

My Conservative Home Article: After Uxbridge, how to go green without soaking consumers

We should be grateful to the voters of Uxbridge. They have posed the main parties some important questions about environmental policies – even though the one most in question was in pursuit of the admirable aim of cleaner air. Many voters objected strongly to imposing a heavy charge on the owners of older vehicles, trying to force them off the road at a time of cost of living pressures. It is not a good look to undermine the precarious budgets of those who need to use an older car or van to earn a living at a time of high inflation. By definition, they cannot afford the newer greener vehicles that the Mayor of London insists on, leaving him defending a policy of cars for the better off only.

This result will lead to a wider rethink of green issues. The Government does need to reconsider some of its policies undertaken in the name of net zero. It has listened to those of us who pointed out its former policy of leaving more of our domestic gas and oil in the ground will increase world CO₂ output in a self-defeating zealotry.

And for as long as most people have gas boilers at home and industry fires its factories with fossil fuels, our choice is not to use less of them. It is: do we import more or produce more ourselves? Importing gas in LNG form generates more than twice as much CO₂ as piping our own gas to users, thanks to the energy it takes to liquify, ship and convert back. Some say that the cost can be several times as much CO₂. Far better then to pipe our own gas and spare the CO₂. It also is far better in every other way. We get more better paid jobs at home, far more tax revenue from taxing the production and a big saving on the balance of payments. Another net zero idea which produces more CO₂ is to spend UK grant money on stopping farmers in the UK growing food or rearing animals, only then to import the food instead. All those extra lorry miles and shipping routes burn more diesel in transport. And once again we lose the jobs, the investment and the tax revenues at home whilst adding to our balance of payments deficit. It is time to spend the grant money on investing in more automated and modern home food production instead.

The UK imposes the highest carbon tax and most penal emissions trading of the main economies. This makes such UK industries as steel and ceramics uncompetitive here. Government is then forced to hand some of the tax back as subsidy. Furthermore, there is the loss of more UK capacity, leading to more imports of high energy based products. This, too, can often increase total world CO₂, given the extra fossil fuel consumed in long distance transport. We may also be importing from factories and furnaces abroad that generate more CO₂ from their processes.

The way to net zero requires many more people to change their heating from gas to electricity, more electricity to come from renewables, more transport

to be electric and more people to eat less meat. All this requires innovation and new products. Voters cannot afford some of the current green options, if they think they are inferior to what they already have.

So if the UK persists with the idea of banning new gas boilers as early as 2025, people will not be persuaded that heat pumps are cheap enough or good enough. They will make do with their old gas boiler. If the Government stops the sale of new petrol and diesel cars in the UK in 2030 before the other main car producing countries do, we will face early collapse of our car industry. Customers will want to buy nearly new imported petrol and diesel vehicles from countries that have not banned their sale.

The UK could help to find new products that work and are sensibly priced. Our innovative businesses, entrepreneurs and academics should be encouraged to do so. Government can use research grants, low business taxes and pro-innovation policies to resolve the difficulties. It makes little sense to plough on with taxes and bans that clobber our jobs and tax revenues whilst increasing world CO2 as we become ever more dependent on imports.

Government also needs to review its often speculative or poorly directed spending on net zero projects. Unresolved questions such as whether electric heating or hydrogen heating will prove more effective need answers that worldwide research and development can help determine. The Government should not think these can all be sorted by its grants and directions, given the scale and complexity of the task. It needs the best of large company research and entrepreneurial flair worldwide to drive a successful revolution. Government has not had to tax, ban and subsidise people into using mobile phones and laptops. Where is the iPad of the domestic heating world or the Beetle of the electric car ranges? That is the crucial consumer challenge on the road to net zero. More UK imports will make things worse, not better.