

# 2021 Speech - United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland



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Speech	I thank the members – the faithful few – who waited until the end of today’s very important meeting. It is very good to see my audience.

An inspection of the fossil record over the past 178 million years since mammals first appeared reveals that the average mammalian species – and indeed we are all mammals – exists for about 1 million years before it evolves into something else or vanishes into extinction. Of our allotted lifespan of 1 million years, humankind – *Homo sapiens* – has been around for approximately 200,000 years. In other words, we are still collectively a

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If we imagine that 1 million years as the lifespan of an individual human being or approximately 80 years, then we are now sweet 16. We have come to that fateful age when we know roughly how to drive, unlock the drinks cabinet and engage in all sorts of activity that is not only potentially embarrassing but also terminal for ourselves and others.

In the words of Oxford philosopher Toby Ord, we are just old enough to get ourselves into serious trouble. We still cling with parts of our minds to the infantile belief that the world was made for our gratification and pleasure. We combine this narcissism with an assumption of our own immortality. We believe that someone else will clean up the mess we have made, because that is what someone else has always done. We trash our habitats again and again, with the inductive reasoning that since we have gotten away with it so far, we will get away with it again.

The adolescence of humankind is coming to an end and must come to an end. We are approaching that critical turning point in less than two months, in just over 40 days, when we must show that we are capable of learning and maturing and finally taking responsibility for the destruction we are inflicting not just upon our planet, but upon ourselves.

It is time for humankind to grow up. It is time for us to listen to the warnings of the scientists. If we look at coronavirus disease (COVID-19), we have an example of the gloomy scientist being proved right. It is time for us to grow up and understand who we are and what we are doing.

The world, this precious blue sphere with its eggshell crust and wisp of an atmosphere, is not some indestructible toy, some bouncy plastic romper room against which we can hurl ourselves to our hearts' content. Daily, weekly, we are doing such irreversible damage that long before a million years are up, we will have made this beautiful planet effectively uninhabitable, not just for us, but for many other species.

That is why the twenty-sixth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 26) – the summit soon to take place at Glasgow – is the turning point for humankind. We must limit the rise in temperatures, whose appalling effects were visible

even this summer, to 1°C. We must come together in a collective coming of age. We must show that we have the maturity and wisdom to act.

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we have just passed, we have shown our skill. We have harnessed clean energy from wind and wave and sun. We have released energy from within the atom itself and from hydrogen. We have found ways to store that energy in increasingly capacious batteries and even in molten salt. We have the tools for a green industrial revolution. We have the kit, but time is desperately short.

Two days ago, here in New York, we had a meeting in which we heard from the leaders of the nations most threatened by climate change – Marshall Islands, the Maldives, Bangladesh and many others – and they spoke of the hurricanes, the flooding and the fires caused by the extreme meteorological conditions the world is already seeing. The tragedy is that because of our past inaction, there are further rises in temperatures that are already baked in – and baked is the word. If we keep on the current track, then the temperatures will go up by 2°F or more by the end of the century.

Never mind what that will do to the ice flows, dissolving like ice in a martini here in New York. We will see desertification, drought, crop failure and mass movements of humankind on a scale not seen before, not because of some unforeseen natural event or disaster, but because of us, because of what we are doing now. And our grandchildren will know that we are the culprits, and they will know that we knew, that we were warned. They will know that it was this generation that came centre stage to speak and act on behalf of them, on behalf of posterity, and that we missed our cue. They will ask themselves what kind of people we were to be so selfish and so short sighted.

In just 40 days' time, we need the world to come to Glasgow to make the commitments necessary. We are not talking about stopping the rise in temperatures. We cannot do that; it is too late to stop the rise in temperatures. But to restrain that rise to 1.5°C, we need to pledge collectively to achieve carbon neutrality – net-zero – by the middle of the century, and that will be an amazing moment if we can do it, because it will mean that for the first time in centuries, humankind is no longer adding to the budget of carbon in the atmosphere, no longer thickening that invisible quilt that is warming the planet.

