

UK NATIONAL CLIMATE POLICY

A BRIEF HISTORY



There has been awareness of the possibility of CO₂ build-up all the way back to the late 1960s and early 70s. You can see it there in the [Reith Lectures of 1970](#) and [The blueprint for survival](#), published by the Ecologist, a British environmental journal, in 1972. The British State set up a Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, which produced detailed reports about all manner of problems, and sometimes these were acted on (e.g. acid rain is no longer a problem).

But on the whole, around climate change, if you want to see elite politicians [making nice speeches](#), you need fast forward to 1988 when Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher started making speeches and then the Hadley Centre for Climate Science is launched within the Met Office. This was at the time of the “dash for gas”, where new gas burning infrastructure was created, partly due to Thatcher’s hatred of coal miners. This switch from coal to gas reduced emissions slightly, which the UK could then claim credit for. The Major government (1990-97) signed Rio, and said it would create a sustainable society. Yeah, no.

Moving forward, the Blair government (1997-2007) had various promises, especially a renewed interest in market mechanisms. As a result, the “climate change levy” (a sort of tax on some businesses) was introduced in 2001, which slowly morphed into the emissions trading scheme at the EU level starting around 2005. In its 1997 manifesto the Blair government also stated that it would set up an academic collaboration, which led to the creation of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research in late 2000. Then, in 2005, Blair also made climate change one of the themes of the G8 meeting held in Scotland in order to try and regain some of the political capital and prestige that had been lost with the illegal Iraq invasion.

You then have this very interesting period for five years or so where there was a bipartisan consensus (see academic article [here](#)). The Labour government, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in opposition were all competing around who's going to have the best Climate Change Bill. In 2008 the Climate Change Act gave us the Committee on Climate Change (CCC) with its annual reports and its five year budgets.

The next big change is the coming of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010. Climate was already “off the agenda” because the Copenhagen conference in December 2009 had been a catastrophe. The Cameron government (2010-2016) set about having a “bonfire of the quangos” (quasi non-governmental organisations). Among these were a couple of relatively/really good ones- the Royal Commission on Environmental Protection (its first report had mentioned carbon dioxide as a possible problem- imagine that!) and the Sustainable Development Commission, set up by the Blair Government.

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UK NATIONAL CLIMATE POLICY (CONTINUED)

These were MORE than just “sheltered workshops” - they regularly produced detailed critiques of government environmental policy which were quoted in the mainstream media, and performed a useful ‘watchdog’ and ‘services to the wider green movement’ function. It was a clever and impactful thing to kill them off, from the perspective of a Government that had no real interest in dealing with the pending ecological debacle, and their absence is still a problem today.

The Coalition Government made a minor attempt - because of the Lib Dems being present - to do something about retro-fitting the UK’s 25 million houses with a so called “[Green Deal](#)”, a complex scheme which got pitifully low levels of uptake (15,000) and was abolished when the Conservatives formed their government in 2015. Overall, the foot was off the accelerator altogether (see academic article Gillard 2016 [here](#)).

The election of a Conservative government in its own right, was in fact a major turning point, but not in a good way. It brought increased hostility to renewables (especially onshore wind. Ironically off-shore wind boomed), an attempted love affair with fracking, and more taxpayer money shovelled into the bottomless pit labelled “nuclear.” (See Sovacool Stirling and Johnson on [policy mixes for incumbency](#)). We now have a far right government, and that you can trace the personal, ideological and financial links between it, the climate deniers and brexiteers [see the desmogblog stuff](#)), all headquartered at 55 Tufton Street in London. The links between rightwing populism and climate scepticism have also been outlined in this [article](#).

The UK bid aggressively to host the UNFCCC big annual conference (to be held in Glasgow in November 2021 rather than 2020) not because of any particular interest in global climate politics, but as a way of showing that a post-Brexit UK was still a major diplomatic “player.” Meanwhile, the Committee on Climate Change, set up as part of the Climate Change Act 2008, says there simply aren’t the policies required to hit future carbon reduction targets.

The UK keeps spinning the line about having reduced its own emissions, while carefully ignoring that consumption-based metrics show essentially no change since 1990. This means we have “outsourced” our emissions to other countries. The [most recent progress report by the CCC](#) also shows that the UK is falling behind its commitment to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Once again, this is only a brief history of UK climate policy. To know more, you can check out the [CEM website](#).

NATIONAL POLICY: QUICK SUMMARY

- 1988 was when UK politicians like Thatcher first started making speeches on climate change
- The Blair government (1997-2007) made some promises on climate change, introduced a climate change levy (a form of tax on businesses) and the Tyndall Centre
- The 2010 coalition with the Lib Dems held some positives in climate policy, but the election of the Conservatives alone put an end to many of these.
- Today, climate change policies in UK government are invariably tied to Brexit-related policies- no real change in consumption has been made since 1990.