

Charlton St. Peter
Wiltshire

February 3rd 2020

Dear Prime Minister,

I was surprised and dismayed to be phoned by Dominic Cummings last Friday to be told I was no longer required to act as your COP (Conference of the UN Parties) President.

I was given three separate explanations for the decision, none of which could be clearly articulated or supported with evidence, apart from needing someone more senior. You did, of course, know my seniority and experience when you offered me the job and my track record of delivery from persuading the Cabinet to host COP26, winning the COP bid in partnership with Italy, publishing the Clean Growth Strategy, introducing our historic Net Zero legislation, launching the global Powering Past Coal Alliance and negotiating the Offshore Wind Sector Deal that has made our vast offshore renewable energy source cheaper than fossil fuel alternatives.

It was very disheartening in this context to learn that No. 10 is rumoured to be behind the media briefings put out to support your decision, which variously contained awful, false and distorted defamatory allegations. To take two examples: "bullying allegations" were referred to, when you are aware that there was a single historical complaint, which was fully investigated by the Cabinet office and found to be entirely without merit. Equally, reports of "problems on international engagements" stemmed from a single blog post which I believe can be completely rebutted by the emails, reports and public statements from our ambassadors and international stakeholders. Just for good measure, almost every negative media story (and none of the good stuff) over the last eleven years was included in the briefings just to spice them up and to detract from the real failings and real concerns about the COP26 process and progress. Given my track record and our long and honest working relationship that is quite disgraceful.

But let's leave my disappointment with the firing process and No. 10's apparent dark ops to one side, and focus on the real issue.

We are almost out of time to win the battle against climate change and start the process of climate recovery.

CO₂ levels are over 415 ppm and climbing. The last time we saw numbers like this was three million years ago when sea levels were 20 metres higher than now and beech trees grew in Antarctica. The world's attempts to get to grips with this epic Tragedy of the Commons are failing. Almost 50 per cent of our collective emissions have been pumped out since the first meeting of global leaders on climate at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 and emissions are 4 per cent higher than in 2015 when the Paris agreement was signed at COP21. Global scientists are clear that unless we break this trend now and start sustained reduction in global emissions with a clear net zero landing zone by 2050 or shortly afterwards, we will be dealing with

unprecedented climate conditions and vast economic and human consequences within decades, not centuries.

It became clear to me as the UK Climate and Energy Minister that the current format of the global COP talks needed to be re-energized and focused if we are to reach any form of meaningful global action plan for climate recovery. This is also the view of previous COP presidents and negotiators, UN climate experts, climate activists and commentators whom we consulted. The annual UN talks are dogged by endless rows over agendas, ongoing unresolved splits over who should pay and insufficient attention and funding for adaptation and resilience. We can't agree how to make the necessary transitions in a just and fair way, and the COP offers no permanent place to celebrate and recognise the action and optimism of the cities, states and businesses who have committed themselves to the huge growth opportunity arising from the shift to a low carbon economy and the enormous co-benefits in terms of health, air quality and welfare that this can bring.

It was particularly awful at the last COP in Madrid, despite the best efforts of the wonderful Chilean President and Spanish hosts. While half a million climate action protestors gathered in the streets, I sat in plenary sessions where global negotiators debated whether our meeting should be classified as "Informal" or "Informal-Informal"; others argued over the structure of tabs, tables and colours in reports (rather than the commitments countries would make) and some of the world's wealthiest oil-rich countries made their annual demand for global funding to offset the damage all this low carbon planning would do to their economy. Some teams did rise above the negativity and made amazing progress in delivering things like the Gender Action Plan but there is a yawning gap between what the world expects from us and where we are. You can't fault the negotiators for doing their jobs sometimes under awful circumstances— it's a systemic failure of global vision and leadership.

That is why I asked you to support the UK and Italy COP bid as a leadership candidate and then promised you the most ambitious COP ever when you appointed me President. Together with our Advisors and the COP team I produced a Action Plan for the next decade built on seven aims:

1. Using the UK's incredible global diplomatic resources to ensure every Paris signatory is supported to bring forward an updated Nationally Determined Contribution this year, as they are required to do under the terms of the Paris Agreement.
2. Setting Net Zero as the clear science-based target for all climate ambition from countries, businesses, states and cities and make this the Net Zero COP.
3. Introducing a properly-funded global package for adaptation and resilience building.
4. Placing nature-based solutions at the heart of the climate recovery agenda, with more funding, a new global transparent Nature Exchange for all carbon credits, a new global goal for tree protection and planting and an international rollout of plans for more sustainable supply chains.

