



Running Out of Time? Future Prospects for Climate Stability

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Summary

The Conservatives recently achieved their biggest UK election victory since Margaret Thatcher's win in 1987. Though climate change was not the main election issue, there was, and remains, a surprising consensus across much of the UK political spectrum that a radical approach is required to tackle climate breakdown. Yet out of all the main political parties, the Conservative's approach is the least progressive. Boris Johnson's landslide victory coincided with a largely fruitless ending to the COP25 summit in Madrid where very little progress was made towards reducing carbon dioxide emissions. In the aftermath of these events, this briefing assesses the prospects of whether a radical rethink amongst policymakers to mitigating climate breakdown will occur in time.

Introduction

Last month's [briefing](#), *A Green Election – If Not Now, When?* examined the manifestos of the main UK political parties ahead of the General Election which took place on 12 December. The latter stages of the campaigning coincided with closing days of the Madrid climate change summit. The briefing concluded:

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“ There is a surprising consistency across much of the UK political spectrum that seriously radical action is essential in responding to the risk of climate breakdown. It is a view long held by the Green Party and by individuals and groups within other parties. What has really changed, and in a very short space of time, is the substantial mainstreaming of these views by the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish and Welsh nationalist parties and especially the largest opposition party, Labour. Given that all the indications are that the need for radical action will become more obvious in the coming months and years because of further warnings by climate scientists and the impact of extreme weather events, this has considerable significance for UK politics... The 2019 General Election may not turn out to be a “Green Election” but the very speed with which large parts of the political mainstream have embraced the issue is a singularly welcome development. ”

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Since then the **Madrid summit** has ended with very little progress made towards reducing carbon dioxide emissions and the UK election was won by the Conservative and Unionist Party with a **substantial majority** over all other parties. This briefing examines the outcome of both events and looks to the future in relation to prospects for radical changes in attitudes to climate breakdown and the extent of the economic and social changes needed to achieve climate stability.

The Madrid Summit

COP25 was held over a two-week period intended to end on 12 December but extended by two days to try and reach a consensus. It was officially the 25th meeting of the Conference of Parties (COP) to the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The 21st meeting held four years earlier in Paris (**COP21**) was generally thought to have had a positive outcome with targets for carbon emission reductions set which could, if achieved, have had the outcome of limiting dangerous climate breakdown, quite possibly by keeping temperature increases no higher than 1.5°C. The scientific consensus was that this would still involve major problems of extreme weather but could be enough to prevent catastrophic climate breakdown. At the event, the next three **COP** meetings made little progress towards that end and the outcome of the recent Madrid summit has been similarly disappointing. UN Secretary-General António Guterres **commented** on the outcome: “The international community lost an important opportunity to show increased ambition on mitigation, adaptation & finance to tackle the climate crisis”.

Meanwhile, climate scientists have warned that climate change is accelerating even beyond recent predictions. A 2018 report from the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stated that keeping to the target would need “rapid far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society.” As last month’s briefing pointed out, carbon emissions have been rising by an average of 1.5% a year for the past decade whereas “They need to fall by 7.6% every year until 2030 even to stay within the 1.5°C ceiling needed to avoid disastrous consequences.” The weak compromises reached at the end of COP25 mean that there is no prospect of this being achieved with current political attitudes. All that could be agreed was that the gap between current targets and what was really needed had to be recognised, but how this might lead on to radical decarbonisation was not considered in any detail.

The lack of progress is down to several factors. One has been the sustained resistance to decarbonisation by the major fossil fuel producer and exporter countries and the transnational corporations involved. Considerable funding, in the many hundreds of millions of dollars, has been pumped into think tanks and campaign groups arguing against the science and much more into promoting the use of fossil carbon. In recent decades a further factor has been the rise of the neoliberal economic system that favours free market deregulation that militates against short-term actions to prevent long-term impacts. Neoliberal shareholder capitalism tends to require quick returns on investments and while some forms of carbon emission reduction may turn out to be highly profitable, these normally take too long to be introduced to have the necessary effect.

At Madrid an additional factor was the attitude of some major carbon emitters. The United States, Russia, Australia, and several Middle East oil and gas

producers all benefit from high usage of fossil carbon. Brazil is opposed to interference in its own land use policies and India may be starting to embrace some renewables but is highly resistant to being told what to do by current high-emissions economies. Canada may “talk the talk” on climate breakdown but is not curbing the exploitation of its huge tar sands deposits and China is resistant to the entreaties of others, even as it transits to low carbon systems while being all too aware of its own climate vulnerabilities.

