The University of Manchester
Sustainable Consumption Institute

Navigating the Backlash:
The Future of British Climate Strategy

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Executive summary

This Report details the changing political dynamic around climate change in the UK, where there has been a breakdown of pro-climate consensus since 2021. This Report is aimed at campaigners who wish to enhance the UK's climate policy ambition, both those within NGOs and those within all political parties. It is also written for researchers and journalists seeking greater contextual information for their policy design and reporting work.

We document the rise of a backlash against climate policy in the UK, which started in 2021 and has achieved significant impacts on the UK government's approaches to climate changes. This backlash has changed the nature of Conservative-Labour competition around climate change, from one focused around policy performance, to one questioning how ambitious and rapid UK climate policy should be. The implications have been that, at times, the Conservative Party has assumed anti-Net Zero ideas, while the Labour Party has moderated its ambitions. At the same time, the rise of Reform on the right, and the ongoing presence of the Green Party on the left, have created new dilemmas for Conservative and Labour leaders in building and maintaining their political coalitions. These changes have created new dilemmas for party leaders about how to pursue climate policy. Campaigners and policy designers will benefit from understanding these dilemmas, and how they affect strategies elevating climate policy ambition.

We discuss the importance of building coalitions around pro-climate policies, and designing policies that create long-lasting benefits that are fair and just in their impacts. To do so, we first introduce current dynamics in UK climate politics, and the history of the climate backlash. We then discuss how these dynamics have changed electoral competition in the UK. Finally, we outline two strategies for navigating this new political context, and we provide specific policy ideas for each. The two strategies are:

- **Strategy one: mitigate the dilemmas, by:**
  - focusing on aspects of climate policy that make backlash difficult to organise, especially by avoiding those things with significant impacts on everyday life;
  - pursuing a 'green industrial revolution' insistently, which generates investment and jobs through technological innovation, and again, avoids changes to daily life;
  - designing policies that create irreversible effects – zero-carbon infrastructure investments that would be too costly to negate.

- **Strategy two: attack the backlash directly, by:**
  - designing climate policy much more resolutely in favour of social justice: for example, retrofitting housing by supporting low-income households;
  - deploying the language of 'energy security' clearly to promote energy efficiency and renewable energy;
  - identifying winning messages and policies, such as 'energy freedom', or community energy ownership, to build public support for future climate policy.

1. Pursuing ambitious climate policies in the current political context

The UK is one of the only countries in the world to be legally bound to become 'net zero' by 2050, compared to 1990 greenhouse gas emissions levels. The 2008 Climate Change Act that began this path was passed with only five votes against it, while in 2019, the Conservative Prime Minister, Theresa May, strengthened this commitment, shifting the UK's emissions target from an 80% cut to net zero. Also in 2019, the UK parliament declared a 'climate emergency' with cross-party support. There was broad consensus about the goal of climate policy action among the major political parties, and party competition centred on each party persuading voters that they were best at pursuing ambitious climate action.

But since the adoption of the net zero target, and especially since 2021, an organised backlash has emerged against climate policy, and especially net zero. Encouraging this backlash remains a niche position in British politics – opinion polls continue to rank climate change in the top most important issues, and citizens think the government should be doing more to reduce the UK's emissions.

Despite this broad public support, the backlash has, since 2023, influenced the approach to climate policy taken by the Conservative government under Rishi Sunak. While still rhetorically committed to the net zero goal, the government has rolled back specific aspects of climate policy. The government has also adopted the language of those opposing climate action to distinguish itself from Labour over climate policy and improve party unity by appeasing anti-net zero MPs – treating climate policy as a politicised 'wedge' issue between the parties. The Conservative Party's manifesto for the 2024 election reflects this: continued support for net zero, with its own section in the manifesto, but alongside a renewed commitment to continue issuing new North Sea oil and gas licences, reversing the Ultra Low Emissions Zone (ULEZ) in London, and banning Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, with the latter being framed as 'backing drivers'. This trajectory is the opposite of what is needed to get back on track to meeting emissions reduction targets.

Understanding this new political context of climate policy backlash, and dynamic changes about how parties compete on climate change, is crucial for those seeking more ambitious climate action in the UK. The politics of UK climate policy is starting to resemble that of Canada, Australia, and the USA. We can no longer assume that parties in government – whichever they may be – can make climate policy more ambitious without pushback from Opposition parties, from factions within their own party, or from a range of other actors pushing the climate backlash. We cannot assume that simply analysing each party's explicit climate policy, as detailed in their manifestoes, is sufficient to understanding what they will do in practice in government. Government climate policy will be influenced not just by internal party preferences about climate action, but the dynamic effects of how party competition shapes what Ministers believe they can achieve. This Report details this new context of weakening pro-climate consensus in the UK, and explains what it means for pursuing greater climate policy ambition.

