



By: *Harvey Morris*

UK parties soft-pedal on climate policy ahead of COP28



Britain's King Charles will this week deliver the opening address at the **COP28 climate action summit** in Dubai at a time when his country's own green strategy risks slipping down the domestic political agenda.

The monarch, who used his role as heir to the throne to advance environmental causes, was obliged in his first King's Speech this month to confirm the government's intention to issue new oil and gas drilling licences in the North Sea.

The contentious move, seemingly at odds with pledges to phase out fossil fuels, was widely condemned by climate campaigners as paving the way for a further weakening of UK climate policy.

In a UK political climate that dictates that every government initiative and opposition response is now viewed through the lens of a forthcoming election, it is not just the ruling Conservatives who are accused of backsliding.

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The Labour party has also been accused of watering down its own green investment pledges, having pushed back a £28 billion a year climate spending programme to the second half of a future five-year term in office, if it elected in the coming year. Party officials said its fiscal rules to guard against over-spending were more important than any single policy.

It may be that both major parties have concluded that there is limited voter appeal in pushing specific green measures in an election campaign that looks likely to focus on the cost of living, taxation and levels of immigration.

An **August survey by Ipsos** pollsters reflected a sharp jump in climate concerns that had become the top priority for one-in-four voters. But that was trumped by concerns

about inflation, the economy and, among potential Conservative voters, immigration.

Green measures

Although the polls confirm that global warming generates some level of concern among a majority of the population, specific green measures have proved divisive and even capable of determining the outcome in tight electoral races.

Labour narrowly lost a July by-election it had been expected to win in the Uxbridge district of London where locals had opposed the extension of a clean air zone with a penalty tax on polluting vehicles, announced by the capital's Labour mayor.

Party leader Sir Keir Starmer was among those who blamed the defeat on the pollution tax controversy, warning "we've all got to reflect on that, including the mayor".

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In line with a new mood of caution on environmental policy, the Conservative finance minister Jeremy Hunt outlined his priorities this month in a speech to parliament in which the word "climate" was not mentioned once.

He did refer to a £960m green industries investment fund, to "ensure the UK continues to build strong supply chains and maximises global growth opportunities." But other limited action on the environment was largely consigned to the treasury small print.

Previous budget statements, including those delivered by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak when he was chancellor, have given greater weight to climate issues and a promised a green industrial revolution, although delivery has not always matched the rhetoric.

Revised targets

The government's focus on green issues accelerated after the UK pushed to secure an international leadership role post-Brexit by hosting the COP26 conference in 2021 during the Boris Johnson premiership.

This past September, however, Sunak revised his government's climate targets, including delaying a ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars by five years and allowing exemptions on the phase-out of fossil fuel boilers.

Among the critical responses to the government row back, Antony Froggatt of the Environment and Society Centre, wrote: "This retreat on ambitious commitments badly undermines one area where the UK could claim a truly world-leading policy position."

He forecast that it would make it easy for other countries to question the UK's climate agenda at the upcoming COP28.



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Ahead of the next election, possibly as early as next spring, the government may be calculating that there is more mileage in short-term appeals to motorists and to householders facing sustained high energy bills than in longer-term pledges to address the climate crisis.

Labour also showed it is sensitive to an issue in which, as in the Uxbridge by-election,

measures to protect the environment can be attacked by its opponents as an attack on working people.

In Labour-run Manchester, Mayor Andy Burnham, a nationally known party figure, has baulked at establishing a clean air zone in the face of substantial local opposition.

Elsewhere, Labour spokespeople have adopted the mantra that, in tackling the climate crisis, they would not adopt policies that punish hard-working families.

Soft-peddalling

For the Conservative party, soft-peddalling on climate measures while appealing to a nebulous motorists' lobby may seem like a sign of desperation and there are already indications it could backfire.

A group representing electric-powered car drivers has attacked Hunt's autumn statement for failing to slash the tax rate on street charging points and thereby sabotaging the growth of the electric vehicle market.

Labour, meanwhile, on climate as many other policies, is keeping its powder dry and saying as little as possible in the hope that today's opinion poll leads will carry it through to power.

It would be much simpler for both parties to set out their climate priorities in a time of plenty, rather than against a backdrop of low growth and a cost-of-living squeeze.

Both must be aware, however, that a perception that the UK is retreating from its climate ambitions could act as a deterrent to the green investment on which the country's economic recovery might depend.

It would also be a betrayal of the vast majority of voters for whom a desire for action on climate change is perhaps the one unifying issue in a divided electorate.