

Why are Fossil Fuel Companies, Their Funders, and Others with Poor Environmental Credentials, on the List of COP26 Conference Sponsors?

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A few days back, I took a peek at the COP26 climate conference website in order to try and track down its official sponsors, because – in these over-monetised times – no self-respecting conference goes without its sponsors, partners, supporters or whatever title is in vogue these days.

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In retrospect, I was probably being a bit naïve, but I expected to see the names of big environmental organisations, Greenpeace perhaps, or Friends of the Earth, and maybe ultra-green energy companies like Ecotricity. What I didn’t expect to see was the names of big polluters, their supporters and their funders.

According to the COP26 website, the UK Government is seeking sponsors who – amongst other commendable aims for tackling the climate emergency – are making real progress in the fight against climate change and are aligned with the aims of COP26. They are also required to have strong climate credentials and short-term plans to meet net zero emissions in 2050 or earlier.

Plastic

So far, so good. Let’s see, then, which admirable companies have signed up as so-called Principal Partners. Well, there’s *Nat West Group*, who made real progress in the fight against climate change by pumping more than US\$13 billion into the fossil fuel sector between 2016 and 2020.

Conveniently, in advance of COP, they claim now to be phasing out financing of oil and gas companies who don’t have plans in place that are in line with Paris climate agreement goals – whatever this means in the real world. Apparently, this makes everything OK and wipes

the slate clean.

Alongside Nat West Group, we have *SSE Power*. This is the energy company that operates the most polluting facility in Scotland, the Peterhead gas power plant. SSE are also in the process of building the huge Keadby 2 gas plant in Lincolnshire, locking fossil fuels into the energy mix for decades.

National Grid are on the list too, despite being keen supporters of carbon intensive 'blue' hydrogen, which is derived from fossil fuels. Then there is *Unilever*, one of the world's biggest plastic polluters, generating a staggering 700,000 tonnes a year.

They are promising to cut plastic use by 100,000 tonnes a year by 2025, to which my response is, big deal! *Sainsbury's* are there too, a company that managed to get the lowest marks in a Greenpeace report on supermarket progress to cut plastic packaging.

Victory

So much for the principal partners. One step down are the Partners who, presumably, haven't shovelled in enough money to be worth the 'principal' tag. Here we have a company referred to on the COP website simply as BCG.

Clicking on the name links to the BCG Centre for Climate & Sustainability, and reveals the company's full name, the *Boston Consulting Group*. Funnily enough, nowhere on this page does it mention that advising oil, gas and coal extractors about how to make the most of their business, is a major part of the group's consultancy work.

Alongside BCG is a company called *SalesForce*, which describes itself, on its website, as a 'customer relationship management solution', whatever the hell that is. It doesn't take much browsing to discover that, like BCG, SalesForce has close links with the oil and gas sector.

Step down another level and we have what are called conference 'Providers', although it is not clear just what they are providing. The UK government has only managed to attract one provider so far, but what a provider. *DLA Piper* is a law firm with considerable involvement with the fossil fuel industry.

Astonishingly, it actually boasts on its website about 'achieving victory' for the Central New York Oil and Gas Company in a case that cleared the way for development of the US\$257 million Marcellus Shale gas pipeline project in the Appalachians.

Fracking

Unusually, for a conference, COP26 has so-called 'Friends' as well as partners and providers. It is not clear whether those invited to be friends need to pay for the privilege or not. Given that a number are academics and NGO representatives are on board, it seems unlikely.

The role of the Friends of COP is, it seems, to advise the UK government and inspire action from their sectors ahead of the conference.

When I spotted the name of Sir Ian Cheshire amongst the list of friends I thought, initially, that it must be some sort of joke or a case of mistaken identity. But no, the non-executive

director of Barclays plc and Chairman of Barclays Bank, UK is pictured in full glory.

My belief has never been so beggared. Barclays is one of the world's biggest fossil fuel bankers, and the biggest in Europe. It is the largest non-US funder of fracking, and has increased its funding of the fracking sector by almost a quarter since 2019.

Climate-clobbering

Over the last five years, it is also one of the biggest non-Chinese funders of the coal industry. In total, Barclays pumped a staggering US\$144 billion into the fossil fuel sector between 2016 and 2020.

It took me a while to get my head around this and to try and figure out what the hell is going on. COP26 is arguably the most important meeting in the history of humankind, yet it apparently counts a leading representative of one of the world's biggest investors in carbon pollution as a friend, and welcomes other companies with dismal environmental records on board.

The answer lies in the fact that sponsors appear to be invited and appointed by the UK Government, I assume with no involvement from the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which organises the COP meetings.

This explains a great deal. In its usual slap-dash way, my assumption is that the government has simply taken the corporate dollar and asked no questions. There can't surely, have been any real and effective vetting procedure, given who has been allowed on board. As for due diligence, either there has been none, or the government simply does not care about the climate-clobbering activities of those it has appointed as sponsors.

Agenda

Even before it begins, the involvement of such corporations and individuals is in danger of devaluing the whole event. It allows them to hijack this critical meeting as an opportunity for green-washing, to access and rub shoulders with key decision makers, and to influence the agenda.

Most of those I have mentioned are also slated to host public events in the conference 'green zone', where they will have the opportunity to pull more wool over the eyes of those watching and listening.

It really is despicable, and an awful look, to have the names of those who are part of the problem rather than the solution on board. It should be in the power of the UNFCCC to decide who can participate as sponsors and contributors - based upon real green credentials - and not Boris and his mates.

I doubt that the choice of supporters is part of any hidden agenda or plan to embarrass the organisers. Far more likely is that it is simply the latest example of the serial incompetence of those currently running the country.

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Featured image: Satirical Barclays adverts were installed by Brandalism activists, adding pressure to banks to divest from fossil fuels. (Source: The Drum/Brandalism)

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