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Making connections on climate change

Climate change is becoming harder to ignore - so where are we in the race to cut carbon emissions and where should we go next?

► Recently it feels like there's been a shift in the mood on climate change. This is no longer something too big and too distant that we can stuff in a drawer like a bill we are afraid we can't pay. Both the ever starker warnings from climate scientists, and the escalation in severe weather, are now hitting home. Saying you can prevent forest fires by raking forest floors "like they do in Finland" feels symbolic of the extractive economy's (and its client states) chaotic, fighting retreat in the face of the growing confidence of the clean energy sector and the new economy.

If the mood music is changing, then where do we stand on the race to cut carbon emissions? If you want a succinct summary of where things stand on UK carbon emissions, then I'd recommend the Committee on Climate Change's recent 10-year progress report and some associated commentary on a series of tie-in blog posts from the New Economics Foundation on their website.

Here's what I took from them.

1 In the UK there has been progress in decarbonising the grid - mostly through the dethroning of King Coal as the main source of the nation's heat, light and power. However, as David Powell, head of environment and green transition at the New Economics Foundation, points out in his blog post this was the relatively easy bit. Summarising the Committee's report, he says: "The government ... needs to pull its finger out

on pretty much everything that isn't electricity generation: that means what we manufacture and consume, and the industries in which we work; how we get around; how we heat our homes and what sort of homes we build; and what we do with the land, and the soil, and our food. All of that stuff isn't mere technocratic tinkering that happens around the edges of 'the proper economy'. It is the economy."

2 The government has a strong narrative on reducing carbon emissions but when it comes to the big decisions too many go the wrong way for the climate... and unfortunately, we haven't got time for this one step forward, one step backwards policy dance. Pumping billions into expanding the inter-urban road network, making motoring increasingly competitive with public transport and bending over backwards to ensure air travel is often crazy cheap are three examples on transport where the need to reduce carbon has not been a consideration. The failure of the Budget to even mention climate change is an example of it not being a consideration at the level of strategic direction.

3 One of the reasons for this is that measures to tackle climate change are seen politically as being a drag on the economy. Not only that, but also unpopular with the public as they are seen to either increase living costs or limit lives

(through, for example, increasing fuel prices or making foreign holidays more unobtainable). The tenor of the debate can too often convey a sense that this is a race we will probably lose whilst also consigning us to increasingly austere but lofty lives of penance and abstinence.

This also plays into the recent global phenomenon around 'taking back control' from the technocrats who are seen as manipulating complex situations in a way which leads to people already struggling, struggling more, whilst those same technocrats ensure their own privileged lives are insulated from the impacts of their advocacy. The current fuel protests in France are an echo of those in the UK in 2000 and show how prices at the pumps can act as the spark plug for wider discontent.

However, there is an alternative to environmental policies being seen as technocratic, elitist, hypocritical and life limiting and that is to recast them into a broader transformative vision which also incorporates wider social goals. There are signs of this 'taking back control' of the environmental agenda in how quickly the 'green new deal' proposed by newly elected US Congress representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has gained momentum. The 'green new deal' isn't all about the complex fiscal and taxation measures that make the economists purr, the technocrats preen themselves, the media bored and the public suspicious - it also emphasises that this means jobs: "This is going to be the New Deal, the Great Society, the moon shot, the civil-rights movement of our generation."

4 In the UK we also need to move away from the current 'bittiness' of carbon policy as an accidental beneficiary or victim of other policies to something which is far more integrated into decision-making as a matter of course. Only then will people start to feel more agency and less anxiety (of which there is more than enough to go around already) over climate change. And only then too can we really scale up and tackle the difficult bits that David Powell talks about. In addition, we can also start to get away from a debate on policies on climate change which tend to be dominated by fiscal and taxation issues to showing how measures which reduce carbon and improve climate resilience can also make people's lives happier, healthier and more financially secure.

“The current fuel protests in France are an echo of those in the UK in 2000”



Rotterdam's transformed Central Station was part-funded by building a huge water tank above the underground station car park in order to hold excess rainfall

5 Some cities are pursuing these connections in a more comprehensive way than others. In Shenzhen, China, all 16,000 buses are now electric and all taxis will follow by 2020. It is also seeking to become more of a 'sponge city' through greening its urban landscape so that it absorbs heavy rainfall like nature does rather than the hard concrete surfaces of a conventional city which channel water into drains that fail to cope.

With hundreds of years of water management behind them, it's no surprise that cities in the Netherlands are also taking a comprehensive approach. In Rotterdam any new development has to leave water management better than it found it. So, for example, a significant proportion of the costs of Rotterdam's transformed Central Station were paid for through building a huge water tank above the underground station car park in order to hold excess rainfall and then release it when the drains can cope. In Berlin, there are multiple initiatives to make the connections between renewable power generation, smart electricity grids and smart electric vehicles. Smart grids have the potential to work with smart vehicles and smart buildings to move electricity around so it can be stored within

the system - reducing overall energy use. There are 'sponge city' schemes there too.

And closer to home there is Nottingham, which has its own power station, electricity grid, electricity retailing arm, bus company, fleet of electric buses, the most extensive programme of greening council housing stock in the country, its own regeneration company, a major university green housing research centre and an extensive ultra low emission vehicle initiative. There is enormous potential here for the kind of synergies on carbon that can be harder to achieve in other UK cities where the levers are held by privatised water, energy and public transport utilities, with short term agendas, enmeshed within impenetrably complex nationally organised regulatory frameworks overseen by absentee civil service landlords.

6 Connections also need to be made at the national level. For example, Daniel Button in his NEF blog on climate change and health, points out that the healthcare system in the UK makes up 10% of our economy and around 10% of the workforce, and the sum total of activities of the NHS, public health and social sector is

the largest public sector carbon generator in Europe! But given all this, what is the NHS doing to join the dots on transport and carbon? Most of the debate around transport and the NHS is concerned with fundraising for helicopters and eliminating parking costs, yet some estimates are that 5% of traffic on the roads is related to the health sector. There is much more that could be done around location of healthcare facilities, on inefficiencies with non-emergency patient transport and with the promotion of active travel as a way to tackle diseases associated with inactivity.

7 One of the areas I'm exploring during my visiting senior fellowship at LSE Cities is how we can raise awareness in UK city regions around what world leading cities are doing in an integrated way on making the connections on carbon and climate change. On top of that how can we provide better guidance on how carbon reduction and climate resilience can be factored into the day-to-day decisions they make on operations and infrastructure. These are things that they were going to do anyway but there may be choices and add-ons (some of which may be cost-neutral) which could contribute to this much bigger goal.

8 As the grid decarbonises, a big dimension to transport's role in cutting carbon is always going to be about how rapidly we can ensure more of the domestic journeys that are made are powered by that decarbonising grid. But that shouldn't be the only game in town - especially with aviation being allowed to let rip and current transport policies making carbon emissions worse from the sector.

It's time to make as many connections as we can - and make city regions healthier, happier and more prosperous places by doing so. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.