It is fantastic that we now have countries here at the United Nations, representing 70 per cent of the world's gross domestic product, that are

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mission — his peregrinations around the world — that number was only 50 per cent of the world's gross domestic product.

We are getting there. That is the point I am making. We can go further, and if we are going to stave off these hikes, these rises in temperature, we must go further, and we must go far faster. We need all countries, every single country represented in this Hall today, to step up and commit to very substantial reductions by 2030. I am absolutely convinced, and I passionately believe, that we can do it by making commitments in four areas, and I want the Assembly to remember them: coal, cars, cash and trees. I repeat: Coal, cars, cash and trees. It is very simple.

By the way, I am not one of those environmentalists who takes a moral pleasure in excoriating humankind for its excess. I do not see the green movement as a pretext for a wholesale assault on capitalism — far from it. The whole experience of the COVID-19 pandemic is that the way to fix the problem is through science and innovation, through the breakthroughs and the investments that are made possible by capitalism and free markets.

It is through our Promethean faith in new green technology that we are cutting emissions in the United Kingdom. When I was a kid, we produced almost 80 per cent of our electricity from coal. I know that some of the delegations in the Hall tonight come from countries that rely very heavily on coal. But in the United Kingdom, that percentage is now down to 2 per cent or less, and coal will be gone altogether from our energy production by 2024.

We have put in great forests of beautiful wind turbines on the drowned prairies of Doggerland, between Britain and Holland in the North Sea. In fact, we produce so much offshore wind that I am thinking of changing my name in honour of the God of the North wind to “Boreas’ Johnson”. Here I go: shoving in a classical allusion at this time of night to see if delegations are paying attention. I know that we are ambitious in our scheme — the developing world ending the use of coal power by 2040 and the developed world doing so

by 2030. But the experience of the United Kingdom shows that it can be done, and profitably too.

By the way, I want very much to thank President Xi of China for what he

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would that not be a great thing? The experience of the United Kingdom shows that it can be done.

When I was elected Mayor of London, a mere 13 years ago, I was desperate to encourage more electric vehicles. We went around the city putting in charging points. In those days, charging points were pretty lonely objects, not much patronized. But, today, it is totally different, and the market for electric vehicles is growing at an extraordinary pace, maybe by two thirds every year. And Nissan is sufficiently confident now to invest a billion pounds in a new electric-vehicle factory plus a gigafactory for batteries. That is because my Government has set a hard deadline for the sale of new hydrocarbon internal-combustion-engine vehicles by 2030, which is the most aggressive deadline in the whole of Europe. Again, we call on the world to come together to drive this market in a low-carbon way, so that by 2040 there are only zero-emission vehicles on sale anywhere in the world.

My point is that we can make these massive cuts in pollution and emissions while driving jobs and growth. We have cut our greenhouse-gas emissions by 44 per cent in the last 30 years while expanding our gross domestic product by 78 per cent, and we will now go further by implementing one of the biggest nationally determined contributions (NDCs) currently being offered. The NDC is the pledge that, in the run up to COP 26, every country has been asked to make in terms of cutting carbon.

We are going to go down by 68 per cent by 2030, compared to where we were in 1990. We are making a big bet on hydrogen. We are going to be expanding our nuclear capacity. The logic of going for more renewables is clear when we look at the spike in hydrocarbon prices, particularly gas. We are helping people to reduce their own households' carbon-dioxide emissions by retrofitting their homes and going for new sources of heating. We are working towards building a "jet-zero" – the first large, guilt-free, carbon-free passenger plane. We also recognize that this is not just about using technical fixes in technology to cut carbon dioxide; we also need to work together around the world to restore the balance between humankind and nature – a balance that has obviously been proved so hopelessly out of whack by the emergence of a zoonotic pandemic, for instance.

We need to halt and reverse the loss of trees and biodiversity by 2030. We should achieve that goal by making a pledge to do so at COP 26 in just 40

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...nudging by planting millions more trees — beautiful trees that stop soil erosion, provide habitats for insects, birds and mammals, and which of course help to fix carbon in the atmosphere. We must also work towards the crucial United Nations summit on biodiversity in Kunming, China.

