

Will they build back green?

This is an extract from my latest book Build Back Green

We live in revolutionary times. A movement to harness the state to root carbon out of our lives has now entrenched itself in government as the prevailing policy. Joe Biden's America joins hands with the European Union in declaring war on carbon dioxide. A clever China agrees in principle and corners the market in many green products, whilst still increasing her output of the unpopular gas.

The protagonists strike an optimistic tone. They assure us the revolution will be carried through with a wide range of new green jobs. They hold out the promise of skilled people running windmill and battery factories, joyously powering the revolution of their dreams. They comment little on the other side, as they effectively sign the redundancy notices of all those in the oil and gas business, in drilling technology, in internal combustion engines, conventional ships, planes and vehicles, gas heating and much else. They have in mind a huge transition from the fossil fuel economy to the green electricity economy. They want us all to dump our diesel and petrol cars, replace our gas boilers, change our diet away from meat, give up foreign holidays and take to our bicycles.

The conversion to carbon free has not developed the same momentum and pace yet that the petrol and diesel vehicle enjoyed when they were introduced. The problems include a perception that the newer green products are not as good as the fossil fuel products they wish to replace, and a view that the green items remain too expensive. Where the advent of the car, van and bus widened people's choices and offered longer range journeys to people who otherwise had to walk, the arrival of the electric car or heat pumps does not offer the consumer any new service or capacity they do not already enjoy. The problem with the green revolution is it comes from the top down. Government are the revolutionaries, not the hordes at the gates of power urging change. Government is trying to persuade or make people change their lifestyles without convincing them they will be better off if they do.

It is a paradox that a revolution should come from the very establishment that is threatened by it. Car companies making a good living selling excellent diesel and petrol cars queue up to decry their old products and promise a new range of electric cars as soon as they can get round to making them. Governments that enjoy huge revenues from oil and gas taxes, vehicle excise and fuel taxes sacrifice them with abandon, pretending that electric cars or electric heating will come tax free in contrast to their predecessors. The elite who have enjoyed dining out on the finest cuts of meat complain about the number of cattle on grassland. The powerful who have lived a charmed life flitting by first class jet to another five star hotel in a remote country warn us off such a lifestyle. The press delights in uncovering hypocrisy, as some of the staunchest advocates of a new austerity or restraint in lifestyle fall foul of their own recommendations to others to cut the carbon miles.

It is time for a proper debate about this ersatz revolution, these grand plans often drawn up by people who think they should have some kind of exemption from the rules they set. So far the green movement has spawned so many long haul flights for delegates to arrive in air conditioned five star hotels to urge the world to stop international flights and much else that many aspire to. It is now at the point where it has to translate aspirations into practical policies, and vague distant targets into shorter term targets with bite. It will only do so if it unleashes a range of popular products that are affordable and better than the ones they seek to displace.