

We all already know how climate change will affect our own and other communities. We also already know climate change disproportionately affects the poor, black, brown, and indigenous people. We also already know it disproportionately affects the abovementioned groups who live in poorer, less-industrialised areas. And we also already know affluent white people living in industrialised areas contribute the most to climate change and suffer the least from it, and that affluent regions are predicted to be the least impacted by climate change.¹ Yet environmental protests like those organised by Extinction Rebellion (XR) and summits like COP26 are held predominantly in the “Global North,”² and have been predominantly catered to and attended by white, western(ised), affluent men. Indeed, the London XR protestors in October 2019 were notably white and middle class, and XR’s tactic of mass arrest is exclusionary in Britain’s systemically racist and classist society.^{3,4} This short and informal essay, rather than belabouring the obvious regarding how climate change will affect humanity, focuses on the inequalities concerning just who is speaking and being listened to, and just whose interests are prioritised, why this is the case, and how to rectify this. Are we going to see a continuation of the status quo, with the axis of power firmly made and held by white, western elites, to the detriment of the poor and BIPOC communities which will subsequently lead to the progression of climate change? If so, can Royal Holloway do something about this?

According to COP26, those invited are “world leaders... tens of thousands of negotiators, government representatives, businesses,” alongside “citizens” for some “talks.”⁵ But who are all these people and why were *they* invited? Not everyone is accounted for. There are two named indigenous representatives out of 25,000 people, and in the past carbon-heavy companies and industries have attended COP summits.⁶ Both China’s and Russia’s presidents will be absent, yet both countries contribute significantly to climate change. We need all nations present, and we need to give BIPOC communities an opportunity to be heard. However, this probably will not be the case at COP26. The secrecy surrounding the attendees; the fact that historically white, western elites have used any opportunity to maintain or advance their positions in relation to “resources” and other states; the fact that the environmental movement is extremely white and middle class; and the fact that the “Global North” is predicted to suffer the least from the effects of climate change suggests that the status quo will remain unshifted after the summit, and yet more inertia is to follow. Furthermore, the absence of names and of certain individuals means responsibility and accountability can be eschewed by such people.

The decision to hold COP26 in Glasgow is a peculiar one. Glasgow is not on the “border” between the “Global North” and “South” (wherever that actually is). It is *very* far north, sitting at Latitude: 55°51’54” N, Longitude: 4°15’27” W. As such, it is, globally speaking, difficult to get to, especially from the “Global South.” This access issue is only exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19. Availability of vaccines and tests are not equal throughout the globe. Whilst the organisers of COP26 have disseminated some vaccines to those countries that lack them,⁷ this demonstrates and replicates the power imbalance between white, industrialised nations and BIPOC communities, and the prioritisation decisions of those white, industrialised nations. Consequently, many voices and perspectives may be absent from COP26 simply because of the decision to host it in northern Scotland. Obviously, Glasgow has and will be affected by climate change; but stating this is rather obvious: everywhere has and will be. Furthermore, the UK—where Glasgow is located—is not a place in which climate change will do the most harm.⁸ Obviously, there are fewer environmental risks to plan for by hosting the summit in Scotland, and of course the UK can fund it. However, if there is a subsequent COP, it should be in a country whose citizens, infrastructure and environments will suffer the most, but it should be funded by affluent nations and world organisations. White, western elites will therefore witness the lived realities of people their lifestyles are detrimentally

impacting, and people living in countries suffering because of current inequalities and those people who experience more profoundly the effects of climate change will have a greater opportunity to speak on a global stage.

However, I do not think another COP is going to be effective; COP26 should be the last. The white elite positions itself and its needs at the centre of climate change and ensures that its voice(s) are heard. These western(ised) elites need to shut up and step up; we need action, not more hot air. They all already know what to do to combat climate change, and they all know that they are the problem. But what also needs to happen simultaneously is for these elite nations and companies to decentre themselves from the narrative of climate change. Climate change exacerbates existing socio-cultural inequalities, and it is obvious that colonialism and climate change are intermeshed.⁹ BIPOC communities need to be able take the stage; they need to be listened to and respected. We need to act on what these communities say will help them and will help the planet.

Likewise, members of Royal Holloway already know how climate change will affect us all, and they already know what to do to prevent it escalating further. But how should the (mainly) white, affluent members of Royal Holloway—which includes me—ensure that they listen to and act upon the concerns and ideas from less affluent and BIPOC communities? We also just need to shut up. We need to refrain from making any guilt that we feel the centre of the discussion. We need to hold ourselves and our “world leaders” accountable. From there, we need to place the poor, black people, people of colour, and native people at the core of what we are doing and see them as valuable agents, not victims of circumstance.¹⁰

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