2. The climate policy backlash

Some opposition to climate policy is longstanding in the UK. In 2000, for example, there were widespread protests against the fuel duty escalator. But climate scepticism remained politically marginal: public support for climate action remains strong, and climate policy targeted 'low hanging fruit' that drew little opposition, such as increasing the supply of renewable electricity. Climate denial is associated most closely with the Global Warming Policy Foundation (GWPF). Founded in 2009 by Thatcher's former Chancellor, Nigel Lawson, the GWPG was well networked with US climate denial organisations, but had relatively little purchase in the UK political system beyond a handful of mostly Conservative MPs.

This lack of influence for the GWPF changed during the course of 2021. Early that year, a group of Conservative MPs, led by Steve Baker and Craig Mackinlay, started publishing and speaking widely against Net Zero as a goal in itself. In October of that year, they created the Net Zero Scrutiny Group (NZSG), a group of MPs modelled on the European Research Group that was instrumental in promoting Brexit. The NZSG produced a number of statements detailing their opposition to net zero over subsequent year, and got considerable coverage in the press. The NZSG mostly avoid climate denial arguments, but instead have made classic populist arguments against net zero, and have targeted specific policies within the broad range of climate policy, notably the fracking ban, heat pumps, the petrol and diesel ban, and support for Electric Vehicles (EVs). During 2021, the NZSG used the emerging cost of living crisis when natural gas prices and thus generalised inflation rose as a context for arguing against net zero: an opportunity that intensified for them following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022.

This backlash against net zero has been almost entirely driven either by Conservative politicians or by those to their right, particularly Richard Tice and Nigel Farage of the Reform UK party. However there has also been growing 'grassroots' opposition to important elements of climate policy at local levels. These rallied notably around the ULEZ in London and equivalents elsewhere, and the development of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, and in 2022, the idea of '15-minute cities'.

An important aspect of the approach taken by anti-net zero groups is the deployment of the language of social justice. Some issues, notably the attack on the fracking ban, show that anti-net zero groups often identify with the interests of the oil and gas companies.

But regarding other policy measures, they have argued that climate policy instruments favour the rich at the expense of the poor. This argument has been most clear in relation to heat pumps, EVs, and the support for renewable energy. In some cases, especially renewable energy, the arguments may be specious, but especially for heat pumps, they have some plausibility to them. Large swathes of climate policy, especially that targeting household emission and energy use, have indeed been regressive in character.

These arguments against climate action have resonated widely, and have generated opposition to specific climate policy instruments that are important for the next stage of the UK's decarbonisation. They have also resonated strongly in areas such as 'red wall' seats with poor housing infrastructure and widespread deprivation, where the pursuit of heat pumps can be framed as an expensive distraction from peoples' real needs, and in rural areas, where the impacts of climate policy on employment and culture can be acute. Yet, overall, the backlash has not destabilised the strong overall public support for more ambitious policy action on climate change.

3. The changing nature of electoral competition

The backlash organised by the NZSG looked like it might fizzle out in 2022. Boris Johnson's government continued to roll out new climate policy initiatives in his 'Green Industrial Revolution' strategy produced in 2021. Liz Truss tried but failed to overturn the moratorium on fracking. But in 2023, the backlash was revitalised. An early indicator of lowering ambitions was the decision to approve the UK's first coalmine for 30 years, in December 2022. But the revitalised backlash was due to the 'grassroots' movements involved. In February 2023, the conspiracy theory surrounding 15-minute cities turned into considerable, if short-lived, protests in several UK cities. During 2023, London's ULEZ was scheduled to expand in the summer, and ultimately did so despite court cases against it. Close to the date of the ULEZ expansion, a byelection in Uxbridge and South Ruislip was announced after Boris Johnson resigned his seat.

The July 2023 Uxbridge and South Ruislip byelection turned out to be well-timed for those opposing climate policy. The Conservative government, now with Sunak as PM, used the Uxbridge byelection as an opportunity to test out a shift in tack on climate policy. Uxbridge was located usefully, just outside the scope of the ULEZ expansion, where many people could be made worried ULEZ would mean that they would no longer be able to drive into London, or must purchase a new vehicle to do so. Also, ULEZ was promoted heavily by London's Labour Mayor, Sadiq Khan, even though it was originally Boris Johnson's plan when he was Mayor of London. The Conservatives were still languishing in the polls, having recovered only slightly from the nadir of the Liz Truss government, and a general election had to be held by January 2025 at the latest. They were eager to find issues around which they could attack Labour.

