

The place of carbon counting in policy making

The UK has been the most successful larger country at cutting its carbon dioxide output since 1990. Some of this was a gain for our economy and society as well as a win for the world, where new investment substituted more efficient fuel saving ways of making and growing things or generating power. Some of it was not a gain for us or the world where it entailed ceasing doing something at home and importing from somewhere else, often in ways which increased the amount of carbon dioxide produced in making and transporting them.

The world system for counting and managing carbon dioxide output is understandably based around the national production of carbon dioxide. As the policies to cut the output of CO₂ are decided and implemented by national governments (or the EU) and companies acting under national laws, that makes sense as a means of management. It does not, however, make global sense if countries decide to cease making or growing things that produce a lot of CO₂ in order to import them and shift the CO₂ onto another country's budget. It is positively harmful both to the country ceasing production and to the wider world if as a result the addition of CO₂ from long distance transport and or from more carbon intensive ways of production in the exporting country actually increases the total world output of CO₂.

In the UK it appears that many officials and some Ministers regard national decarbonisation as the main or only imperative in thinking through policies. In the energy department there has been a mad dash to close down coal power stations, to block new gas combined cycle stations and greatly increase reliance on imported electricity through interconnectors. If we end up importing power which comes from Russian gas or German coal that is not a win. The same department has been keen to plan the run down of existing gas and oil fields in the North Sea and to prevent new connections to untapped reserves that are discovered. Instead they prefer we rely on increasing volumes of imported oil and gas during the "transition". The agriculture department seems worried by methane from cows for milk and beef cattle, so it offers grants to wild our land and to make us ever more dependent on imported meat and dairy products. It allows us to mainly import salads, flowers and other items needing greenhouse heating from the Netherlands instead of helping the UK create more jobs and cut the food miles with more home production. The Business Department watches as the UK retreats from aluminium, steel, ceramics and other energy intensive manufactures, only to rely more on imports.

In each case departments need to give greater weightings to the need for more better paid jobs and more successful businesses in the UK, and the need to increase national resilience at a time of disrupted world trade and global shortages. They need to also see that even given their main preoccupation, CO₂ output, there is a case for doing more at home to cut the food miles and to improve the fuel efficiency of processes in industry.