5. Embedding in COP26 and future events a strong Clean Growth agenda, including: a financial and strategic package to accelerate coal phase-out; a single global measure of the emissions reduction plans of companies, cities and states; new Net Zero sector deals from some of the hardest to decarbonise sectors and a repurposed Mission Innovation focused on outcomes like scaled up green hydrogen production.
6. Aligning global financial flows with emissions reductions and pricing of physical climate risk, working with private finance, development banks, central banks and regulators.
7. Aiming to close the Paris Rulebook on time this year, while recognising that implementation can begin immediately among countries who have “opted-in” to the rules already agreed and opening the negotiations and COP processes to public scrutiny so the citizens of the world can be our audience.

We planned something else too – a celebration of the UK’s action in cutting its emissions more than any other developed country, a Four Nations COP with every part of the UK involved and a year of Climate Action for the whole of society to create a coming together after the Brexit battles with one common goal of climate recovery.

A great agenda. But we are miles off track. When you asked me to be your COP President (and to combine it with remaining in your Cabinet as a Minister, an offer I declined) you promised to “lead from the front” and asked me what was needed “money, people, just tell us!” Sadly, these promises and offers are not close to being met.

- The Cabinet sub-committee on climate that you promised to chair, and which I was to attend, has not met once.
- In the absence of your promised leadership and Cabinet agreement, and despite the best efforts of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, departments have fought internal Whitehall battles over who is responsible and accountable for COP actions and made the work of the COP unit to drive forward plans and preparation so much harder. At this stage, we should have clear actions to communicate to the diplomatic network, an agreed plan of Ministerial international engagements led by you from now until November and a roadmap for the Year of Action. As of last Friday, we did not.
- I am told by COP unit sources that budgets (which I do not see) are ballooning, the team and the Scottish government are in an extraordinary state of stand-off and that you are considering re-locating the event to an English location. I had asked if you would consider resetting your relationship with the First Minister – putting aside the devolution battle for the sake of this vastly more important agenda. I understand you declined in salty terms.
- The COP Delivery unit, led by and staffed by some of the best and brightest people Whitehall has had to offer and supported by an all-star Advisory Group of global climate leaders has had to battle for every resource, jump through every possible internal process hoop and been prohibited from hiring in outside talent with appropriate experience such as Olympics delivery experts. Not surprisingly this has been extremely stressful for them and they are stretched to the limit.

As you will know from my contract, I do not have responsibility for any of these items and the COP team do not report to me. You will also know from years of working with me that I could not stand by and see this extraordinary opportunity fail for lack of any leadership and so have tried to intervene in some of the worst of the process and ambition blocks and maintain momentum but my intercessions have regrettably been perceived as undermining rather than supportive as is so often the case when “politicians” meddle with the workings of Whitehall. And it is also fair to say that some officials have found the need for action and real change to be threatening to the COP status quo – for some it is hard to give up on incrementalism even when it is demonstrably failing.

In my judgement this isn't a pretty place to be and we owe the world a lot better. We must move on from Whitehall knot-tying, infighting and obfuscation, petty political squabbles and black ops briefings to real sustained engagement, maximum global ambition, open-hearted international cooperation, joined-up action and alliance building. To do that will require a whole of government reset and for your team to move the vast and immediate challenge of climate recovery to the top of the Premier League of their priorities from where it is now - stuck currently somewhere around the middle of League One.

I hope you will use my sacking as a moment to reset the dial and make these changes happen and I wish my successor every possible success. I will continue to do whatever I can to support the best possible outcomes for this COP that has been in gestation for so long that it feels like my fourth child. But I will do so joyfully free from political patronage and pretence, cheering on progress and calling out greenwash, empty promises, dither, and delay.

I know you like quotes. So, let me end this long letter with one from Proverbs:

Where there is no vision, the people perish.

You had a vision for Brexit and you got Brexit done. As I write, we have less than 7,000 hours before the start of COP26 where we have a chance to set a new global vision for climate recovery and build a new consensus for global climate action.

Please get this done too.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Claire O'Neill". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Rt. Hon Claire O'Neill