When the Conservatives won the Uxbridge byelection, it seemed to confirm their strategic hunch that climate policy – especially around questions of cars and transport policy – could be an issue that wins and loses votes. The party proceeded to develop such an attack strategy in the second half of 2023. Much of this attack strategy was focused on cars. While Sunak posed in 'Margaret Thatcher's old Rover', he positioned the Conservatives as 'being on the side of motorists' and attacked Labour by saying that 'Just Stop Oil are writing Starmer's energy policy', and stated that he wanted to stop local councils developing Low Traffic Neighbourhoods. The Conservative Party subsumed climate policy within a broader 'culture wars' framing that they have applied to other contexts, such as immigration and transgender rights, as exemplified by highlighting that Keir Starmer is a vegetarian. Although Sunak claimed in 2024 that the Conservatives were committed to net zero overall, he stated policies should be 'pragmatic and proportionate'. This pragmatism entailed delaying the phaseout of petrol and diesel cars, auctioning new oil and gas licences in the North Sea, and scrapping the northern leg of the HS2 high-speed railway.

This weakening of the UK's pro-climate consensus via the Conservative Party's shift in direction affected Labour's preparations for the 2024 election, as they sought a 'bombproof' manifesto. There has been considerable struggle within the Labour Party following the previously established pledge to spend £28bn per year to pursue net zero, while taking a cautious stance on making economic pledges. That £28bn pledge had emerged according to a logic of consensus-based electoral competition over climate policy – framing Labour as simply having stronger climate policy than the Conservatives – but then came under pressure as the Conservatives switched electoral strategy. The £28bn pledge was scaled back in February 2024, although the commitment remained to create GB Energy – a publicly-owned clean energy company. For most but not all commentators, Labour's climate strategy is both inadequate to the needs of the climate crisis, and too timid in responding to the challenge laid down by the Conservatives' shift in approach. There may be as many electoral opportunities in enhanced climate ambition – through connecting to other goals such as reducing energy poverty and broader social inequalities, generating investment and creating new jobs in the 'clean' energy sector, most notably – but Labour risks missing out on those opportunities if the party respond to the Conservatives' shift of approach by moderating their ambitions.

To understand these dilemmas for both Labour and the Conservatives, we need to understand that both are facing pressures that pull them in multiple directions. These pressures are more acute for the Conservatives, but apply to both parties.

For the Conservatives, Sunak has competing pressures from Reform on the right and both Labour and the Liberal Democrats to their left. This is reflected in his shifts of direction since 2023. The culture war attacks – on climate change but also other issues framed as 'woke' – respond to the pressure from Reform which has sat at 6-10% in the polls, rising rapidly during the course of the election campaign itself. They are unlikely to gain seats but are in a position of splitting the right-wing vote leading to potentially significant numbers of seats being lost to either Labour or the Liberal Democrats. However, appeasing this vote – over climate change but also for example immigration – risks losing more moderate voters who may then simply vote for Labour or the Liberal Democrats. So Sunak has variously doubled down on its 'Rwanda' policy, and shifted to being the 'party of the motorist', before shifting again by bringing David Cameron back into the government in November 2023 – after which Reform's popularity in polls soared at the Conservatives' expense.

Labour's situation regarding climate policy is similar in some ways to the Conservatives. Were they to stick with more ambitious climate policy, as is desired by many within the party, including Shadow Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero Ed Miliband, they risk enabling the Conservatives in their attack strategy, who will be supported by significant strands of the media. There is also considerable push within the Labour camp coming from a number of trade unions to weaken the ambition of climate policy. But the structural equivalent of Reform for Labour on climate change is the Green Party. The timidity of Starmer's leadership over climate change and the climbdown of various policies risks losing support to the Green Party. There are few seats where voters face a dilemma that voting Green may cause Labour to lose the seat. And after the election, Labour will risk losing future votes to the Greens if climate action is seen as overly tepid. It is also worth noting that there are relations with Reform voters that Labour could cultivate. One of the sources of the rise in support for UKIP (now Reform) and for the Leave vote was in 'left behind' areas that used to be largely Labour voting. While this was associated with the Brexit campaign, it had a range of underlying causes to do with employment, housing, and investment, meaning that there are possibilities for Labour to use climate policy to target getting those voters back from Reform in those areas. Nevertheless, Labour, like the Conservatives, is pulled in different directions simultaneously by the new electoral dynamic.

