

The Article



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Why Net Zero is a commendable national aim, but contributes little to curbing climate violence



SHANGHAI, CHINA - China's biggest coal-fired power plant in Shanghai. (Shutterstock)

China currently has rather more than 1000 Gigawatts of installed coal-fired generating capacity, providing about 55 percent of its total electricity output. A further 243GW of coal-burning capacity is either under construction or planned. China consumes more coal, than the next twenty largest coal users combined – about half the world's total.

India comes second, although a long way behind at 244GW, the United States a close third.

These bald facts are worth re-stating in any discussion about decarbonisation anywhere because they are, of course, where the whole global warming problem, and its containment, both lie. Leading voices on both political left and right have been pointing this out for a while.

The most evangelical green campaigners in the UK climate debate seem to lose sight of this central reality and what should, and must, surely be the prime aim of all climate policies in all responsible nations, but especially the richer ones. This is to contribute most effectively as possible, and to the limits of what can be safely devised and afforded, and maybe beyond, to curbing the chief sources of global emissions and the massive climate violence they presage. China's vast coal burning is by far the chief source of these emissions, with India and the USA each with roughly a quarter of China's coal burning levels.

An even deeper aspect also seems forgotten by Rishi Sunak's "watering down" accusers. This is that the UK's Net Zero goal, and its staging posts along the way at 2030 and 2035, of itself makes zero impact on rising emissions or climate dangers – at less than 1 percent of total soaring world carbon and methane output – the real killers. This is so, whatever the speed the Government tries to drive towards an all-electric economy, and however repeatedly and loudly it asserts its commitment to climate targets.

The retort will be that this ignores the power of example. What the UK is trying to do, it is insisted, in pressing ahead at top speed with its own domestic energy transition to Net Zero, is a shining example, which the big emitters and the giant coal-burners will all look at and then follow.

There is not a shred of evidence for this round the world. On the contrary: the sheer disruption and costs of an all-out drive to complete decarbonisation of all UK energy almost regardless of social stress, supply risks, costs and political realities is met more with a shrug of the shoulders than praise and a hurry to copy. It would be hard to find anyone in Delhi, or in Beijing, with much interest at all in the UK's Net Zero aim.

Not that the UK has nothing much else to contribute. It has indeed a serious part to play. The question is whether putting the British people hurriedly through the wringer, in a non-stop drive to abolish all fossil fuels by 2050, seems the wrong and somewhat self-centred way, as well as the riskiest, of making its impact.

The UK, with its expanding technical skills in all aspects of low carbon engineering, its innovative bent, its soft power and sheer development experience, has much better and more focused ways of playing a role in the world climate crisis and adjusting to new facets of the challenge. India, for example, has made it crystal clear that, to move away from its present coal-based economy, its prime need is for green technology transfer, training and engineering skills, joint innovation projects and lots of capital investment.

All over China, there are said to be some 1100 carbon-billowing, coal-burning chimneys at plants, with another 1000 or so in India, Indonesia and across the African continent, with many more being constructed.

Had the British priority in recent years been to concentrate on all-out efforts to cheapen carbon capture and re-usage technology, and to back up the training and other skills necessary to see hundreds of these belching carbon sources neutralised, that would have made many times more of a dent in rising global emissions. Green technologies and skills would also have made a many times bigger impact in saving the planet and its peoples from further climatic chaos than any amount of targeting and example signalling.

Perhaps, in announcing his intention to steer a more balanced path to Net Zero here in the UK, that is what the Prime Minister has in mind. If curbing the planet's oncoming climate danger, whether through mitigation or adaptation, is the main aim, the technological approach would certainly make a great deal more common sense.

It would, for instance, have taken us a distinct step nearer to the Paris 1.5 degrees limit than spending fortunes on replacing gas boilers with heat pumps in 26 million homes, or setting impossible (and shifting) targets for EVs, or taking a decade or more to build another giant nuclear power station of questionable design and little attraction to investors. This is just

when new green technology and smaller nuclear power plants, which can attract private funds and are exportable to the world, are rapidly coming up on the inside track.

What is more, this comes on top of the need for a national new grid configuration to deliver the hundreds of extra gigawatts due from both a fivefold increase in offshore wind farms (as well as on-shore) and new nuclear sites.

Perhaps all these developments, and much more, will come through eventually, with ever cheaper renewables and the natural desire to have as green and pleasant a land again as possible, as well as a greater and fairer spread of prosperity and good quality surroundings. That is an ambition in which markets and the state will play their part.

But if it is combating violent climate change which is the overriding objective, as it surely must be, thereby protecting cities and populations from devastation of the kind we are already seeing, and the planet from frying us, then many of these changes can wait a bit. They are desirable but they are not the priority targets. Instead, if approached more steadily and handled politically more sensitively, these goals can be better planned and phased, given more time and gaining more consent, as well being better financed and with less pain and fright for millions.

That would be not so much “watering down” progress to fixed goals as re-focusing on the main global purpose. It would certainly give much greater substance to the UK’s claim to be a world leader in fighting climate change than enthroning our own Net Zero goal at the strategic centre of the national picture, to the exclusion — except, of course “by example” — of the wider world’s practical needs in the fight against global warming.

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