

PM speech at COP 26 Launch: 4 February 2020

Good morning everybody, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, Sir David, Ladies and Gentlemen

I am thrilled to welcome you all to the launch of what I hope will be a defining year of action for our country, and indeed for our planet, on tackling climate change but also on protecting the natural world

now when I used to come in a long time ago as a kid, as I'm sure all of us have done, there used to be a very curious exhibit on the way in – which unfortunately doesn't seem to be there – it's been removed, I think, for repair in Yorkshire or somewhere

it is a very curious carriage, and it looks like the sort of thing that could have carried Madame Bovary around Paris

except it wasn't pulled by horses this carriage – can you see the thing in your mind –

it is an electric taxi – the world's first – and it was invented by an unsung genius called Walter Bersey in 1897

And Walter Bersey like many of us in this room was a total nut for electric vehicles

he built an electric bus that went 4000 miles, this is around 1895

he built a series of electric vans

and he built a total of 75 of these taxis, and they were popular and commodious, velvet lined and effective

because they could turn on a dime they obeyed all the TFL scriptures, and they could mount Savoy hill, which was the steepest in central London

But the tragedy for Bersey, and the tragedy for humanity

was that he allowed himself to be daunted in what he was trying to do

because he was in the end defeated by the sceptics

and those who thought that his efforts were technologically impossible

First he was fined for going too fast – his vehicles could get up to 12 mph – and he was fined for going down parliament street without a chap in front carrying a red flag, which you had to have in those days

and he did admittedly, as time went on, experience some minor technological issues

the beautiful glass batteries that he had that weighed only two tonnes, were not always reliable, the tyres gave way under the strain

and eventually his electric taxis – so lovely and so convenient – were subject to a growing hostile whispering campaign by those who were wedded to the old technology, the ostlers and the coachmen and everyone else in involved in horse drawn vehicles

and in the end, and the end came pretty soon for Bersey, he gave up, and he concluded that it was impossible

He wound up his company, surrendered to the internal combustion engine in 1899

and that was the last electric taxi on the streets of London for more than a century, 110 years in fact,

until a certain visionary mayor decided to launch a campaign in 2008, and there they are, you can see them all over the streets, or hybrids anyway,

and as you look at that Bersey taxi it is impossible not to feel the pathos

It's as though humanity came 110 years ago – more than that 120 years ago – to a fork in the road – and took the wrong way

And look at what happened in the century since Bersey despaired

We have had a catastrophic period in which the global addiction to hydrocarbons has got totally out of control

We've poured so much CO₂ into the atmosphere collectively that our entire planet is swaddled in a great tea cosy of the stuff

CO₂ levels today are at a level not seen since 3 million years ago when there were trees on Antarctica,

Since Bersey despaired of his electric taxi, the temperature of the planet has gone up by one degree, and it is now predicted, unless we take urgent action, to get three degrees hotter

And in the hurricanes and the bushfires and the melting of the ice caps, and the acidification of the oceans, the evidence is now overwhelming and it is taking its toll, this phenomenon of global warming is taking its toll on the most vulnerable populations around the planet, which is why the UK has now committed to £11.6bn in tackling global climate change and in financing climate initiatives around the world

And we know, everyone – and it's fantastic to see so many people here this morning – because I think we all know that as a country and as a society, as a planet, as a species, we must now act

and we in the UK, will do everything we can to support our Chinese friends in

their biodiversity COP which is also coming up in the Autumn

and I think it's very important there should be a link between the two and there should be a clear sharing of the agenda,

because we must reverse the appalling loss of habitats and species

It's only by repairing the damage to the natural world

and restoring the balance between humanity and nature – which is now so grotesquely out of kilter

that we can address the problem of climate change

and of course at the same time we have to deal with our CO2 emissions

and that is why the UK is calling for us to get to net zero as soon as possible,

for every country to announce credible targets to get there, what's we want from Glasgow

and that is why we are pledged here in the UK to deliver net zero by 2050

and we're the first major economy to make that commitment, I think it's the right thing to do,

I think it's quite proper that should, we were the first after all, to industrialise. Look at historic emissions of the UK

we have a responsibility to our planet to lead in this way and to do this,

and of course there are people in this country – not necessarily in the Treasury – and people around the world who may say,

of course it's expensive, of course it's difficult, it will require thought and change and action, people will say it's impossible and it can't be done,

and my message to you all this morning is that they are wrong

and if you look at what this country has done, since 1990 – cutting CO2 by 42 per cent and at the same time seeing a 73% increase in the GDP of this country

We have done that through sheer determination and technological optimism

in 1990 70 per cent of the power of this country came from coal

it's now down to 3 per cent – and we want to get it to zero by 2024

and that is because, we're able to do that, because this country is leading a revolution in renewable energy and by the way, it's driving our national agenda of uniting and levelling up our country,

because it's parts of the North and the North East of the country in particular, that are showing the lead in renewable energy

the world's biggest offshore wind turbines are built beside the Humber, the carbon capture storage is being pioneered on the banks of the Tees.

one in five electric vehicles sold in Europe is built on the banks of where – the Wear. And there you go.

So I say to all those who doubted Walter Bersey, eat your heart out, because his basic idea has triumphed, hasn't it?

And the thing that they thought to be impossible has actually proved to be the solution,

And even the aviation industry is now committing to be carbon neutral by 2050

well we are on the verge, I'm assured, within a couple of years of having viable electric passenger aircraft

And we will get there, we will get there

And that is the lesson of that electric taxi that I wanted to look at and speculate about mournfully.

it is not that Walter Bersey was wrong, he wasn't wrong

he was wrong to doubt himself

and the sceptics are wrong to doubt the promethean genius of humanity to solve these problems

So we will crack it and I hope that we can as a planet and as a community of nations get to net zero, as I say, within decades

We're going to do it by 2050, we're setting the pace, I hope everybody will come with us

and let's work with Giuseppe, let's work with our Italian friends to make COP 26 a great success, a fantastic success for our country and for our planet

and let's make this year the moment when we come together with the courage and the technological ambition to solve man-made climate change and to choose a cleaner and greener future for all our children and grandchildren.