

**Written evidence submitted by Dr. Thomas Hale, Associate Professor, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford (COP0003)**

1. I thank the Committee for the opportunity to submit evidence on the 26<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP26, UNFCCC), to be hosted by the UK in partnership with Italy. I am associate professor of global public policy at the [Blavatnik School of Government](#), University of Oxford. My academic work focuses on how we can best address transnational challenges such as climate change. I focus in particular on why multilateralism often becomes “gridlocked,” and what strategies governments—but also other actors such as business, cities, and NGOs—can use to meet global challenges even in the face of geopolitical headwinds.<sup>1</sup> I have been an active participant in the UNFCCC process since 2013, and regularly advise governments and international organizations on the subject. The evidence below is organised around the seven questions the Committee raised.
2. I welcome the Committee’s attention to the success of COP26 because the stakes, already extraordinarily high, have become stratospheric. COP26 represents a critical juncture on three fronts:
  - As the first moment since 2015 to increase countries’ Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement, COP26 is critical for global efforts to address climate change;
  - As the first major international summit the UK will host after Brexit, COP26 is critical for demonstrating—both to the divided British public and to the world—that the UK remains a leader on global issues outside the EU;
  - As a major international summit following the COVID-19 outbreak, COP26 is critical for efforts to “Build Back Better,”<sup>2</sup> and to strengthen our frayed multilateral system.

The UK’s overriding national interest is therefore to make COP26 as successful as possible. At the time of writing, COP26 has been postponed, but a new date has not been set. The UK must make the most of this extra time.

3. **Key recommendation.** For COP26 to succeed, it must be not just a meeting of diplomats but an “All Society” event that complements diplomatic commitments and outcomes with substantive action from cities, businesses, investors, and other actors. In the wake of COVID-19, an “All Society” frame also helps demonstrate how climate ambition builds healthy, resilient societies and economies that protect people’s basic welfare over the long-term.

**What should the Government be aiming to achieve at COP26?**

4. The most important thing for COP26 to deliver is a significant “ratchet” of climate ambition to put the world closer to the goals of the Paris Agreement. The “catalytic” logic of the Paris Agreement is organised around flexible national commitments that increase over time.<sup>3</sup> If we do not see a meaningful increase at COP26, the basic premise of the Agreement will be put in question, crippling what is perhaps the most significant multilateral achievement of the last decade.
5. A ratchet of ambition can come in several forms:

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hale and David, Held. 2017. *Beyond Gridlock*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

<sup>2</sup> UN Secretary-General António Guterres. “[Opening remarks at virtual press encounter to launch the Report on the Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19](#).” 31 March 2020. New York.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Hale. 2018. “[Catalytic cooperation](#).” BSG-WP-2018/026. September.

- The primary yardstick for ambition will be what new, updated, and enhanced *Nationally Determined Contributions* countries put forth—their new pledges under the Paris Agreement.
  - Countries are also invited to submit *Long-term Strategies* in 2020, which are national plans for mitigation and adaptation that reach to 2050. Consistent with the aspiration to limit warming to 1.5C, long-term decarbonization strategies should target “net zero” by 2050.
  - The UNFCCC process also seeks to mobilise *commitments from cities, provinces, states, and regions, businesses, investors, and other actors*. Globally, this “groundswell” of climate ambition includes over 9,000 sub-national jurisdictions home to about 1 in 5 people, and over 6,000 businesses whose combined annual revenue exceeds the GDPs of China and the United States combined.<sup>4</sup>
  - Numerous *transnational initiatives* (often multi-stakeholder in nature) seek to create substantive outcomes to aid global climate goals, such as halting deforestation or deploying electric vehicles. These “real economy” changes are valuable demonstrations of ambition as well.
6. Within the UNFCCC process, NDCs will be seen as the key benchmark for ambition (since they are the primary tools under the 2015 Paris Agreement). However, the UK has a strong interest in also emphasizing Long-term Strategies, sub- and non-state commitments, and real economy outcomes. As discussed below, NDC-enhancement may be unlikely, on its own, to deliver a sufficient ratchet to make COP26 a success. Instead, the UK should capitalise on the expanding range of other drivers of ambition, following an “All Society” strategy that makes full use of the groundswell of climate action from all spheres of society.
  7. A key question is how much of a ratchet in ambition will be needed to declare success at COP26. Current NDCs put the world on track to somewhere between 3 to 4 degrees of warming in this century.<sup>5</sup> In a best-case scenario, new pledges would put the world on track to well below 2 degrees of warming, and ideally 1.5, consistent with the goals of the Paris Agreement. However, as noted below, this will be difficult to achieve. Further “ratchets” in 2025 and beyond will likely be needed to get fully “on track.” However, in my view it will be difficult to declare COP26 a success if new NDCs do not reduce our collective trajectory by at least another degree, falling below the psychologically salient 3C threshold.
  8. Finally, while COP26 should be focused on getting the world on track to meet its climate goals, The COVID-19 crisis reminds us *why* emissions reductions are essential—to ensure the long-term resilience of our economies and societies. While “ambition” should remain the primary focus of COP26, a benchmark for success will be how well the event connects global climate goals to the immediate human needs that the COVID-19 outbreak reveals, as well as the economic recovery packages governments are elaborating. An “All Society” frame assists with this broadening of the COP process.

