

Keswick Reminder 19.12.25: NfWW No.104 The troubles with net zero

Pushback against climate action is growing in many countries and is being expressed in both political and public criticism of net zero policies. These are policies which aim for countries to be carbon neutral by a certain date (most commonly 2050). Nowhere is the scale of this backlash so great as in the US where the President simply does not accept climate science to the extent of defunding climate research and withdrawing from the landmark Paris Agreement and much more.

But even in countries where the truth of climate change is widely accepted, politicians worry about what they see as the cost of achieving net zero. This is especially so when there is fuel price inflation which can be blamed (usually wrongly) on net zero policies.

Of course net zero policies cost money: changing from fossil fuels to renewable power generation involves building wind and solar farms. But if there is a short-term net cost to that there is a long-term net savings. And set against such costs, renewable energy assets will often be replacing aging fossil fuel infrastructure. Most governments are really poor at explaining all this.

Sadly where that is so, net zero policies become politically polarized and play into culture wars, with climate becoming a wedge issue rather than a shared challenge. Onto this bandwagon populists jump, portraying net zero as anti-growth, anti-freedom and imposed by elites. And all of these criticisms are amplified by social as well as by some mainstream media.

However, cutting back now on the path to net zero illustrates the short-term thinking of politicians who join that camp. And that is extremely dangerous. For if we carry on with business as usual, with fossil fuels still providing nearly 80% of the world's energy needs, we face a nightmare future within our children's lifetimes.

Every year of delay raises future transition costs, locks in high-carbon infrastructure and increases the human and financial costs of extreme weather.

Projections show that, in this scenario, global heating will lead, by the year 2100, to a large portion of the Earth's productive land becoming desert. Such desert land could, according to some scientists in the worst-case scenario, stretch from the latitude of mid-France down to the tip of South Africa.

This will lead to a mass migration crisis that will dwarf current human movements simply because it will lead to the loss of a large part of the world's food producing regions; this – in addition to the extreme weather produced by further global heating. The costs of such cataclysmic events will far outweigh any short-term 'savings' made by ditching commitments to net zero.

Politicians and others on the anti-net-zero bandwagon should be aware that their stance in opposing net zero will lead to future nightmares with unimaginable human costs. This really is a version of the head-in-sand denialism, the subject of our next piece.

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