

OPINION

BETTER DAYS AHEAD?

In this proud new era of unchallenged sovereignty, no opportunity is missed to make clear that Britain is Best. Even when the UK drugs regulator licenced a Covid vaccine created in Germany by a Turkish couple, for a US drug company to manufacture in Belgium, a government minister explained that this proved British scientists were 'the best in the world' and that 'we're a much better country than every single one of them'.

It is surely only a matter of time before Gavin Williamson is deployed to pronounce on climate policy. His breathless fact-free enthusiasm would be perfect for press releases like this:

The UK's new target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions – our Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) under the Paris Climate Agreement – is among the highest in the world and commits the UK to cutting emissions at the fastest rate of any major economy so far. Today's target is the first set by the UK following its departure from the EU, demonstrating the UK's leadership in tackling climate change.¹

As the host of next year's COP26 climate summit the UK is expected to set an example. Virtue-signalling on climate is also one way for a newly isolated blond populist to build bridges with the incoming US administration. After Brexit though, this must apparently take the implausible form of claiming that clean high tech Britain is forging ahead of the dirty old EU, not to mention the rest of the world.

UK, EU, CO₂

Reducing emissions 'by at least 68% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels' would mean that 'UK emissions per person will fall from around 14 tCO₂e [tonnes of CO₂ equivalent] in 1990 to fewer than 4 tCO₂e in 2030'.² Sounds good: but most of this reduction has already happened, due to the historic move from coal to gas power stations. The per person figure for 2019 was 5.3 tonnes, so the new target in fact proposes a less impressive cut of around a quarter over the next decade.

The equivalent EU target, also recently announced, is a cut of 55% by 2030. This is certainly a lower headline figure, but it is also an average across 27 countries facing many different challenges. Current EU average per capita annual emissions are around seven tonnes, and if the 2030 target were met this would reduce to around five. So a similar drop of around a quarter from today's levels is envisaged by 2030.

Of course setting long-term targets is the easy bit. Even ten years ahead seems a very long time under present conditions, but these 2030 targets are intended as stepping stones towards reaching the holy grail of 'zero carbon by 2050', which both the UK and the EU have committed to. A measure of how hard this will be is provided by recent work estimating that the dramatic drop in global economic activity caused by the pandemic will impact global temperature by no more than 0.01 degrees.³

Oddly, the UK's NDC announcement carried endorsements from banks, energy companies, Tesco and Coca Cola Europe. Their enthusiasm may in part be explained by the fact that, as usual, the target does not apply to international aviation or shipping. Nor does it include emissions elsewhere in the world, such as those arising from the production of goods for UK consumption, or from overseas activities of UK-registered companies.

Britain's decarbonisation progress is faster than some EU countries, but slower than others. For instance a welcome end has been announced to export guarantee funding for overseas fossil fuel projects, like the billion pound offshore gas project the UK is currently underwriting in Mozambique. Closer to home though, Denmark has halted all new North Sea oil and gas exploration. Their example looks unlikely to be followed by the UK, which has earmarked £3.8bn of Covid recovery funding for fossil fuel and nuclear power, compared to just £121m for renewables.

Wheeling and Dealing

On the face of it, the UK's NDC commits to achieving reductions by actually emitting fewer greenhouse gases, rather than by international offsetting or carbon trading. But voodoo carbon economics reappear in the small print:

While the UK intends to meet its NDC target through reducing emissions domestically, it reserves the right to use voluntary cooperation under Article 6 of the Paris Agreement. Such use could occur through the linking of a potential UK emissions trading system to another emissions trading system or through the use of emissions reductions or removals units.⁴

This cryptic statement sounds distinctly ominous when read in conjunction with the new Energy White Paper which proclaims in familiar triumphal tones:

Having left the EU, we are ready to lead the world again. ... We will establish a UK Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) to replace the UK's participation in the EU ETS. ... the UK is open to linking the UK ETS internationally ... we are considering a range of options, but no decision on our preferred linking partners has yet been made.⁴

In reality the only plausible 'linking partner' is the much bigger EU scheme, so any UK ETS will share the many flaws of that scheme, without being able to influence it.⁵

Of course post-Brexit threats to genuine decarbonisation come not only from virtual carbon trading, but also from old fashioned physical trade. Importing and exporting goods across the world rather than across the Channel is not exactly going to help. Nor are the traffic jams.

More broadly, EU law and oversight have been the key upward drivers of UK climate and environmental standards for decades. No-one seriously believes that the sacred 'divergence' will result in UK environmental standards being higher than those in the EU. But they will be *British* standards, so of course they will be better.

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1) UK sets ambitious new climate target ahead of UN Summit www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-sets-ambitious-new-climate-target-ahead-of-un-summit Dec 2020

2) UK NDC: Information to facilitate clarity, transparency and understanding https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/943618/uk-2030-ndc.pdf

3) P. Forster *et al* 'Current and future global climate impacts resulting from COVID-19' *Nature* Aug 2020 www.nature.com/articles/s41558-020-0883-0

4) Energy White Paper: Powering our net zero future Dec 2020 www.gov.uk/government/publications/energy-white-paper-powering-our-net-zero-future

5) See analysis by Carbon Brief: <https://www.carbonbrief.org/in-depth-qa-how-does-the-uks-energy-white-paper-aim-to-tackle-climate-change>