By the way, on the subject of planting trees, we are going to plant millions in the United Kingdom, but I was absolutely blown away the Pakistani pledge. Indeed, I invite everybody to follow the example of Imran Khan of Pakistan, who has pledged to plant 10 billion trees in Pakistan alone, and he is doing so.

It is very important that we in the developed world recognize our obligation to help less developed countries down the path of embracing these technologies. We have got to be honest. We in the United Kingdom, we in Britain, started this industrial hydrocarbon-based revolution. We were the first to send great puffs of acrid smoke into the heavens on a scale large enough to derange the natural order. Although we were in fact of course doing something rather wonderful in one sense — we were setting in train a new era of technology that was itself to lead to a massive global reduction in poverty, emancipating billions of people around the world — the industrial revolution was a good thing fundamentally — but we were also unwittingly beginning to quilt the great tea cozy of carbon dioxide around the world.

We therefore understand that when the developing world looks to us to help, we must take our responsibilities. That is why two years ago, when I last came to the General Assembly, I committed the United Kingdom to providing £11.6 billion to help the rest of the world to tackle climate change. I want the Assembly to know that in spite of all the pressures on our finances in the United Kingdom caused by COVID-19, we have kept that promise to the letter. I am therefore very pleased and encouraged by some of the pledges we have heard in this Hall, including from Denmark and

now a very substantial commitment from the United States that brings us within touching distance of that \$100 billion pledge that we need every year.

But we must go further. We must be clear that government — government cash alone — is not going to be enough. We must work together so that international financial institutions, including the International Monetary

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cash that will enable developing nations and the whole world — all of us — to make the necessary changes. To give an example, it was the United Kingdom Government that set the strike price for the private sector to come in and transform our country into the Saudi Arabia of wind, in a manner of speaking. We do not resemble Saudi Arabia in many ways, but we in terms of offshore wind, we produce more offshore-wind power than any other country in the world.

Only yesterday, the United Kingdom's first sovereign green bond raised £10 billion on the markets, from hard-headed investors who want to make money. My point is that these investments will not only help the countries of the world to tackle climate change, but they will also produce millions — literally millions in the decades to come — millions and millions of high-wage, high-skilled jobs. Today's workforce and the next generation of green-collar workers will have the extra satisfaction of knowing that beyond being well remunerated, they are doing something useful, providing green energy and helping to save the planet at the same time. Every day, green startups are producing new ideas from feeding seaweed to cows to restrain their traditional signs of digestive approval to using artificial intelligence and robotics to enhance food production, capture carbon dioxide and put it into brownies and so on. It is these technological breakthroughs that will cut the cost for consumers so that we have nothing to fear and everything to gain from this green industrial revolution.

When Kermit the frog sang "It's not easy being green" — we all remember that one — he was wrong. I want Assembly members to know that it is easy. It is not only easy; it is lucrative. It is right to be green, even if Kermit was unnecessarily rude to Miss Piggy. It is easy to be green because we have the technology, as we used to say when I was a when I was a kid. We can do it. In 40 days' time, we will have the choice before us.

The poet Sophocles is often quoted — or often quoted by me anyway — as saying that there are many terrifying things in the world, but none is more terrifying than humankind. It is certainly true that Sophocles was right in sensing that our species is uniquely capable of its own destruction and the destruction of everything around us. But if we look at look at the Greek, what Sophocles actually said was that humankind is awesome.

We are both terrifying and awesome. I think he was right on that point. We have an awesome power to change things — and for the better — and an

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To get back to my metaphor of adolescence, I hope that COP 26 will be a sixteenth birthday party for humankind – not a miserable party, but a party in which we choose to grow up, recognize the scale of the challenge that we face and do what posterity demands that we must.

I therefore invite members of this great General Assembly to come in November and take part, by their actions, in what I hope will be a global coming of age and to blow out the candles of a world on fire. That is what I think we should do. I thank members for the pledges that they are making. I hope that they will increase them and do what is needed.

Mr. President, I will see you in Glasgow.

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