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Baked In

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The structure of the climate summits ensures that the most lethal interests prevail, by design. Here are some better models.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian

Let's face it: climate summits are broken. The delegates talk and talk, while Earth systems slide towards [deadly tipping points](#). Since the climate negotiations began in 1992 more carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels has been released worldwide [than in all preceding human history](#). This year is likely to set [a new emissions record](#). They are talking us to oblivion.

Throughout these Conference of the Parties (Cop) summits, fossil fuel lobbyists have swarmed the corridors and meeting rooms. It's like allowing weapons manufacturers to dominate a peace conference. This year, the [lobbyists outnumber](#) all but one of the national delegations. And they're not the only ones: Cop28 is also heaving with meat and livestock lobbyists and reps from other planet-trashing industries. What should be the most important summit on Earth is treated like a trade fair.

It's not surprising that the two decisive measures these negotiations should have delivered at the outset – agreements to leave fossil fuels in the ground and to end most livestock farming – have [never featured in the final outcome](#) of any Cop summit. Nor should we be astonished that these agreements favour non-solutions such as [carbon capture and storage](#), whose sole purpose is to provide an excuse for [inaction](#).

The appointment of Sultan Al Jaber as president of Cop28 could be seen as this fiasco's denouement. His day job is chief executive of the United Arab Emirates' state oil company, Adnoc. Adnoc is now [planning](#) a massive [expansion of its oil and gas operations](#). Before the meetings began, Al Jaber was planning to use them as [a lobbying opportunity](#) to sell his company's products to delegates. In arguing with people calling for more effective action, he recited classic fossil fuel industry tropes, including that old favourite: if we were

to phase out fossil fuels, [we'd go back to living in caves](#). Fossil fuels present the [real threat to civilisation](#). There have been some uninspiring presidents of the international climate summits, but none so manifestly unsuited to the role.

Perhaps it's unsurprising that, of [27 summits](#) completed so far, 25 have been abject failures, while two (1997's Kyoto protocol and the Paris agreement, in 2015) have been half-successes. If any other process had a 3.7% success rate, it would be abandoned in favour of something better. But the world's governments carry on doing the same thing in the expectation of different results. You could almost imagine they wanted to fail.

The first and most obvious reform is to shut out the lobbyists. But the fossil fuel lobby, grotesque as it is, is by no means the only problem with the way these jamborees are run. The process itself is terminally crooked.

The only global negotiations that are organised like the climate summits are other environmental summits, such as the [UN biodiversity conferences](#). When states want something to happen – trade agreements, for example – they use different methods. The failure of the Cop meetings is baked in. In 1994, Saudi Arabia, backed by other members of the oil cartel Opec, insisted that all general decisions must be made by [consensus](#). Because this question was never resolved, the UN's rules on decision-making remain in [draft form](#).

The result is that the oil states got what they wanted, by default. What “consensus” means is that every nation has a veto: 198 delegates can agree to a measure, but it can be blocked by the 199th. The most lethal interests prevail, by design. The only way such impasses can be resolved is by a determined president “gavelling” decisions through: insisting that a consensus has been reached and hoping no one calls their bluff. It's not easy to picture Al Jaber playing this role.

Since this horrible farce began 31 years ago, plenty of people have proposed reforms. The proposals fall into three categories. One is to [improve the way](#) consensus decisions are made. Well-meaning as these are, they're futile: you can tweak the process, but it will remain dysfunctional.

Another approach is to replace consensus decision-making with voting, an option that remains, in draft form, in the UN rules. The obvious objection is that a majority would impose decisions on other nations. But this reflects a narrow conception of what voting could do. There are plenty of ways of ensuring everyone can be heard, without relying on crude binary choices. One of the most promising is the [Borda count](#), a decision-making

method first proposed in 1435.

The Modified Borda Count developed by the [de Borda Institute](#) looks especially useful. First, the delegates agree on what the principal issues are. These are then turned into a list of options, on which everyone is asked to agree (the options could range from the immediate phase-out of fossil fuels to planetary Armageddon). The options are listed on a ballot paper, and each delegate is asked to rank them in order of preference. A scoring system awards points for every ranking. The more options a delegate ranks, the more points each one is worth to them. This enables complex decisions to be made without excluding anyone.

The third approach, which could run alongside the second, is to bypass the Cop process by developing new binding treaties. The professor of environmental politics [Anthony Burke](#) suggests an approach modelled on the 2017 treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons, the 1997 anti-personnel mine ban convention and the 2008 convention on cluster munitions. In these cases, states and citizens' groups frustrated with a lack of progress began building treaties without the participation of the powerful nations – the US in particular – that sought to resist them. They developed enough momentum not only to push the treaties through the UN general assembly, but also to establish new diplomatic norms that made defiance of the treaties much harder to justify, even for nations that refuse to ratify them.

Burke proposes treaties on deforestation and the elimination of coal, and a stronger version of the [fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty](#) that others have developed. He suggests that if they don't immediately gain the support of the general assembly, they can begin as regional treaties, establishing, for example, deforestation-free zones. He argues that these treaties should be folded into an overarching Greenhouse Convention, supported by an International Climate Agency, modelled on the International Atomic Energy Agency.

However we do it, we need to break the power of the Earth-devouring industries before they break us. Otherwise, we will keep watching as yet another year is wasted, yet another of our last chances scorches and shrivels. Soon, there will be no years left.

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