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Let's cut these regressive wind and solar taxes

Matt Ridley



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If the world can't agree on reducing emissions, Britain should seize the moment and make energy bills cheaper

The first council of Nicea, held 1,690 years ago this summer, decided upon a consensus about the nature of God, namely that the son had been “begotten not made, being of one substance with the father”, as Athanasius argued, and not created out of nothing, as Arius argued. Phew. Glad they settled that.

The 21st conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, also known as the “11th session of the meeting of the parties to the Kyoto protocol”, in Paris this December, will be scarcely less theological.

Its purpose is to get international agreement to emissions cuts that will limit the global temperature increase to 2C above pre-industrial levels. Given that nobody knows for sure what those levels were, how sensitive to industrial emissions global temperatures are, how emissions will change, when the 2C threshold would be reached, how much natural climate change there will be, or how much damage (or benefit) two degrees of global warming would cause, this is as practical as arguing about the nature of the trinity.

It is a fair bet that 17 centuries from now, the Paris climate summit will seem as unworldly as the first council of Nicea, and a lot less consensual. All 20 of the previous climate summits have proved futile, even though their participants usually declare victory at the final press conference. There are no binding international agreements to cut emissions and the chances of one this time are small.

Developing countries will not agree to limit the growth of emissions (and put economic growth at risk) unless they get the \$100 billion a year they were promised at Copenhagen five years ago. Few developed countries wish to fulfil that promise. A binding climate treaty has as much

chance of passing the Republican-controlled Congress in the United States as a declaration of atheism would have had at Nicea.

To resolve this, the sherpas working towards the Paris climate summit have come up with a neat formula. As Bloomberg reports, they are “coalescing around a deal that would commit every country to restricting greenhouse gases but bind none to specific targets”. Brilliant: a binding agreement to non-binding targets!

Gesture, in other words, is all. The British government seems to understand this well. Amber Rudd, the energy secretary, said in her speech on Friday, that she wants a “strong, ambitious, rules-based agreement that makes the shift to a clean global economy irreversible” — knowing full well that such a thing is vanishingly unlikely to emerge in a form that commits us to anything. She’s just reciting the Nicene creed.

She is meanwhile boldly trying to rein in some of Ed Miliband’s and Chris Huhne’s regressive stealth taxes on energy bills, which have been subsidising crony capitalists in the renewable energy industry and driving jobs abroad. Since these measures have been bringing down emissions very little and at a cost per tonne far exceeding the damage likely to be done by climate change, this is sensible reform.

The spectacle of Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians lamenting the harm these reforms will do to the confidence of wealthy investors in the wind industry is a wonder to behold. It is not as if the Tory manifesto’s promise to stop onshore wind farms was a secret, and it allows Conservatives to champion the poor, on whom the cost of these green measures has fallen disproportionately, through their energy bills. Our electricity prices are twice as high as America’s.

It was always fanciful to think that wind and solar farms could stop global warming. Despite vast subsidies, their deployment is not even keeping up with the increase in energy demand. To the nearest whole number, wind produced 1 per cent of global energy (ie, 3 per cent of global electricity) in 2014; solar, 0 per cent. Fossil fuels’ share was 87 per cent, unchanged from ten years earlier. With current technology, only a vast expansion of nuclear power, a switch from coal to gas and a surge in energy efficiency, especially in China and India, can slow down the rise in emissions significantly, let alone affordably. (As always, I declare an interest in fossil fuels, mainly coal.)

Ms Rudd also signalled that she would stop Britain’s policy of unilateral decarbonisation at a faster rate than other countries, as mandated in Mr Miliband’s Climate Change Act of 2008. Rightly she realises that it simply exports the problem, along with jobs in energy-intensive industries. Messrs Miliband and Huhne used to justify our unilateralism on the grounds that we were setting an example that the world would follow. We are the “world leader” in offshore wind, which produces electricity at three times the wholesale price and intermittently, only because the world seems unpersuaded to follow.

Supposing the Paris conference produces its expected fudge, what should our energy policy look like? The European Union is trying to get agreement on a 40 per cent reduction in emissions (from 1990 levels) by 2030, but this is conditional on agreement in Paris. The Poles and other Eastern European countries are opposed to going it alone again, even before a non-binding agreement in Paris.

That will give the British government the opportunity to revisit its own targets. According to part 1, section 2, of the Climate Change Act, the secretary of state has the power to amend the act's CO2 targets if there is a significant change in international climate policy. She should grasp it. The targets were predicated on rising fossil fuel prices to make renewables look affordable (whereas fossil fuel prices have plummeted), on rapidly rising temperatures (temperatures have risen much more slowly over the past 40 years than predicted), and on international agreement (which has not been reached). Put money into research instead.

The political risk would be small. Parties sceptical of renewable energy have done well at the ballot box in Poland, Canada and Australia. The big green pressure groups have little backing among the public, just a lot of influence in parliament, the City and the BBC. In a United Nations opinion poll, in which people all over the world are asked to list their most urgent priorities in order, and which has already attracted more than seven million responses, climate change comes dead last of 16 options. People are no more obsessed with climate change policy than they were with whether the son was begotten of the father in AD325.

5 comments



Lennart Bengtsson

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pending

A brilliant contribution and most enjoyable to read [Edit \(in 5 minutes\)](#)

Recommend Reply

PM1066

55 minutes ago

Offshore wind, ridiculously expensive, incredibly inefficient and a drain on our economy.

3 Recommend Reply

Richard Stout

6 hours ago

Nice analogy Matt.

The church of anthropogenic climate doom and original carbon sin, meeting annually to demand tribute and further sales of indulgences and the subjugation of the secular world is every bit as scientific and relevant as the first council of Nicea.

4  Recommend Reply**Alan Webster**

8 hours ago

Indeed! If any reader is doubtful about Matt Ridley's article I suggest taking a look at some hard evidence here <http://www.gridwatch.templar.co.uk/> Whilst you are on the page click top left to see how France is tackling this - it will take your breath away.

As we are busy closing coal fired power stations to reduce carbon emissions you might consider how we can balance our energy book. The answer will almost certainly involve buying more electricity from France most of which is produced by nuclear reactors.

3  Recommend Reply**Jack Townshend**

6 hours ago

@Alan Webster

We are currently building new nuclear reactors for the production of electricity at Sellafield and not before time. It is also about time that the ridiculous airport tax was abolished.

Recommend Reply

Mr Sean Grainger

3 hours ago

@Alan Webster Yes, I use the UK energy app but same difference. As The Times publishes daily the £/\$ exchange rate about which we can do nothing I think these figures should be on the front page daily in an attempt to arrest the lunacy of the Climate Change Act — Ed Miliband at his very finest of course.

3  Recommend Reply

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