

PM's statement to the House on COP26: 15 November 2021

Mr Speaker before I begin today's statement I would like to say a few words about the abhorrent attack that took place yesterday morning outside the Liverpool Women's Hospital.

On behalf of the whole House I want to pay tribute to the swift and professional response by the extraordinary men and women of the emergency services, who once again showed themselves to be the very best among us.

The Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre has today raised the nationwide threat level from substantial to severe, meaning an attack is highly likely. The police are keeping both myself and the Home Secretary informed on developments and we will of course in turn keep the House updated on the investigation as it continues.

And now Mr Speaker with your permission I should like to make a statement on the United Nations Climate Change Conference better known as COP26 which took place in the magnificent city of Glasgow over the past two weeks.

It was the biggest political gathering of any kind ever held in the United Kingdom. 194 countries were represented.

We had around 120 heads of state or government. 38,000 accredited delegates. And there were countless tens of thousands more in the streets and parks and venues outside. It was a summit that many people predicted would fail. A summit that I fear some quietly wanted to fail. Yet it was a summit that proved the doubters and the cynics wrong. Because COP26 did not just succeed in keeping 1.5 alive. It succeeded in doing something no UN climate conference has ever done before by uniting the world in calling time on coal. In 25 previous COPs, all the way back to Berlin in 1995, not one delivered a mandate to remove so much as a single lump of coal from one power station boiler.

For decades, tackling the single biggest cause of carbon emissions proved as challenging as eating the proverbial elephant. It was just so big that no one knew quite where to start. But in Glasgow, Mr Speaker, we took the first bite. Because we have secured a global commitment to phasing down coal – and as John Kerry has pointed out, you can't phase out coal without first phasing it down as we transition to other, cleaner energy sources – and we have, for the first time, a worldwide recognition that we'll not get climate change under control as long as our power stations are consuming vast quantities of the sedimentary super-polluter that is coal.

That alone is a great achievement, but we haven't just signalled the beginning of the end for coal. We've ticked our boxes on cars, cash and trees as well. The companies that build a quarter of the world's automobiles have agreed to stop building carbon emission vehicles by 2035 – and cities from

Sao Paulo to Seattle have pledged to ban them from their streets.

We've pioneered a whole new model, an intellectual breakthrough, that sees billions in climate finance, development bank investment and so forth being used to trigger trillions from the private sector to drive the big decarbonisation programmes in countries like South Africa.

And we've done something that absolutely none of the commentators saw coming by building a coalition of more than 130 countries to protect up to 90 per cent of our forests, those great natural soakers of carbon. Mr Speaker none of this was a happy accident or inevitability.

The fact that we were there at all, in the face of a global pandemic, is in itself the result of a vast and complex effort involving countless moving parts. Right until the very end there was a very real prospect that no agreement would be reached.

And what has been achieved has only come about thanks to month after month of concerted British diplomacy, the countless meetings, the innumerable phone calls. The banging of heads at UNGA, at the Petersberg Dialogue, at President Biden's climate summit, the Security Council, the G7, the G20. And the setting of an example, several examples by the UK.

Because again and again the task of our negotiators was made easier by the fact that the UK wasn't asking anyone to do anything we're not doing ourselves. We've slashed our use of coal so much that our last two coal-fired power stations will go offline for good in 2024. We've more than doubled our climate finance, providing vital support for poor and vulnerable nations around the world. We've made a legally binding commitment to reach net zero, the first of the major economies to do so. We've set a date at which hydrocarbon internal combustion engines will reach the end of the road. And we've shown the world that it's possible to grow your economy while cutting carbon – creating markets for clean technology and delivering new green jobs that reduce emissions and increase prosperity.

Every one of those achievements was not just great news for our country and our planet but another arrow in the quiver of our fantastic team in Glasgow. A team led by COP president the Rt Hon Member for Reading West. From the moment he picked up the COP reins he has been absolutely tireless in his efforts to secure the change that we need. And while I'm pretty sure that what he really needs right now is a well-deserved break

I don't think any of us here will be able to hold him back as he sets off pushing countries to go further still and making sure the promises made in Glasgow are delivered not diluted. But success has many parents and I want to say a huge thank you to the officials in our own COP unit, in Downing Street and across government in embassies around the world, and at the United Nations who pulled out all the stops to make the event work and shepherd through the agreements that have been reached.

I also want to thank everyone on the ground at the SEC in Glasgow – security, catering, transport, the relentlessly cheery volunteers, the police from

across the country who kept us safe from harm, the public health authorities who kept us safe from Covid – and everyone in the Scottish Government. And above all I want to say thank you to the people of Glasgow, who had to put up with so much disruption in their city and welcomed the world all the same. I say to the people of Glasgow – we couldn't have done it without you.

Is there still more to do? Of course there is. I am not for one moment suggesting we can safely close the book on climate change.

In fact I can think of nothing more dangerous than patting ourselves on the back and telling ourselves that the job is done. Because this job will not be complete until the whole world has not only set off to reach net zero but arrived at the destination.

A goal that, even with the best of intentions from all actors, cannot be achieved overnight. While COP26 has filled me with optimism about our ability to get there I cannot now claim to be certain that we will, because we have seen countries that really should know better dragging their heels on their Paris commitments. But if, and it is still an if, they make good on their pledges, then I believe Glasgow will be remembered as the place where we secured an historic agreement and the world began to turn the tide.

Before Paris we were on course for four degrees of warming. After Paris that number fell to a still catastrophically dangerous three. This afternoon, after Glasgow it stands close to two. Still too high, the numbers are still too hot, but closer than we have ever been to the relative safety of 1.5, and with an all-new roadmap that will lead us there.

Aristotle taught us that virtue comes not from reasoning and instruction but from habit and practice. And so the success of the Glasgow Climate Pact lies not just in the promises but in the move that the whole world has now made from setting abstract targets to adopting the nuts and bolts programme of work to meet those targets and to reduce CO2 emissions.

We are now talking about the how rather than the what and getting into a habit of cutting CO2 that is catching on not just with governments but with businesses and with billions of people around the world. It is for that reason that I believe COP26 has been a success and 1.5 is still alive.

That is something in which every person in our United Kingdom can and should take pride, and I commend this statement to the House.