

The Green New Deal is already changing the terms of the climate action debate

February 28 2019, by Rebecca Willis



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

What a splendid irony it would be if the enduring legacy of Donald Trump's presidency was the Green New Deal – a radical, government-directed plan to transition the US to a socially just society with a zero-carbon economy.

Of course, it isn't Trump's idea. The Green New Deal was [first proposed a decade ago](#), but has only recently captured the public imagination. Environmental activists from the "[Sunrise Movement](#)" protested in House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office on November 13 2018, [demanding the deal](#). And they were joined by recently elected Congresswoman [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#), who has [argued passionately on behalf of the plan](#) ever since.

Still, it's partly thanks to Trump and the shock of his election that radical ideas are getting a hearing and his opponents are being forced to think bold. That's just what is needed if the world is to get serious about tackling climate change.

Alongside an aim for net-zero greenhouse gas emissions and 100% renewable energy, the Green New Deal demands job creation in manufacturing, economic justice for the poor and minorities and even universal healthcare through a ten-year "national mobilisation", which echoes President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s.

The UK has, for the past decade, [thought of itself as a climate leader](#). It's true that [the 2008 Climate Change Act](#), which sets a legally-binding framework for carbon reduction, is ambitious compared to legislation in many other countries.

But the UK's approach – like so many other countries – is based on quiet consensus. So far, climate politics has been a polite conversation between government, industry and researchers, not a subject of heated debate in parliament.

[My research with UK politicians](#) shows a reluctance to speak out on climate change, as many prefer a low-key approach – dressing up [climate action](#) in the language of economic policy and market mechanisms to avoid confrontation with colleagues, the electorate or the

industries that risk losing out in the shift to a low-carbon economy.

Some Members of Parliament even told me that they deliberately avoid mentioning climate change in speeches to the House of Commons or in their constituency, fearing it could backfire. One worried that he would be branded a "zealot", and marginalised by his colleagues if he argued too vociferously in favour of climate action.

This approach is severely limiting. Moving to a zero-carbon society will require changing the way that people live in their homes, travel around, shop, eat and source their food. It's impossible to do all this without people noticing and attempting to impose change from above, without social consent, may also cause a backlash.

French President Emmanuel Macron found this to his cost when he tried to implement fuel tax rises which disproportionately affected poorer consumers. The result was the Gilets Jaunes protests which erupted in France in late 2018.

Climate policies should involve and excite people by addressing their concerns and aspirations. Climate policy proposals have typically centred around technically optimal solutions – trying to establish the least disruptive or costly approach, without paying attention to the question of whether people might vote for them.

President Barack Obama's [well-intentioned climate policies](#) fitted this mould. His [Clean Power Plan](#), which sought incremental carbon reductions from existing power stations, was a pragmatic response to a divided political scene.

After decades of technocratic and consensus-building climate politics, [the Green New Deal](#) swaggers onto the scene – an avowedly political and idealistic take on climate action.

The Green New Deal's first victory

The Green New Deal was put forward as a [Resolution to the House of Representatives](#), by Ocasio-Cortez and supporters from both houses on February 5 2019. It's only a non-binding statement of intent at this stage and would require complex legislation. Bold political plans often founder on the rocks of implementation, especially when politics are as fractious as in the current Congress.

But the Green New Deal has already succeeded in one important aspect: it puts climate policies on the agenda that are as ambitious as the science of climate change demands. This makes it impossible for opponents to stay silent. The Green New Deal is forcing Democrats and Republicans to consider their own stance on climate change.

Some Democrats have branded the plan as unrealistic – a "green dream", as Pelosi called it. Veteran senator, Diane Feinstein, was similarly dismissive, when [young campaigners asked for her support](#). Republicans, meanwhile, have branded it a [socialist takeover](#) to rally their own supporters. But the Green New Deal's opponents can't simply criticise. They will need to find their own answer to the climate question.

For the Republicans, denying or dismissing the science of climate change is becoming less tenable by the day. The impacts of climate change are mounting, [public concern is rising](#), and schoolchildren are striking.

The Green New Deal has drawn attention to a gaping hole in right-wing politics – the confident articulation of a climate strategy. If you agree with the scientific consensus that rapid action is necessary, but you don't like the strongly social flavour of the Green New Deal, what do you propose in its place?

In the UK, the fog of Brexit has [clouded any serious political debate](#) on [climate change](#), but when politicians manage to take a breath, they too will face the same challenge. [The Labour Party has promised action](#) but the Conservatives have been told that their own commitments aren't compatible with the Paris Agreement and so they, too, need a plan.

The fight is not nearly won. But the Green New Deal is already succeeding in putting [climate](#) action where it belongs, as the defining political issue of our time. How strange that we have dysfunctional US politics to thank for this huge step forward.

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