

UK backtracks on net zero policies

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Sunak says politicians have not been honest about the costs and trade-offs of net zero.

Britain will soften policies aimed at achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050 and instead pursue a "pragmatic" approach to hitting the target, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said Wednesday.

"We can adopt a more pragmatic, proportionate and realistic approach to meeting net zero," Sunak told a news conference, saying a ban on the sale of petrol and diesel cars would be pushed back from 2030 to 2035.

That would bring it in line with countries such as France and Germany, he said.

The prime minister also announced an easing of energy efficiency targets for rental properties and backtracked on plans to make homeowners replace gas boilers with heat pumps.

The move comes amid growing concern over the potential financial cost of the government's net zero pledge.

A general election is expected next year and Sunak's Conservative Party is trailing in the polls behind the Labour opposition amid a cost-of-living crisis that has seen food and housing costs spiral.

The narrow win by a Conservative candidate in a west London by-election in July—largely put down to a campaign against the expansion of a vehicle pollution toll zone in the capital by Labour mayor Sadiq Khan—triggered calls within the party to rethink climate commitments.

'I believe in net zero'

Stressing that "no one can doubt" the reality of climate change, Sunak said he was a firm believer both in net zero and the UK's ability to achieve it.

But he added that "too often motivated by short-term thinking, politicians have taken the easy way out, telling people the bits they want to hear, and not necessarily always the bits they need to hear.

"We haven't had an honest conversation about these issues in a long time. It's not enough to just announce these targets—great headlines in the short term—to will this thing to happen. That's not right," he said.



The UK's ban on the sale of petrol and diesel cars will be pushed back from 2030 to 2035.

The UK had leeway to ease targets as it had achieved "the fastest reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in the G7", he argued.

But the rethink sparked anger among opposition lawmakers, environmental campaigners, the car industry and some Conservative MPs, setting up a possible rift in Sunak's party.

Greenpeace campaigner Georgia Whitaker said the announcement "flies in the face of not just what we need in terms of climate science, but actually what the public really want.

"The UK was leading on climate policies, we were leading since COP26 a couple of years ago and it's really devastating to see our prime minister roll back on his previous commitments," she told AFP.

In July, Sunak approved hundreds of new oil and gas licences in the North Sea off Britain's east coast, angering environmentalists.

Former prime minister and net zero proponent Boris Johnson warned that "we cannot afford to falter now or in any way lose our ambition for this country", while COP26 president and Conservative lawmaker Alok Sharma added that "for any party to resile from this agenda will not help economically or electorally."

Reports suggested that some MPs may even be preparing letters of no confidence in protest.

'Complete farce'

Green Party MP Caroline Lucas called the move "economically illiterate, historically inaccurate and environmentally bone-headed" while Ed Miliband, Labour's spokesman for energy, said it was a "complete farce from a Tory government that literally does not know what they are doing day to day."

Criticism also came from industry, with Mike Hawes, chief executive of the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, saying the UK should be a "leader in zero emission mobility" but "clear, consistent" messaging is required from the government for consumers to want to switch to electric vehicles.

"Confusion and uncertainty will only hold them back," Hawes added.

The City of London Corporation, the governing body of the City of London that is home to much of the UK's financial sector, offered guarded support, saying the government "is right to explore how we deliver solutions within a fiscally constrained environment."

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