

The costs of net zero policies

Labour's decision to abandon most of its planned £28 bn a year extra investment programme for net zero has served to highlight the costs of the policy. It should also lead Labour to ask how they could both afford and achieve their wish to accelerate the UK's progress to net zero compared to very exacting existing government targets. Under Mr Sunak the government has been relaxing some of the requirements, recognising that for the policy to work it has to be undertaken at a pace that people will accept. Much of the investment needs to be made by individuals and by private companies, so it needs to be realistic. The faster the government wants to go the more subsidy and direct public spending it will need to bring it about.

Labour say they are still wedded to the idea of zero carbon electricity generation by 2030. How can this be? That would require the closure and write off of all our gas power stations and the remaining coal ones. If Drax is staying it would require a carbon capture and storage scheme to be up and running at great cost for that facility. It would require a massive expansion of the grid to handle more interruptible power and the planned expansion of electric heating and vehicles. It would need a major further investment in wind and solar power. It would require big battery installations to store power, and probably some new pump storage schemes as well. No-one seriously believes this can be done by 2030. Nor could it be done for part of a planned £28bn a year let alone without £28 bn a year.

Two of the big areas where net zero requires different conduct by individuals are transport and heating. Labour's faster progress would mean ripping out far more gas boilers far sooner, which most people show no wish to do. It would require a fast replacement of diesel and petrol vehicles with electric. It would require an end to many holidays abroad or a rapid roll out of synthetic fuels for all aeroplanes. It is time interviewers on main media asked these crucial questions of those who advocate faster moves to net zero. It is simply wrong to be told wind energy is cheaper than fossil fuel energy when the figures do not take into account the costs of back up power today from fossil fuel. Nor do they take into account the full costs of extra grid, the costs of battery and pump storage, the costs of smart meters and the costs of rolling out charger points and extra cable capacity into homes for a more comprehensive renewables system.