

BLOG POST February 25th 2020

A test for British diplomacy: climate negotiations in a post-Brexit world

Authors

Lucien Chabason

Senior Advisor

Lola Vallejo

Climate Special Adviser

 Reading time: 6 min

With less than 9 months to go before the 26th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (9-19 November) to be held in Glasgow under the British Presidency, its contours are finally taking shape with the appointment of Alok Sharma as the new President (13 February)[1](#) and the announcement of five thematic priorities (24 February). The British have a huge task ahead of them: what are they expected to deliver? What themes do they want to focus on? What assets can they build on, and what major challenges lie ahead?

COP26 marks the fifth anniversary of the Paris Climate Agreement. The British are expected to focus first on their ability to meet the deadline by which States are required to submit new climate action commitments (nationally

determined contributions, or NDCs, due 2030-2035) and encouraged to submit longer-term strategies towards a low-carbon and resilient development. So far, only three states have submitted new NDCs,² and while more than a hundred have committed to upgraded NDCs, large emitters such as the United States will miss the call, unless a Democrat defeats Donald Trump and announces a return to the Paris Agreement. Others have not sent a very clear diplomatic signal: we could talk about China, or the European Union, where the Commission and Member States will have to work together to give substance to and translate President Ursula Von der Leyen's commitment of -50 to 55% emissions by 2030 in a European Council decision by November. The United Kingdom itself will be scrutinised on the timing and content of its first post-Brexit NDC.³ Many observers already point out that the credibility of the British Presidency of COP26 will also depend on the decisions that the country takes domestically with regard to the objective of achieving zero net emissions in 2050 for all gases—the United Kingdom having been the first G7 country to formalise this commitment.

Furthermore, the British Presidency must also succeed in resolving the main tensions that the previous COPs have been running into: firstly, defining rules for international carbon markets, established in Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, after the failure of the COPs in Katowice (COP24) and Madrid (COP25), notably due to an isolated Brazilian position; and convincing the world that the 100 billion per year in 2020, promised at COP15 in Copenhagen, will be delivered, while preparing for the discussion on a new post-2020 climate finance target.

The Presidency's thematic priorities⁴ include:

1. Adaptation: a theme co-piloted by the United Kingdom for the UN Secretary General's summit last September.
2. Finance: the UK is seen as being at the forefront of this issue, notably through the figure of Mark Carney, former Governor of the Bank of England involved in disclosure initiatives,⁵ and special advisor to the Presidency.
3. Nature: a way to strengthen ties with the Chinese presidency of COP15 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), but also to untie Article 6, which could provide funding for the conservation and restoration of nature-based climate solutions (NBS).
4. Energy transition: which can build on the Powering Past Coal Alliance⁶ launched by the United Kingdom in 2017.
5. Clean road transport: which can build on the domestic decision to move away from thermal vehicles in 2035.

In the face of these major challenges, everything suggests that the UK government seems convinced of its responsibilities in terms of the climate diplomacy that must accompany the COP26 agenda. While the late replacement of Claire O'Neill by Alok Sharma (appointed Secretary of State for the Economy, Energy and Industrial Strategy in charge of the preparation and presidency of COP26) has been criticised in the context of the preparation of the COP, it can be considered that by changing leadership, Boris Johnson has shown his commitment to the success of COP26 by putting in place a necessary genuine climate diplomacy. The international experience of the new incumbent, previously in charge of development, should be useful in a rather tormented international context. But the time remaining until Glasgow is short.

The new President can nevertheless rely on a strong team, including the Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy Department (BEIS) and the diplomatic network of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO), as well as a special COP 26 unit of more than 100 people attached to the Cabinet Office under the direct responsibility of the Prime Minister. In addition to Alok Sharma and, it is hoped, the personal involvement of Boris Johnson, the Presidency relies primarily on two special envoys from the administration (John Murton, COP26 envoy attached to the Cabinet

Office, and Nick Bridge, special climate envoy to the Foreign Office) and on a champion from civil society (Nigel Topping, former director of We Mean Business and the Carbon Disclosure Project, in charge of rallying businesses, investors, cities and regions, alongside Mark Carney). The British presidency should also build on the role that Scotland could play in bringing regional and local authorities on board at the COP, beyond the tensions of independence.

Although British diplomacy will not benefit from the equivalent of the USA-China Joint Presidential Announcements in September 2014 and September 2015,⁷ which both represented crucial steps paving the way for the success of COP21, it has high expectations of the Leipzig summit between European heads of state and China's Xi Jinping. The United Kingdom must also take into account the withdrawal of the United States—which is influencing countries such as Brazil and India—and the difficulties of China, which is hampered in the context of Covid-19 and is mobilised towards the success of its own Biodiversity COP planned—for the time being—in Kunming next October. Logically, the natural ally for the preparation of the COP should be the European Union committed to raising its climate commitments, including Italy, which is due to host a preparatory meeting for the COP in Milan (28 September-2 October). But 2020 will also be the year of the negotiation of the EU-UK trade agreement following Brexit, which promises to be delicate and tense. The United Kingdom will also have to seek support from the Commonwealth, which includes countries in favour of a determined climate action (some of the *Small Islands and Developing States*)⁸ and others, such as India, that are active in the *Like Minded Developing Countries (LMDCs)*⁹ group.

The recognised professionalism of British diplomacy will be necessary to lead the preparations for COP26 in this particularly difficult context. Mobilisation of the government and the diplomatic network, consultation with non-governmental actors, nothing must be neglected. As *The Economist* writes, "Britain has been handed the opportunity to prove, post-Brexit, that it can be a world leader on a pressing issue. It could do worse than swallow its pride and learn a lesson from its neighbours over the Channel"; as a matter of fact, the British Presidency has decided to learn from its predecessors by inviting the champions and presidents of the COPs from 2015 to 2019 to a strategic retreat at Wilton Park (20-21 February).¹⁰

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/alok-sharma-appointed-cop26-president>

² Marshall Islands, Suriname, and Norway: <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2020/02/10/which-countries-updated-ndc-2020-marshall-islands-suriname-norway-cop26/>

³ <https://www.endsreport.com/article/1674490/uks-paris-target-will-based-fifth-carbon-budget>

⁴ <https://twitter.com/COP26/status/1231923594449629184?s=20>

⁵ <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/-/media/boe/files/speech/2019/tcfd-strengthening-the-foundations-of-sustainable-finance-speech-by-mark-carney.pdf?la=en&hash=D28F6D67BC4B97DDCCDE91AF8111283A39950563>

⁶ <https://poweringpastcoal.org/>

⁷ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/25/us-china-joint-presidential-statement-climate-change>

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Like-Minded_Developing_Countries

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Like-Minded_Developing_Countries

¹⁰ <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/event/wp1768/>