In the medium-term aftermath of the 2024 election, these dynamics will continue to hold. For the Conservatives, much will depend on their number of MPs, who those MPs are, and where they represent, as well the choice of successor to Rishi Sunak, who will shape future Conservative strategy. There are signs that many of the MPs who have been vocally supportive of climate action are not standing or will lose their seats. Conversely, from the NZSG's leadership, Craig Mackinlay is not standing for election and Steve Baker's seat looks vulnerable with only about a 4,000-vote majority. But it is unlikely that the dilemma Conservatives face will be resolved by the election in favour of a return to the centre-right, but rather to court votes lost to Reform more aggressively, which will favour those arguing against climate action within the party. For Labour, there will also be some issues to resolve. The influx of a large number of new MPs will plausibly, if not definitely, result in backbench support for more aggressive climate action, and which will have more freedom of movement the greater the size of the Labour majority. The Labour cabinet may well have to contend with a noisy backbench support for more ambitious climate action. Even if they do not have to contend in the immediate future with a powerful opposition voice from the Conservatives, there may still be pressures for moderation to prevent a Conservative resurgence in the 2028/9 election.

4. Key implications for pursuing enhanced climate action

The above changes in the UK's political context generate both risks and opportunities for climate action. There is the danger of the flip-flopping over climate action we have seen in countries such as Australia. But there are also opportunities to use this new political context to promote climate action.

What are the key implications of this new political dynamic around climate change for those pushing for enhanced ambition? We suggest that the incoming government in July 2024 can usefully explore two strategies: Mitigating the dilemmas, and Embracing climate action to undermine the backlash.

4.1. Strategy one: mitigate the dilemmas

This entails identifying areas of policy action that are relatively immune from the political dilemmas created by the new context. They are unlikely to eliminate these political risks but mitigate them overall. We highlight three means of pursuing this:

- **Policies that reduce emissions by targeting technical infrastructures,** which require limited 'behaviour change' by households or individuals, and so are difficult for anti-Net Zero groups to mobilise opposition around. This approach is unlikely to totally avoid criticisms, as shown by the dispute over Scottish grid investments. Such policies include:
  - Upgrades to the electricity grid will enable renewable energy to expand further into the electricity system, aid electrification of households and industrial plants that are far from urban centres, and minimise peak loads in electricity system, which reduces overall capacity needs;
  - Planning reforms that enable EV infrastructure to be rolled out more easily;
  - Developments of urban heat networks;
  - Small fiscal reforms, such as tying mortgage interest rates to housing retrofitting (which already exists in Germany), to favour homes with high energy efficiency and low emissions ratings;
  - Initiatives to expanded renewable energy, which both reduces emissions further by displacing natural gas, and delinks electricity prices from natural gas prices, which are highly volatile.

- **Policies that promote a 'green industrial revolution'.** These ideas are represented in the 'green prosperity' part of the Labour manifesto and the approach to net zero in the Conservative manifesto. This approach shifts attention away from changes by households and daily life that are key sites of backlash mobilisation. And it generates investment and jobs that could plausibly build coalitions in favour of future climate policy ambition, for example by shifting the preferences of trade unions.
  - Many of these policies are already in place following changes to industrial policy in the mid-2010s and especially in the 'Green Industrial Revolution' strategy under Boris Johnson, but they need to be strengthened.
  - Some existing policies have collapsed (hydrogen heat networks, British Volt), while others were always deeply questionable in terms of climate ambition and now need to be replaced by less wishful approaches ('Jet Zero' for the aviation sector, and Carbon Capture, Utilisation and Storage).
  - We must remember though that at some point, though, shifts to daily practices for housing and transport are unavoidable for the UK to achieve decarbonisation.

- **Policies that are hard to reverse when implemented.**
  - These policies may involve political mechanisms that generate and sustain pro-climate policy coalitions, and undermine the climate backlash (see below).
  - They also may create permanent impacts. For example, lowering emissions over time by introducing new energy infrastructure that would be highly costly if not physically impossible to dismantle. The electricity infrastructure investments mentioned above have this quality, as do other changes to green infrastructure, such as policies that expand rooftop solar, support the installation of batteries (for electricity storage, peak load shaving, etc), and aid the retrofitting of buildings.

