

# Toward a new politics of decarbonisation

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Politics is the process through which society arrives at and implements collective decisions. The decision to decarbonise the UK by 2050 is a collective decision of potentially monumental importance – one that will conceivably impact every single person's life.

The UK has benefited from actively depoliticising the issue. The Climate Change Act – which established the legal framework governing decarbonisation – was enacted because the main political parties struck a cross-party agreement that effectively insulates the issue from the vagaries of daily politics. A new body – the Committee on Climate Change – was established to offer independent and impartial advice on reduction targets and the progress made towards meeting them.

Depoliticisation has been greatly enabled by the fact that most of the UK emission reductions to date largely derive from actions taken by the large energy supply companies. In general, these actions have not directly impinged on the daily lives of most electricity consumers and, importantly, voters. Depoliticisation has certainly served its purpose. The UK is a world leader in reducing emissions. In 2018, total emissions were over 40% lower than they were in 1990. Emissions from energy supply have fallen by almost 60%.

But will the same strategy facilitate the deep seated transformations that are needed to ensure that the UK achieves net zero emissions by 2050? Such transformations will disrupt whole areas of daily life – mobility, diet, thermal comfort – that have largely escaped climate policies thus far. The transformations will create winners and losers, both in the long and in the short term.

This is arguably why politicians have found it more comfortable to debate very long term policy targets for 2050 rather than, say, 2025.

There are already many signs that the climate issue is politicizing – think of the School Strikes for example, or the direct action of Extinction Rebellion. According to Ed Miliband MP, one of the architects of the Climate Change Act, politicization is a good thing – it keeps politicians on their toes and prevents the cross-party consensus from becoming too cosy. Decades of political science research confirm this point: when politicians are not under electoral pressure, they tend to give an issue less priority.

And yet pushed too far, politicization has the potential to disrupt decarbonisation transformation, as the Chair of the

Committee on Climate Change, Lord Deben, recently warned. The challenge, therefore, is to find a new form of politics that simultaneously politicizes and depoliticizes. Depoliticisation is needed to safeguard the long term collective goal of decarbonisation from short term political pressures. But without politicization, politicians will not feel under pressure to adopt the short and medium-term policies needed to kick start deep decarbonisation.

If that were not enough, the new politics must emerge and take root relatively quickly if the threat of dangerous climate change is to be averted, in turn requiring much greater trust in democratic politics and greater collaboration between politicians and publics. At present, both are in relatively short supply in the UK. One way or another, finding a new politics of climate change is going to be every bit as urgent and important a challenge, as is finding new technological and scientific solutions.



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