



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

COP26: Blah, blah, blah

Clay Nelson © 7 November 2021

To introduce my musings this morning I am turning to an 18-year-old woman who, ever since she was a child, has been teaching us how to speak truth to power. Greta Thunberg has resisted being a token voice used by governments lacking political will and by global companies seeking to monetise efforts to stop killing the planet while doing their best to protect their financial interests in extracting carbon. This is a short speech she gave on the eve of COP26.

<https://youtu.be/n2TJMpiG5XQ>

Greta paints a pretty bleak picture and she is right. While 193 parties signed the Paris Agreement, that was the “easy” part. Signing it offered positive headlines without having to put much skin in the game. It was good PR. For governments, not challenging their countries to take on the sacrificial requirements to make the headlines a reality was good politics. Besides, the climate change deniers were muddying the waters to stall acknowledging the science and the fierce urgency of now. So, again she is right. There is a lot of blah, blah, blah to drown out inaction.

Before going further I need to clarify the differences between a person and a people. There are countless persons of reason and integrity and passion who get the science and are doing all they are capable of to mitigate the destruction of the planet. Greta is just one example. There are even some politicians and corporations genuinely trying to make a difference.

Then there are people. All too often they are irrational, superstitious, selfish, fearful and easily manipulated into a mob mentality by persons at the other end of the continuum from the Gretas. Those people act without conscience; concern and care for the common good do not trump their desire for power and profit. They don't even feel responsible for those they manipulate to achieve their purposes. When good persons who do care are afraid or intimidated, they tend to look at what has to be done as being in the too-hard basket, leaving a vacuum for those of ill will to fill.

Here are a few examples. The big three emitters of carbon into the atmosphere are China, the US and India. Cooperation between such disparate political systems and cultures would be hard enough without adding the hardening of relations between the US and China over Taiwan and Hong Kong, trade, domination of the South China Sea and human rights violations.

Xi Jinping has chosen not to attend COP26. But China has agreed to stop building coal-fed generators outside China, while more than doubling the number being built inside China. Blah, blah, blah. The wishful thinking is that China will reach peak emissions by 2030 and will reach zero emissions by 2060, which will be much too late.

The US has never once passed through Congress a green bill. Joe Biden is a vast improvement over his predecessor who withdrew the US from the Paris Accord. Biden has returned to the Paris Accord. He has joined with the European Union in an effort to reduce methane emissions and has provided billions for assisting developing countries become greener and to survive the effects of climate change that will hit them hardest. Unfortunately, Morgan Stanley and others are saying billions will not be nearly enough. We are now in the territory of trillions.

And then, for reasons beyond my comprehension, last week Biden approved opening vast portions of government land for gas and oil exploration. Blah, blah, blah.

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi is thought to at least be open to net zero emissions in a country that has been heavily coal dependent, as renewable energy becomes more cost effective. However, India has long said all substantial emissions-cutting efforts must come from developed countries, which bear historical responsibility – even though recent figures show its cumulative emissions since 1850 outstrip those of the UK. Blah, blah, blah.

There are of course others to be mentioned. We all know what Brazil's president Jair Bolsonaro has done to Amazon's rainforest. It has been carnage. He and those he represents have brought the world's biggest rainforest, a huge carbon sink, to the brink of becoming a source of carbon. Shortly before COP26 he promised to double the budget for protecting the Amazon. Not sure how much double very little is, but nevertheless he reneged on the commitment days later. In addition, he wrecked the last COP in 2019 over the

technicalities of carbon trading, an issue still to be resolved at this COP. More blah, blah, blah.

And then there is the Prime Minister across the ditch. Here is what the Australian Climate Council had to say about Scott Morrison's visit to Glasgow:

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has addressed world leaders at COP26 in Glasgow with a speech that was **light on commitments and credibility, but heavy on spin.**

Morrison claimed that his Government is acting on climate change "the Australian way". However, based on the Federal Government's track record, their "way" of responding to the climate threat is very unAustralian and includes:

- Blocking global collaboration on climate action
- Promoting the extension and expansion of fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas
- And refusing to step up and set ambitious climate goals

Even with a new net zero by 2050 target, **Australia remains dead last on climate.** Our actions so far at COP26 have only cemented our global reputation as a climate action blocker.

Our PM stood up in front of the world and effectively promised to do nothing. If speaking spots at COP26 were determined by the strength and merit of each country's commitments, then the PM would not have been given the mic.

That's right. Blah, blah, blah.

Now before we catapult too many stones into other people's glass houses, New Zealand is far from doing its fair share yet. While I believe there are many persons in our government who understand that we are in a climate emergency, I don't see them preparing the people for what sacrifice is going to be required. My major criticism is that there is a reluctance to spend the political capital to do what most in leadership know needs doing. Pain will be required if hope is to be found. Let me offer a couple of examples.

As the Glasgow climate summit is underway, New Zealand's government has announced a revised pledge, with a headline figure of a 50 per cent reduction

on gross 2005 emissions by the end of this decade. That is so much blah, blah, blah.

New Zealand's actual emissions in the 2010s were 701 million tonnes (Mt) of carbon dioxide equivalent. The carbon budget for the 2020s is 675Mt. The old pledge for the 2020s was 623Mt.

The Climate Change Commission's advice was for "much less than" 593Mt, and the new Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) is 571Mt. So yes, the new pledge meets the commission's advice and is a step up on the old. However, due to the application of two complicated accounting methods it does not meet our fair share under the Paris Agreement. Instead of a 50% reduction of emissions, the real NDC figure is only 21.8%. The climate does not care about our clever accounting choices, it cares about the level of net emissions. And our failure to walk-the-talk will be apparent to our trading partners in our United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change reporting.

New Zealand's old climate strategy was based on tree planting and the purchase of offshore carbon credits. The tree planting came to an end in the early 2010s and is only now resuming, while the Emissions Trading Scheme was closed to international markets in 2015. The Paris Agreement was intended to allow a restart of international carbon trading, but this has not yet been possible.

New Zealand has a terrible record in cutting emissions so far. Burning of fossil fuels actually increased by 9 per cent from 2016 to 2019. It's a challenge to turn around our high-emissions economy.

With only two months to go until 2022 and the official start of the carbon budgets, there is no plan to meet them. The suggestions in the consultation document add up to only half the cuts needed for the first budget period.

Thinking in the transport area is the furthest advanced, with a solid approach to fuel efficiency already approved, and an acknowledgement total driving must decrease, active and public transport must increase, and new roads may not be compatible with climate targets.

But industry needs to step up massively. The proposed 2037 end date for coal burning is far too late, while the milk cooperative Fonterra intends to begin phasing out natural gas for milk drying only after that date.

And don't get me started on the reduction of methane. Agriculture produces 48% of our greenhouse emissions, of which 71% is methane from primarily cows. How we will reduce that by 47% by 2050 is a mystery unless political will and sacrifice is brought to bear.

It is enough to make you wonder how many millions of tonnes of greenhouse emissions is produced by blah, blah, blah.

Meditation / Conversation Starter:

How much are you willing to sacrifice for environmental justice?

What would you balk at?