

Combatting Climate Change - where are we with Net Zero?

Seminar Report

Note: Views expressed by the speakers and other individuals do not necessarily represent the opinions of their organisations.

Introduction:

Extremes of weather are already causing loss of homes and livelihoods across the world, and it has been estimated that the average global temperature for 2023 was already 1.5 degrees higher than the average for the period 1850-1900. It has therefore become as important to identify ways to adapt to the effects of climate change as it is to avoid it. Meanwhile, last September the UK Prime Minister had postponed banning the sale of new petrol and diesel cars from 2030 to 2035 and announced further drilling in the North Sea. The terms Climate Change and Global Warming both have wide ranging implications that encompass almost every area of both human activity and of thought. This seminar covered many of those issues as background to considering how we can best measure success in combatting climate change. We won't know if we are measuring progress in the right way, unless we understand the issues that need to be measured.

The Report:

The seminar therefore provided an interesting array of papers from a diverse group of speakers, with the morning chaired by **Vicky Pryce** of the **Better Statistics Advisory Committee** who also provided the *welcome introduction*. This was then followed by **Professor Piers Forster**, **Interim Chairman of the UK's Climate Change Committee** with the first keynote talk, largely designed to reassure delegates that the United Kingdom will achieve net zero by the target date of 2050. In doing so he confirmed the complexity of the requirement covering 50 different aspects to be monitored. Moreover he confirmed that presently we are only on target for 9 of them, with 16 significantly off track, 14 slightly off track and the remaining 11 presently not yet properly defined. He emphasised that efforts are underway to rectify the position with the 30 not 'on track', but he also highlighted a few areas where the present plans are insufficient, particularly in respect of Industry.

And so to our first topic for the day – ***How should we measure progress?*** Our lead speaker, **Ehsan Masood** from the **Journal Nature**, pointed out that our economic success is always measured by GDP (Gross Domestic Product), which has hitherto been largely dependent upon the use of hydrocarbons and he briefly mentioned the '*limits to growth*' debate of the early 1970's. However, he assured us that the necessary de-coupling of growth from carbon emissions was now happening, and that ***sustainable growth*** represents an increasing proportion of our economy.

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Will Carr from the **Green Alliance** then provided us with a description of their **Policy Tracker**, which uses many of the same sources as those used by the Climate Change Committee, but possibly provides the information in a more accessible form. Will also emphasised the importance of the tracker in providing clarity to assist with accountability. Then, our final speaker for the session was **Jill Poet** from the **Organisation for Responsible Business** who advised us that you don't have to be a large business to have a proper concern for society and sustainability. Talking without slides, Jill managed to promote the importance of microbusinesses to our economy and the need to provide them with effective support to ensure they make their contribution to the transition required by the net zero target.

Following a short coffee break we settled down to our second topic – **Sectoral Perspectives**. In the event the session largely concentrated on Agriculture, with the first talk providing a comprehensive review of **Greenhouse Gas Emissions from UK Agriculture**. Delivered by **Emeritus Professor Ian Plewis**, Ian suggested that there are up to 20 different farming activities that create green-house gasses which we should be monitoring, with just 13 of them presently covered by one means or another; 11 of them by the Farm Practices Survey and one each by the June Survey and the BSFP. He then expressed concern about the decrease in response rates to these surveys and the lack of information on smaller farms, [particularly those within the 3 smaller Nations (Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales), he therefore concluded that there remains a lot still to be done.

The second speaker in this session was also talking about farmers, this time telling us that as many farmers concerned about the effects of **Government policy**, as are concerned with the effects of climate change. **Nigel Jacklin** of **Accord** had conducted a **Readership Survey amongst Farmers** on behalf of RDP Communications, an Agricultural Marketing Agency, and he had uncovered a considerable level of scepticism concerning climate change, with as many as 45% believing they are simply experiencing normal variation of the weather.

The final paper for the session was delivered by **Merle Gering**, a retired Civil Servant and **climate activist**, who gave us an engaging history of the effects of carbon dioxide emissions on the atmosphere, beginning in 1856, when Eunice Newton Smith had demonstrated the greenhouse effect, showing that a tube of CO₂ holds more heat when exposed to sunlight. Then Merle described the obfuscation of the facts created by the energy companies, before warning that the two primary mitigation effects, re-cycling plastic and carbon storage, simply do not work. Finishing with the statement by Sir David King, former chief UK science advisor, in 2021 that “*the next 3 or 4 years are likely to determine the future of humanity*” emphasising that we are now over halfway through that period!

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The seminar then adjourned for lunch and the opportunity to discuss a stimulating morning's papers with fellow participants.

