Her Majesty's words, delivered to world leaders attending COP26.

She said:

“It is the hope of many that the legacy of this summit – written in the history books yet to be printed – will describe you as the leaders who did not pass up the opportunity; and that you answered the call of those future generations.”

That history is still to be written.

And I hope that the leaders of today, in my own country, in the United States, and across the world will heed the late Queen’s wise words.

To those of you setting out on your own leadership journeys.

Make them count.

And whilst my formal role ends at COP27, I will be there with you, continuing to champion the cause of climate action, which is so vital.

Thank you.

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