

Opinion – Scotland: Host of COP26 but Divided on Its Role in the World

Written by Anthony Salamone

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ANTHONY SALAMONE, NOV 2 2021

Global attention has turned to Glasgow, Scotland's largest city, for the November 2021 UN Climate Change Conference – COP26. For the world leaders and negotiators in attendance, and those watching from a distance, COP26 represents a crucial test of our collective action, or inaction, in the face of manifest and worsening climate change. For the host country, COP26 means that and something more. Beyond the climate politics, the conference reflects Scotland's uncertainty about its political future and its role in the world.

Scottish politics is defined above all by its independence debate. At present, public opinion on the issue is fairly evenly split. The Scottish Government and the UK Government remain engaged in a long-running, though currently dormant, dispute over holding a new independence referendum. Observers should keep this context in mind when viewing the domestic optics of COP26. The UK Government is the official host of the conference. It holds the COP26 presidency and it is negotiating on behalf of the UK as a whole. The Scottish Government has no direct role in the negotiations, but it is responsible for local infrastructure and logistics — and it will seek to make its voice heard on climate change throughout the COP nonetheless.

The hosting of COP26 is embedded in the Scottish independence debate. Both governments will use the conference to promote their differing visions for Scotland's future: as a continued part of the UK or as a separate state. London will want to show that the UK remains a force in the world and that Scottish independence is unnecessary, if not dangerous. Edinburgh will make the case that Scotland would thrive as a European small state which was part of the EU. These arguments will be weaved, mostly subtly, into the two governments' engagements around the COP. The principal target of these efforts will be the Scottish public, rather than conference-goers. In any event, UN delegates will undoubtedly be focused on climate negotiations, not Scottish politics.

The Scottish political class likes to think of Scotland as an internationalist country. That belief is one reason why most of it opposed Brexit so emphatically. Before the UK's 2016 EU membership referendum, only a small number of Scottish politicians genuinely wanted to leave the EU. Yet, for all the interest in and enthusiasm for COP26, Scottish political debate on EU and international affairs is largely superficial. Discussion is often reduced to points for or against independence, disconnected from the substance of global events and Scotland's relationship to them.

Scottish institutions have no legal powers on foreign and defence policies, which remain with London. Nevertheless, a soft-spoken political consensus used to exist that Scotland could engage in European and global affairs to a modest degree, without calling its constitutional position into question. The Scottish Government has a small international development programme, for instance, focused on Malawi, Pakistan, Rwanda and Zambia.

That consensus was shattered by the realisation of Brexit (which the Scottish electorate did not support in the 2016 referendum). Now, the Scottish Government's interactions with the outside world are increasingly viewed, by both sides of the argument, as merely an extension of the independence debate. The government's opening of representative offices in different EU member states has been a particular point of contention. Seemingly unconcerned by these divisions, the Scottish Government, run by the pro-independence Scottish National Party, aims to increase its global profile even further. Climate diplomacy is a priority area. It wants Scotland to be known as

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ambitious and progressive on addressing climate change.

The Scottish target to achieve net-zero carbon emissions is 2045, which is five years ahead of London's 2050 target. The Scottish Government even published its own Nationally Determined Contribution (a climate action plan), as if it were a signatory to the Paris Agreement in its own right. The full picture is more mixed. Scotland has long been an exporter of fossil fuels, in the form of North Sea oil and gas. It has missed its last three annual emissions reduction targets. In advance of COP26, the Scottish media chronicled ongoing environmental problems across Scotland, including polluted rivers, poor air quality and weak energy efficiency ratings of COP26 venues.

Moreover, the Scottish Government is in an awkward position. The signature UN climate change conference is being held in Scotland, but it is not part of the negotiations. It is challenging to show climate leadership from conference fringe events. In time, COP26 may be remembered as a success or a failure in facing climate change — and it could influence Glasgow's and Scotland's reputations accordingly. Either way, the Scottish Government has little power to shape the negotiations or their outcome.

Instead, the UK Government is the president of COP26. It is responsible for the conference, and it will receive the plaudits if a substantial outcome is achieved. London is also concerned with more than just climate politics. Maintaining public support in Scotland for the British union, and against Scottish independence, is one of its central goals. It certainly chose Glasgow as the host city for COP26 to demonstrate what it considers to be the UK's international strength and prestige to Scottish voters.

Throughout the conference proceedings, the independence debate will never be far away for the local audience. The various meetings, photo ops, and side events of the Scottish Government and the UK Government will be scrutinised for coups and snubs that can somehow be connected back to the constitutional question. Some supporters of independence see COP26 as an opportunity to promote their cause to a global audience. However, if the world looks to Glasgow for climate action, and finds that Scotland is instead talking about itself, that would hardly be an ideal image for the host.

Scotland may be an internationalist country, but it is also profoundly unsure of its political future. It could remain a constituent of the UK, an ex-member of the EU with a remote relationship to the bloc. It could become an independent state, likely as a more normal EU member committed to the European project. That debate on Scotland's future will continue for some time. Alongside its global significance, COP26 exposes the deep divisions which shape Scottish politics. Whether on climate change or wider issues, the lingering question remains: How much can Scotland meaningfully contribute to global debates when it is so undecided on its own role in the world?

About the author:

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