**If this is not possible, what would be a realistic but successful outcome?**

9. Substantial barriers block the path to a significant ratchet at COP26. But given the high stakes noted above, the UK’s best strategy is not to try to lower expectations to a “realistic” outcome. Even post-COVID, such a move would be very likely to backfire given increasing public concern around climate change and the UK’s objective of positioning itself globally post-Brexit. Instead, the UK should seek to shift the zone of possible outcomes in a positive direction.

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<sup>4</sup> UNFCCC. 2019. [Yearbook of Climate Action 2019](#). November.

<sup>5</sup> UNFCCC. 2015. [Synthesis report on the aggregate effect of the intended nationally determined contributions](#). Bonn. 30 October 2015.

10. The primary obstacle to success is built into the nature of the process. The UK and its allies possess few diplomatic levers to influence the NDCs of most of the world's largest emitters, including China, the United States, India, Brazil, and Russia. In these countries, domestic political factors will be by far the strongest drivers of climate ambition. Put bluntly, if success at COP26 is defined solely in terms of NDCs, the UK will essentially surrender the key outcome of this most critical international summit to the leaders of the countries listed above.
11. While still insisting on strong new NDCs from all countries, the UK must also work to broaden the definition of success to include factors that it can influence directly. Here the UK can leverage the positive momentum toward decarbonization we see across a wide range of actors. For example, a recent report found that countries, cities, companies and other actors that account for nearly half of global GDP have set, or are considering setting, "net zero" targets.<sup>6</sup> An "All Society" COP that emphasizes commitments from all actors, as well as "real economy" outcomes, can help widen the definition of success in this way.

#### **What is needed to put the conference on track to deliver this?**

12. Over the course of 2019, the UK lost valuable time in articulating and advancing a high-level COP26 strategy. Leadership changes, elections, and Brexit understandably but lamentably delayed political leadership on the COP, though the civil service machinery moved forward. In the last 6 months there has been an impressive increase in tempo, with the COP26 team staffing up and elements of strategy being finalised and publicly articulated. This ramp up was very late (e.g. compared to preparations for COP21 in Paris in 2015), but perhaps just in time for the original November 2020 timeframe.
13. At present, the COVID-19 crisis has an ambivalent affect. On the one hand, it has understandably diverted ministerial attention at exactly the moment the COP process was beginning to develop momentum. On the other hand, the postponement of the COP creates valuable time in which the UK can strengthen and develop its strategy. It will be critical to use this time effectively. While there has been, and will be, significant disruption from COVID-19, the UK potentially has a rare second chance to prepare.
14. Encouragingly, the COP26 team has already begun to develop key building blocks for an "All Society" COP. The cross-ministerial teams, including the team around the High-level Climate Champion Nigel Topping, are exploring how to generate transformational outcomes in key economic sectors, and how to mobilise additional commitments from sub-national and non-state actors. These efforts could be granted additional resources and woven more effectively together with "traditional" diplomatic activities (see below).
15. More broadly, it is critical to (re)establish a strong narrative for the COP that emphasizes how the urgency for greater climate ambition directly answers the human need for a healthy and resilient economy and society. Moreover, once a new date for the COP is set, it will be necessary to rebuild the calendar of preparatory and momentum-building events that will be needed to seed and cultivate the desired outcomes. Given that many of these will need to take place virtually, radical creativity will be needed.

#### **4. What diplomatic efforts should the Government undertake, to ensure that countries substantially raise their ambition?**

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<sup>6</sup> Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit. 2020. "Net zero tracker." Available: <https://eciu.net/netzerotracker>

