

Climate Crisis part 1 - The powers that be ...

Almost out of nowhere the Westminster government has declared a 'climate emergency' this week, following the devolved administrations in Wales and Scotland, and a number of local government bodies around the UK. This was one of the demands of the Extinction Rebellion movement and the urgency for action featured strongly in the public work of the very establishment figure of Sir David Attenborough, and Greta Thunberg, the inspiration behind the global School Climate Strikes. The science has also been assembled and published at a global scale by the IPCC and the UK's own Committee on Climate Change.

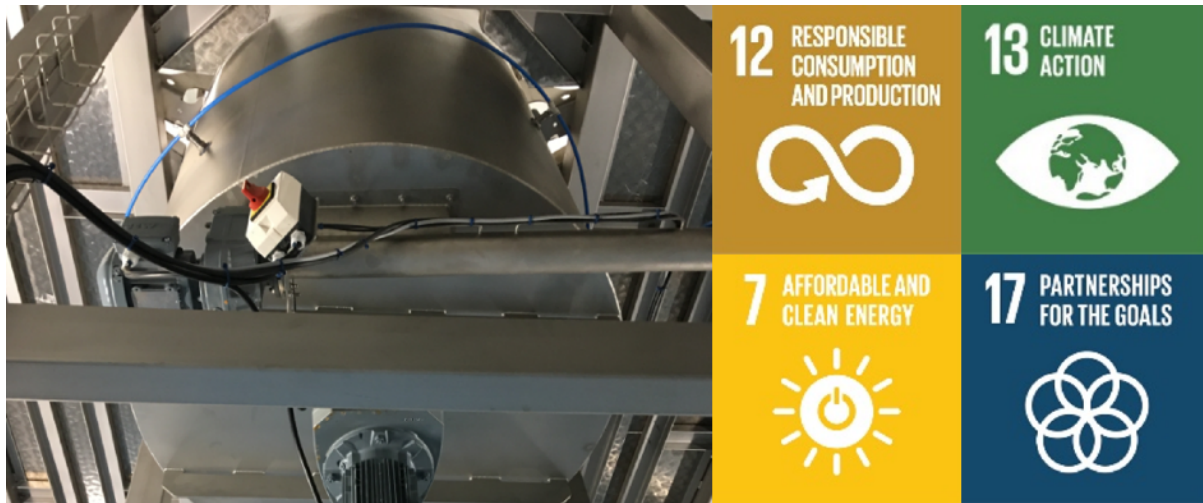
General public reaction in the UK and elsewhere around the globe has been positive; a recent Greenpeace poll found that two-thirds of the British public agree that there is a climate emergency, and over three-quarters would 'cast their vote differently to protect the planet'. Those are heartening statistics but, stuck as the country is in heated debate over the question of the UK's relationship with the EU, the democratic process is currently pointed elsewhere. On top of that, the whole issue of climate has regrettably become politicised, and any policy response must be designed to have as broad appeal as possible to head off the risk of partisan politics derailing action on this common threat.



That begs the question, of course, on what policy interventions could look like. The UK already has the 2008 Climate Change Act, which calls for 80% decarbonisation by 2050 against a 1990 baseline, but it is almost certain that the coming two budget periods will overshoot their targets. What use is legislation that cannot prevent such an outcome? More is clearly needed, and there is talk of extending the target to 100% decarbonisation, but there is a risk of alienating at least part of the public if the way new regulation is designed leads to some feeling that they are economic losers even if only in the short term.

The *gilets jaunes* in France are a lasting reminder of how good intentions can pave the road to infernal flames on the streets. As a general principle, a recent study has found that regulation works in driving carbon reductions. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the US is the country where regulation has been most successful despite climate change also being such a contentious issue there. The target areas are obvious; power generation, transport, especially air travel, home heating and the agri-food system. Many of these are areas in which citizen action can also have

an immediate impact, which has already been seen in dietary choices and the rise of ‘flexitarian’ eating, so business is likely to find itself impacted by the consumption end of the value chain, especially if it fails to take meaningful action on the impact of supply.



In the UK, last month saw the introduction of the Streamlined Energy and Carbon Regulations, (SECR) obliging larger businesses to report on their emissions and what they are doing to reduce them. Whilst there is no penalty for non-reduction, there is at least publicity and that should drive improvement as organisations seek to avoid reputational damage. Alongside this, the second phase of the Energy Savings Opportunity Scheme (ESOS) will oblige the same companies to undertake energy efficiency audits. This legislation also lacks teeth, as there is no obligation to implement any of the opportunities identified by the audits, but at least it shines another light on activity leading to industrial emissions.

If the UK departs the EU by October 31st, whatever replaces the Common Agricultural Policy will finally have to confront what will be done with the much-touted question of public money for public goods. There has been much heat but, so far, very little light arising from consultations initiated by Michael Gove at Defra, although I am pleased to have been able to play a part through contributing to the multi-stakeholder roundtables convened by the National Farmers Union (see the ‘Moral Maize’ blog post on the website for more). So much for regulation and policy, for the time being at least. In the second part of this article I will look at business and citizens.

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