While the prospects for developing rapid action to prevent climate breakdown are currently bleak in the wake of the Madrid conference, this has been against background of some trends which give cause for optimism.

The first trend is growing collective action by certain developing states. The conference itself saw the further development of a coalition of states determined to argue for much stronger responses. This coalition is centred on a grouping of relatively weaker economies from the Global South together with the European Union and is likely to be more vociferous in the run-up to the next summit, COP26 in Glasgow next December.

A second trend is the huge improvement in renewable energy technologies, especially in the utilisation of solar and wind energy, with some systems already below grid parity with fossil fuels energy.

The third trend is the increased willingness of climate scientists to speak out on the dangers ahead and finally there has been a near-transformation in public attitudes to the risks of climate breakdown reflected in an explosion in campaigning activity, especially among younger people.

Overall, if the failure of COP25 to make progress is coupled with the remarkable rise in public awareness then there is likely to be global attention surrounding COP26 in a year's time, including the attitude of the host state for that meeting, the United Kingdom. This makes it particularly appropriate to review recent political changes in the UK, not least Brexit and the success of the Conservative Party in the recent general election.

The UK General Election

The convincing majority gained by Boris Johnson's Conservative Party puts it in a strong position to oversee the withdrawal from the European Union in a matter of months, even if the complete process takes far longer. Even in the short term, though, it means that Britain's involvement in EU leadership on the global climate issue will be lost. What becomes more significant, therefore, is whether the Johnson government embraces strong decarbonisation policies.

The signs are not good. While the government is committed to a zero-carbon economy by 2050 there is now overwhelming evidence that this is far too modest an aim. As the last [briefing noted](#), the Conservative's approach is one of the least progressive approaches of any of the main political parties, with Labour, Liberal Democrats, Greens and Scottish and Welsh Nationalists all aiming in their recent manifestos for much faster changes.

Furthermore, the recent history of the Conservative Party implies disinterest leading to a clear lack of prioritising of climate issues. Despite promising to create the "greenest government ever", when David Cameron's party won the 2015 election after a five-year coalition with the Liberal Democrats it spent the first three months dismantling key climate initiatives. These dated back to the

Labour government before 2010 but had been maintained because of Liberal Democrat insistence within the coalition.

As a report in *New Scientist* indicated, there were substantial cuts in support for solar power with layoffs for thousands of industry staff, a further £1 billion of subsidies for North Sea oil and excluding onshore windfarms from a subsidy scheme from April 2016. They also entailed reduced incentives for low-emission vehicles, the scrapping of the "green deal" in support of energy-efficient homes and the privatisation of the Green Bank.

Perhaps the most marked change of all, hardly noticed outside the building industry, was the scrapping of the "zero carbon homes" plan. Under it, all new homes from 2016 were meant to be carbon-neutral. It was seen as a change that would have had a steady cumulative effect and would also have done much to change the psychology of home ownership whereby homeowners would be motivated to upgrade their houses and thus also increase their value, sustainability, and sales potential.

Mr Johnson has shown little personal interest in climate breakdown, declining to take part in a television debate on the issue and dismissing climate protestors as "crusties". Furthermore, COP26 will take place within weeks of Britain's withdrawal from the EU when political discussion will be dominated by that. There are, though, other elements to consider. One is that the awareness of climate issues is far higher among younger people and there is little sign of that going away. Indeed, it is likely to increase in intensity in the UK and many other countries as the evolving impact of climate breakdown becomes obvious. Johnson's government may therefore face opposition from unexpected quarters, especially if there are yet more extreme weather events.

It is also highly likely that there will be further evidence from the climate science community that rapid decarbonisation is absolutely essential, adding still more to the anger of younger people and resulting in greater opposition to what should be a stable and secure government, given its electoral success.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most interesting element is that the whole Brexit issue is heavily influenced by a sense that Britain needs to make itself great again. Whatever the harsh reality of life as a state politically divorced from Europe trying to regain status, the presence of the COP26 summit in Britain will present the new government with the need to show serious leadership on a crucial and potentially disastrous global trend. If it does not do so, on this of all world stages, then any idea that post-Brexit Britain is a world leader will be shown to be a myth. That alone may be a reason for the Johnson government to embrace stronger policies on decarbonisation in the coming months.

Image credit: [John Briody/Flickr](#).

About the Author

Paul Rogers is Oxford Research Group's Senior Fellow in international security and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His '**Monthly Global Security Briefings**' are available from our website. His latest book *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins* was published by I B Tauris in June 2016.

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