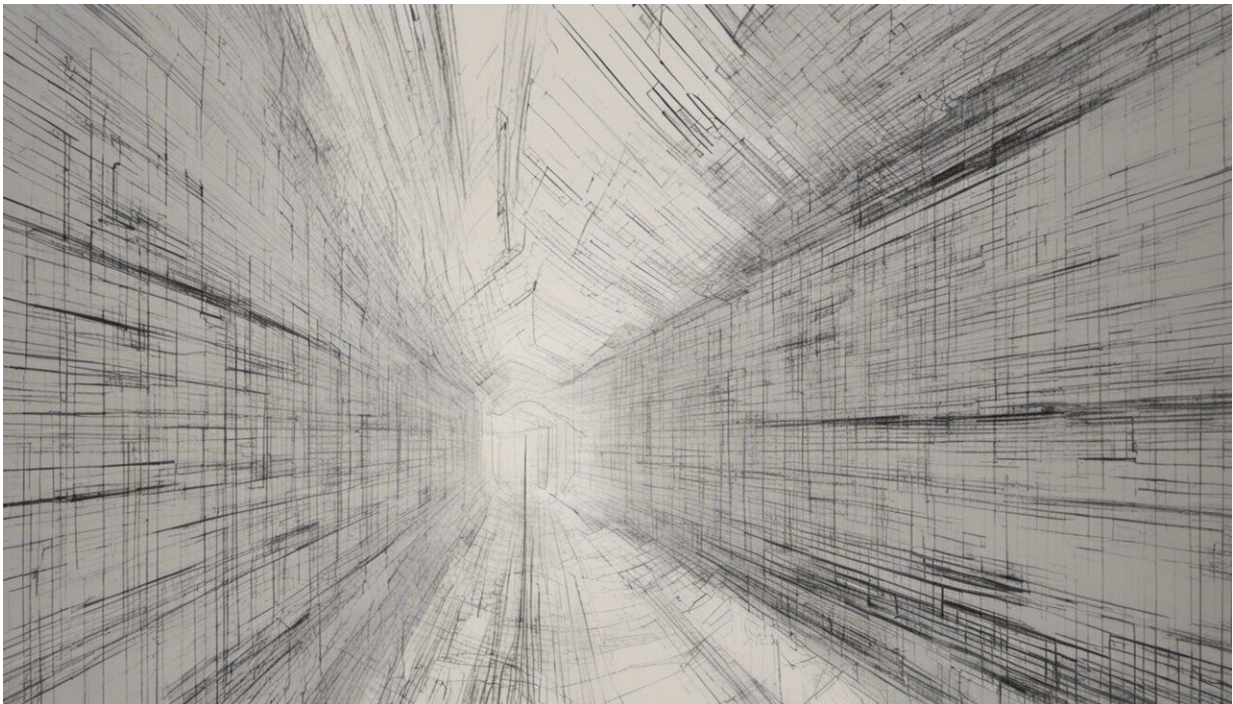


Could Liz Truss allow new drilling for oil and gas and still strengthen the UK's net zero target?

September 7 2022, by Myles Allen



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

The U.K.'s new prime minister, Liz Truss, has pledged to [suspend green levies](#) on energy bills and look for "better ways to deliver our [net zero targets](#)." Despite a record-breaking heat wave plus wildfires, droughts and floods worldwide, neither contender for the Conservative Party

leadership felt the urge, as David Cameron once did, to [hug a husky](#) during the summer leadership campaign.

In her acceptance speech, Truss made clear her first priority is "dealing with people's [energy bills](#), but also dealing with the long-term issues we have on [energy supply](#)." Many [read](#) this as a green light for licensing new oil and gas extraction and perhaps ending the moratorium on fracking.

But as a former foreign secretary, Truss must also know how [flood victims in Pakistan](#) would react to Global Britain backtracking on its climate change commitments less than a year after cajoling the world into signing up to the Glasgow Climate Pact.

Can Truss preserve the U.K.'s reputation for climate leadership, and its target of net zero emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂) by 2050, while appointing [a business secretary](#) who wants to extract "[every last drop](#)" of oil from the North Sea? As a physicist who helped identify the need for net zero in the first place, I suspect the only way to do this would be to package these initiatives into an even bolder climate policy: make the U.K. the first country in the world to commit to [geological net zero](#), linking future fossil fuel extraction and imports to permanent disposal of the CO₂ they generate.

A target written in stone

Achieving geological net zero [means](#) returning one metric ton of CO₂ to storage in the Earth's crust for every ton generated by any continued burning of [fossil fuels](#). It is a much more robust goal than net zero alone, because it leaves far less wiggle room for creative accounting of how much forests and other natural carbon sinks can soak up. And it is the bare minimum that a wealthy country and high historical emitter such as the U.K. should be committing to.

Crucially, the road to geological net zero need not be paved with subsidies. No taxpayer money is needed at all. What is needed is a licensing requirement on any firm extracting or importing fossil fuels into the U.K. to permanently dispose of a rising fraction of the CO₂ generated by the products they sell, either capturing it from their customers or drawing it out of the atmosphere, with that fraction rising to 100% by 2050. Since most of that carbon would probably be re-injected under the North Sea, lots of jobs would be created in north-east England, where the government has already [promised investment](#), paid for by companies like BP, whose boss recently [admitted](#) not knowing what to do with their excess profits.

The fossil fuel industry will insist that any such idea would make fossil fuels much, much more expensive—the last thing that is needed right now. But let's think about that claim for a moment. Their most expensive option, capturing CO₂ from thin air to compensate for every single molecule generated by the products they sell, which they would only have to reach by 2050, would add less than 5p per kWh to the cost of supplying natural gas, and less than 60p to the cost of producing a liter of petrol. Technologies such as [direct air capture](#) cost about [£200 to suck up a ton of CO₂](#) today, and the industry would have 30 years to reduce the cost [further](#).

That's an additional cost of production, phased in gradually over three decades, that is less than their average increase in wholesale profits since the beginning of 2022. Would these companies be able to pass it all on to consumers, on top of today's prices? Or would competition from renewable energy mean they actually have to absorb some or all of this cost themselves? The only time the idea of a [carbon takeback obligation](#) came close to U.K. law, [back in 2015](#), it was bitterly opposed by the lobby group Oil and Gas UK, which suggests what they really think (I know, because a lobbyist in a nice suit took me out for a coffee and spent a good hour explaining to me what a terrible idea it was).

Knee-jerk opposition overcome, the next challenge would be standing up to fossil fuel companies offering to invest in wind farms instead of disposing of CO₂. Companies are welcome to invest in renewable energy if they want to, but those investments are no replacement for stopping the products they sell from causing global warming by keeping the CO₂ they generate out of the atmosphere. The alternative makes as much sense as a water company promoting its investment in water-absorbing peatlands as an excuse for dumping [sewage on beaches](#).

Countries are racing to diversify their fossil [fuel](#) supplies right now, and producers are begging for new extraction licenses. Banning all new extraction isn't helpful if it simply increases our dependence in future on Russia and Saudi Arabia. But how can the U.K. license more oil and gas without locking in more emissions? The answer is simple: make the continued extraction or import of fossil fuels into the U.K. conditional on permanent CO₂ disposal, starting now and ramping up to 100% by 2050. And then challenge the country's trading partners to do the same.

Require the world's most profitable industry to get net zero done.

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Provided by The Conversation

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