4.2. Strategy two: attack the backlash directly

The second strategy is to deliberately tackle the dilemmas above head-on, by developing policies that undermine the backlash and by resolving the dilemma in favour of pursuing Green-minded voters. If the incoming government risks losing support in different directions regardless of how it pursues climate ambition, then pro-climate arguments should focus on the potential vote gains from such policies. The possibility for a Labour government to make such vote gains from the Green Party are particularly influential in constituencies where the Green vote in the past has been higher than the difference between the Labour and the Conservative vote. Even if this problem for Labour is small in 2024, it is likely to return in future elections. There are also opportunities for well-designed climate policies that explicitly deliver other social gains, which would target some of those voters who switched during the 2000s and 2010s to UKIP/Reform. Even if there are few votes in this for the Labour Party, such moves would undermine key arguments underpinning the broader backlash against climate policy. There are several elements to this strategy, which can be used to target both Green and Reform voters.

- **'Pro-people' climate policies.** Anti-Net Zero forces have targeted the inequalities generated by climate policy. In response, strategies for housing and transport decarbonisation could be redesigned to support household improvements for citizens who currently are unable to benefit from policies that promote household retrofits or the EV transition. These citizens include the entire lower half of the income scale, and particular groups within that half, such as young renters, and low-income families. Such policies include:
  - housing retrofits to dramatically reduce household energy bills, organised through more concerted efforts rather than individual household subsidies that disproportionately benefit the well-off;
  - community renewable energy schemes to generate broad but local community benefits from decarbonisation, such as around faith buildings or sports groups, which can also help reduce opposition to the siting of new energy infrastructures.

- **Policies that emphasise energy security.** This framing is especially influential in a context of high inflation and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This framing can operate at both the level of UK national energy security, and at household levels in response to the 'cost of living crisis'. But such a narrative can be positive or negative for climate policy. Policies to make the relation positive include:
  - Measures to support renewable energy, manufacturing renewable technologies, and creating household energy demand initiatives that reduce individual vulnerability to energy price shocks. And it has also been used to promote new oil and gas licences and the end of the fracking moratorium.
  - Initiatives aiding household insulation, rooftop solar, and community-owned wind energy, which can readily be framed in terms of 'energy freedom' but also provide targeted social benefits alongside emissions reduction.
  - And narratives that reframe the targets of attack, for example turning wind turbines, which can at times be a source of opposition, into a visual signal of enhanced energy security.

- **Policies that are plausibly popular and can be combined with winning messages.** A classic analogy is the Thatcher government's decision to enable the 'right to buy' for council housing, which was highly popular and dramatically changed not only UK housing but the electoral landscape: as Thatcher hoped, new homeowners were more likely to vote Conservative. What might be plausible equivalents in climate policy? Taking such an explicitly pro-climate stance is a higher-risk approach but with potentially much higher, transformative rewards both in climate and electoral terms. The following is a list of candidate policies:
  - Free or cheap public transport, following the German €49 train pass example, which has been highly popular
  - Community energy ownership. This is already a part of Labour's GB Energy proposal but could become more central to it. The entire GB Energy package in any case will take a long time to create – at least a whole parliament. Community energy already exists in various forms and could be promoted/enabled quickly.
  - Planning reforms for self-build/community housing, to promote Community Land Trusts and similar means of enabling zero carbon housing construction focused on community ownership and low-income citizens, as well as using planning regulations to roll-out zero carbon heating in all new homes.
  - Targeting areas of corporate climate activity where there is significant popular anger. Examples include profiteering by energy companies, property developers, and water companies. A windfall tax on energy companies is a proposed source of funding for GB Energy: underlying anger could be used to garner support for this policy.
  - Tying incentives for housing retrofit to low interest rates for other improvements (new kitchens, etc).

5. Conclusions

The next stage of decarbonising British society will be much harder than what has been achieved so far. We have dramatically reduced emissions in electricity by eliminating coal from electricity production, and achieved significant cuts through improving waste management and industrial energy efficiency. We need now to decarbonise home heating and transport, which raise much more thorny political issues. While the technical, social, and policy issues are well understood, we know less about the political context that enables or blocks the ability to create effective policy, and this context will continue to change over time. We have detailed that changing context, and explained how those seeking to improve UK climate policy might use that information to achieve their goals. We do not pretend that the ideas above for addressing this new context will eliminate all difficulties and dilemmas for those pursuing climate action in the UK. But we hope the explanation of this new context is useful for elevating climate action.

Acknowledgments

For funding the costs of making this Report, and the workshop that informed it, we gratefully acknowledge the support of the Sustainable Consumption Institute at the University of Manchester, as well as the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), having funded Paul Tobin via grant ES/S014500/1. We are grateful to Policy@manchester for help with contacting attendees and circulating the Report. We are grateful to James Patterson who also attended our workshop along with the authors listed above.

UKRI Economic and Social Research Council