

The UK post-Brexit: a leader in climate change diplomacy?

A discussion paper

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Is UK leadership on climate change fading?

The UK's action on climate change mitigation at home gives it credibility to influence other nations to implement similar plans¹.

There are signs that the implementation of this strategy is weakening, however. If true, the UK's reputation, and position as a driving force for climate change mitigation, may be damaged².

For example, the number of attaches working under the UK Special Representative on Climate Change has declined since the Paris Agreement in 2015³.

While the absorption of the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) into Business Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) has led to doubt concerning the UK's commitment to its ambitious fifth carbon budget, there has been no evidence of a changed position. Indeed integration of climate change into an expanded and powerful business and energy department could improve the effectiveness of action⁴.

Some recent policy changes, including the UK's slashed budget for carbon capture and storage⁵, might lead to questions regarding the UK's commitment to long term decarbonisation.

To the extent to which the UK's departure from the EU highlights anti-globalisation sentiments, there remains a crucial need for continued climate-change diplomacy at a fully international level⁶.

The UK supports global action

The UK has a long history of being a leader in international diplomacy⁷ and is a founding member of groups such as the G8, OECD, UNFCCC, WTO, World Bank, NATO, and is a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The UK is one of the top three donors to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)⁸, and was central to its establishment in 1966⁹. UK-US special relations¹⁰, and their prolific and global industries, have led to English serving as the dominant language for many sectors¹¹. This places the UK in a unique position at the epicenter of trade between the Western and Eastern Hemispheres¹².

UK leadership in climate action

Since the first World Climate Conference organised by the World Meteorological Organisation in 1979, the UK has shown commitment to taking action on climate change, both at home and in its foreign policy¹³. UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was amongst the first high-profile leaders to put climate change on the mainstream political map in the 1970s, making it part of an international relations agenda that had previously focused largely on issues of security and conflict. Thatcher's speech at the UN General Assembly in 1989 is still quoted today, and UK initiatives at home continue to serve as examples for other nations including:

- The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution reporting on climate change¹⁴;

- The UK's 2008 Climate Change Act – ground breaking legislation, which placed greenhouse gas reduction targets at 80% of 1990 levels by 2050;
- The Committee on Climate Change – an independent statutory body of experts providing advice to government on how to meet carbon reduction targets. The Chinese counterpart, the National China Expert Committee on Climate Change, was then formed and the two maintain a close partnership¹⁵;
- UK tax policy, introducing the Climate Change Levy in 2001 – a tax on energy delivered to non-domestic users originally including a number of climate action related exemptions. The UK's carbon price floor is above all EU member countries except for Finland and Sweden at \$28/tCO₂eq¹⁶;
- The UK government special representative on climate change: John Ashton (2006-2012) and then Professor Sir David King (2013-2017). These pioneering appointments have driven progressive policies on climate change, with other nations following in appointing similar positions. The UN appointed three special envoys on climate change in 2007 to progress international negotiations³;
- The UK Treasury's Stern Review, which presented the costs and benefits of action on climate change and is arguably the most important review to date on the economics of climate change¹⁷;
- The Green Investment Bank (formed in 2012) – the first investment bank fully dedicated to greening the economy¹⁸;
- The Global Commission on the Economy and the Climate (led by the UK with Colombia, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Norway, South Korea and Sweden). The Commission's New Climate Economy report provides an investment and growth narrative for tackling climate change¹⁹;

- The UK becoming the first western nation to join the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank, despite strong objection from the US²⁰. This membership allows the UK to influence this new and emerging economic superpower²¹. Italy, Germany and France soon followed in gaining membership; and
- The UK's Department for International Development (DFID), which continues to support climate change activities through its aid programme and the UK's International Climate Fund – a £9.67 billion commitment over the 10 years to 2021 to support climate action throughout the world²².

Pushing progress in Europe, and being pushed

The UK has consistently shown leadership in committing to ambitious climate change targets for the EU². Without the UK's influence, a minority of climate-skeptic member countries with less ambitious targets such as Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, might have a stronger influence on EU climate and energy policy²³.

Conversely, the EU pushed an otherwise technology-neutral UK²⁴ towards a greater adoption of renewable energy ambition, with the UK accepting a target within the EU's 20% renewables target by 2020²⁵.

Looking at specific policies, the UK, preferring a market-based approach to decarbonisation, played a crucial role in the development and maturation of the EU Emissions Trading Scheme (EU ETS). The UK trialled a voluntary ETS to test the concept and gain experience in the multi-market approach²⁶.

While the UK's role in international negotiations will be a more independent one outside the EU, the UK's significance in these negotiations has been contingent on its ability to influence the EU position².

The UK's membership of the EU has, therefore, been important for both national and Europe-wide progress on

climate change mitigation. Leaving it may create a void that requires acknowledgement and awareness by all parties.

Policy Recommendations

The UK must continue to set an example – leading the international community to take action on climate change. To do so, the UK government needs to:

- Continue to act as a trailblazer in environmental policy at home, and fuel the economy with investment in clean innovation domestically and internationally;
- Establish new, and reinforce old multi-lateral agreements and platforms that encourage sustainability and climate change commitments such as the World Bank, OECD, or the Global Commission on the Economy and the Climate;
- Determine a new relationship with the EU that continues to work together on climate change mitigation targets, dedicated institutions and technology transfer; and
- Use its departure from the EU to strengthen policies at home, including more focused policy goals around the Common Agricultural Policy²⁷ and direction for low carbon economy investments²⁸.

References for this paper can be found here: <http://www.imperial.ac.uk/grantham/publications/discussion-papers/>

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