We began the afternoon with the second keynote provided by **Bob Ward, Policy and Communications Director at the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change**. Bob's talk, entitled ***Misinformation about Net Zero***, primarily focussed on an extremely relevant example - an editorial in the Sunday Telegraph of 23rd July 2023. Headed "*Britain needs a referendum on Net Zero*" the editorial claimed that the Act of Parliament that had created the target of net-zero emissions by 2050, had not been properly considered and that some of the supporting evidence was unproven, with consequences that were increasingly damaging. Bob provided specific evidence to refute each of the claims in the editorial, in so doing he implicitly endorsed many of the points Merle had made just prior to lunch.

We then moved to our third topic - reviewing some of the expected ***economic effects of climate change***, beginning with consideration of the ***macro-economic effects*** in a talk provided by **Boromeus Wanengkirtyo** of the **Bank of England**. Boro (as he prefers to be called) provided a deceptively straightforward consideration of some of the economic realities, noting that larger organisations are more resilient to flooding than are smaller businesses, particularly micro-businesses. Interestingly he claimed that, although few organisations admit to having a strategy to combat climate change, a majority claim to have already taken steps to reduce their emissions. Finally, Boro reassured the audience that the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England had enough experience of economic change to ensure that it would guide us through whatever may lie ahead..

Our next speaker, **Dr Alison Todd** of the **Office of Budget Responsibility** was also reassuring with her review of the ***costs of climate change***, confirming that it was necessary to invest now to reduce more damaging effects later. Her analysis divided the costs associated with change into three categories - the cost of the damages caused, the cost of adaptation and the mitigation costs. Helpfully, Alison explored the outcome associated with some different scenarios and finished with a statement of the work presently in progress suggesting that we should look out for the publication of the ***Fiscal Risks and Sustainability*** report to be published in July 2024.

The final paper for this session was provided by **Shaun Richards** an **independent economist and journalist**, specialising in the causes of inflation. Shaun's review of the ***unknown, unknowns*** pointed out how the costs of green energy have fluctuated over time, with the costs of building wind turbines significantly increased and the realisation of the overall increase in apparent generating capacity required to overcome the intermittent effects of a variable climate. Each of these has made the costs of

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converting to green energy higher than originally thought, whilst the costs of carbon based energy is becoming more competitive, as we recover from the shock induced by the war in Ukraine.

After a short tea break, we convened for our final topic – ***climate and people*** to hear more about what people think. Introduced by **Ian Townsend, Head of Environmental Statistics and Analysis at the Office for National Statistics (ONS)**, Ian provided us with an *overview* of the interaction of our environment with our economy and society, as observed by the ONS. His talk therefore covered measuring the number of ‘green’ jobs and the wider ‘*environmental economy*’, including valuing the services nature provides us; he also presented some of the results of surveys of GB adults and of businesses as conducted recently by the ONS. The addendum below provides links to the latest reports on most of the items covered in Ian’s talk.

Our final talk was provided by **Sir John Curtice, Professor of Politics at the University of Strathclyde**, who was unable to be present in person and had therefore pre-recorded a presentation of the results of the ***public opinion survey*** conducted by Opinium on behalf of Better Statistics. As the UK’s best known psephologist, Sir John identified some important differences by intended voting behaviour, with supporters of all three parties identifying the cost of living as their most important concern whereas for Conservatives, immigration was the second most important and for Labour it was Climate Change; Libdem supporters were more ‘in between’ the views of supporters of the other two main parties. After providing further examples of the differences between the two major parties Sir John concluded that the widespread public concern left the opportunity for disagreement as to how to tackle the issue, possibly suggesting the need for more debate on the subject?

On a more parochial note, it was interesting to see that the ONS data and the Better Statistics Survey provided very similar measures of the public’s concern with Global Warming; although at first glance they seemed to differ because slightly different questions had been used. The respondents to the Better Statistics survey had been restricted to selecting their ***top three*** concerns, whereas the ONS survey had asked respondents to identify as many concerns as they wished. The devil is always in the detail when it comes to numbers!

All the sessions of the day had left us feeling that, whilst there is undoubtedly a lot going on, nevertheless there is still a long way to go, and little consensus on the actions required. Nor much recognition of the urgency of the situation. The importance of public understanding on the various aspects of Global Warming has led this observer to wonder how we can identify simpler statistics that can be used to measure our progress. The topic is probably as important as measuring inflation, so should progress

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not be reported more frequently, at least quarterly or better still, monthly. Would that help create more debate and interest in our progress?

Addendum

Please visit <https://www.betterstats.net/combating-climate-change-where-are-we-with-net-zero/> for the video of the event and to review all the slides.

Links to some relevant ONS surveys

1. Green Jobs
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/bulletins/experimentalestimatesofgreenjobsuk/2024>
2. Transport emissions from commuting (2021) – contains useful emissions calculator [COVID-19 restrictions cut household emissions - Office for National Statistics](#)
3. Public Opinions and social trends, Great Britain -
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/publicopinionsandsocialtrendsgreatbritain/28februaryto10march2024>
4. Low Carbon and renewable energy economy
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/bulletins/finalestimates/2022>
5. [Measuring UK Green House Gas emissions](#) updates the article originally on the portal..

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