

Opinion: Why a serious climate strategy is almost impossible in the UK's current political system

March 31 2023, by Steven R. Smith



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

The UK government [reportedly](#) chose Aberdeen, its carbonization capital, as the original location to relaunch its de-carbonization strategy. The strategy, [now published](#), has been [strongly criticized](#) by environmentalists. Part of the plan to transition the country away from

oil and gas is to allow highly subsidized, mostly foreign-owned companies to extract more oil and gas from these islands and sell it overseas to the highest bidder, thereby improving the UK's national energy security. This is barely a week after climate scientists gave their starkest, [final warning](#) to keep fossil fuels in the ground or risk catastrophic, civilization-threatening levels of global overheating.

If your response to "energy security day" is to ask yourself: how on Earth can our leaders offer this as an adequate plan? After all the flooding, wildfires, heatwaves and storms; after all the scientific reports; after David Attenborough's Climate: The Facts; after Extinction Rebellion and Greta Thunberg and the millions of [young people](#) who refused to go to school; and [poll](#) after [poll](#) showing how concerned we now are; how we want our government to go much further and faster on climate policy. Do they really think we will swallow this Orwellian doublethink—hold two contradictory beliefs in our minds simultaneously, and accept them both? Are we really going to put up with this?

According to my [doctoral research](#) at the University of Surrey, the answer to these questions, unfortunately, is yes. Until the elements of UK civil society and polity who advocate accelerating action for a rapid transition become a much more effective, collaborative, strategic and coherent coalition, most of us probably will accept the doublethink and put up with it. To understand why, you first need to understand the "ecosystem" of UK climate actors and coalitions.

One key insight of this research, which relied on analyzing the views of 100 experts from a wide cross-section of society, is that the decarbonization transition needs to be both politically and ecologically viable, but a configuration of actors and narratives that combines these two necessary conditions into an effective force for change does not yet exist.

Politically but not ecologically viable

There is a large, dominant, politically viable coalition—I call it the "green growth" coalition—which consists of the government, the main political parties, the business and finance sectors, the mainstream media, and most [civil society](#) NGOs. It is politically viable because it enjoys a broad cross section of support, is relatively unified, and communicates a familiar, coherent, consistent, "win-win" narrative: private wealth and [public health](#) and well-being go together, and you need a viable, growing economy to pay for [public goods](#).

This coalition also conforms to the global financial system and its deeply embedded addiction to GDP growth. No single politician, [political party](#) or [national government](#) acting alone is likely to survive a campaign pledge that doesn't prioritize economic growth.

However, the green growth coalition is ecologically unviable. The internationally agreed safety limit of $+1.50^{\circ}\text{C}$ of global overheating will almost certainly be breached by the 2030s. If we factor in our greater historical responsibilities and financial capabilities to make things fairer for newly industrialized and less wealthy countries, then developed nations like the UK should be reaching zero emissions by the mid-2030s.

The government's net zero by 2050 transition is therefore far too slow and increases the risk of [tipping Earth systems](#) beyond critical thresholds. 2050 is based not on ecological necessity but on least-cost optimization and a belief that existing power relations and "[the grain of existing behavior and trends](#)" must be maintained. It also relies on "exporting" emissions to other countries and on speculative carbon removal technologies.

Ecologically but not yet politically viable

Two further coalitions—which I label "limits" (consisting of The Green Party, Greenpeace, and various more radical thinktanks, NGOs and campaigners) and "revolution" (Extinction Rebellion and similar non-violent direct-action groups)—are ecologically viable. They respect the overriding importance of the Earth's biophysical capacities ([planetary boundaries](#)). However, they are (currently) politically unviable, being composed of fragmented groups of more radical actors with marginal influence, few resources and no support at all in key sectors. They also face well-resourced, skilled, incumbent opposition with the backing of all the major media.

Concerned, but not yet persuaded

A rapid transition to net zero carbon by 2035 for the UK may be an ecological and humanitarian necessity. But despite record levels of concern, the UK public and key sectors are not yet persuaded. In addition, we have our own doublethink issues to contend with. We want better public transport and clean air. And we want to keep our cars and our cheap flights and to pay less in taxes. We want the government to take the lead. And we don't trust them to manage the rubbish collection let alone a just transition to a new economy.

If we want to take back control and have real energy security—based on [renewable energy](#), properly insulated buildings, the right to generate and sell our own renewable electricity, free public transport funded by a tax on frequent flyers—we're going to have to break the "[silent stand-off](#)" that leads politicians and the public to assume that the other party doesn't really care about the climate or surely they would be doing more about it. We need a proper national conversation about the kind of society we want to live in, and the real risks and difficult trade-offs we face in the years ahead, so that rapid transition or incremental change becomes a [conscious choice](#).

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