16. An “All Society” approach to COP should not be seen as an alternative to “traditional” diplomacy, but as a complement to it. Indeed, traditional diplomacy can be enhanced by creating greater linkages to pro-climate actors within countries, who can act as internal voices of support for raising ambition (see below regarding the US).
17. Because China and the United States are individually and jointly critical to the success of COP26, I focus on them here. Bilateral diplomacy between the Obama Administration and China was critical to the success of the 2015 Paris Agreement. COP26 faces a changed landscape in the domestic politics of both countries and in their bilateral relationship.
18. For the United States, the UK strategy must be robust to the multiple potential outcomes of the November 2020 election, which will likely remain impossible to predict. Given this uncertainty, a “no regrets” measure will be to forge strong ties to the US states, cities, and businesses that remain committed to the Paris Agreement. A recent report found that such actors represent 68 percent of US GDP, 65 percent of the US population, and 51 percent of US emissions. If it were a country, this coalition’s economy would be larger than China’s.<sup>7</sup> An All Society approach to COP will help provide a space and platform for these actors. Moreover, UK diplomacy can focus on increasing the ambition of those US subnational actors that do not yet align with net zero by 2050.
19. With China, the UK has a significant opportunity to link COP26 to the Conventional on Biological Diversity (CBD) summit China is due to host (originally scheduled for October but now postponed). The CBD conference will be the first large global environmental summit China has ever hosted. Its bureaucracy has limited experience in orchestrating these kinds of consensus based multilateral processes, and was struggling to put forward an effective processes even before the COVID-19 outbreak. At the same time, a successful CBD outcome in China would provide a much-needed boost to the country’s standing as a global leader and contributor to global public goods in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak and ongoing geopolitical contestation. The UK is well positioned to leverage its diplomatic networks to help China make the CBD COP a success, while in return seeking Chinese support for success in COP26.
20. Finally, the UK has an opportunity to link its climate and trade agendas to the benefit of both. The global trading system is in crisis. Going forward, we are likely to see some major economies like the EU and (pending the outcome of the election) potentially the US making trade agreements conditional on various social goals, including climate protection. Other large economies are likely to oppose these goals (again, potentially the US under a different electoral scenario, but also India, China, and others), promising even greater friction in global trade. As a medium-sized economy seeking new trading arrangements at a time of geopolitical contestation, the UK would benefit from being a rule-setter, rather than a rule-taker, on this issue. Articulating a strong pro-climate trade agenda tied to COP26 (there is already a coalition of countries

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<sup>7</sup> America’s Pledge. 2019. “Accelerating America’s Pledge: Going All-In to Build a Prosperous, Low-Carbon Economy for the United States.” Available: <https://www.americaspledgeonclimate.com/reports/>

working on this)<sup>8</sup> could put the UK at the forefront of this issue and create additional diplomatic leverage and credibility for the UK.

**5. What can the Government do to prevent countries' broader priorities around growth and poverty, as well as COVID-19, from undermining the effort to raise ambition?**

21. It is critical for COP26 to cement the idea that climate action builds social and economic resilience to the kinds of disruptions the world is currently seeing. Happily, we continue to see significant forward progress on climate even during the COVID-19 outbreak. For example, in April South Korea became the first East Asian country to pledge to reach net zero by 2050.
22. However, even if COP26 can successfully position itself in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, there remains the very practical risk that headlines, events, civil servants' time, and political leaders' agendas will be consumed by the daily demands of managing the pandemic. The UK can help meliorate this risk by setting a good example and insisting on COP26-related content in all high-level international interactions.

**6. What risks and uncertainties should the Government be contingency planning for, and what would sensible contingencies look like?**

23. Perhaps the greatest risk is that the COP will not happen in a way that allows it to succeed. For example, due to ongoing COVID-19 concerns, the decision may be made to hold a virtual meeting, or a radically scaled down one, or to simply pass to the next regional group due to host in 2021 (Africa). The UK should resist such moves, but if it cannot then it may be necessary to host a non-UNFCCC climate summit. Such an event, building on precedents by the UN Secretary General, France, and California, would seek to create a substantial ratchet in ambition through sub- and non-state actors, as well as multi-stakeholder initiatives.

**7. What actions could the UK Parliament take to provide a meaningful and useful contribution to COP26, both in the run-up to, and during, the conference?**

24. Parliament has a key role to play in advance of, and during, COP26 in liaising with parliamentarians from around the world. As we shift to the implementation phase of the Paris Agreement, there is less need for diplomatic negotiations over the text of treaties, and more need for pragmatic exchanges between governments over how to transition. The UK Parliament has been a source of world-leading climate legislation, not least the Climate Change Act. Parliament can support COP26 diplomacy by inviting parliamentarians for key countries to exchange ideas around what legislative tools are most effective in addressing climate change.

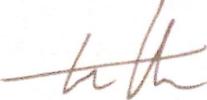
**Conclusion**

25. In sum, COP26 remains the most important international summit the UK has hosted in recent years. Success in Glasgow can bolster the global response to climate change, secure the UK's global standing post Brexit, and strengthen the multilateral system in the wake of COVID-19. By the same token, a failed COP will suggest that the Paris Agreement is unable to deliver its central ratchet function, undermine the UK's post-Brexit standing, and reveal the multilateral system to be truly gridlocked.

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<sup>8</sup> New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. "[Agreement on Climate Change, Trade and Sustainability \(ACCTS\) negotiations.](#)" 2020.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in brown ink, appearing to read 'T. Hale', is centered below the word 'Sincerely,'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line crossing through the middle of the letters.

Dr. [Thomas Hale](#)

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