

**UK Net Zero does little to curb Climate Threat – speech to the
House of Lords 16.09.21
Lord Howell of Guildford
(Con)**

‘My Lords, I warmly congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Blackstone, on the extreme timeliness of her Motion, amid the final preparations of the build-up to COP 26 in November. I declare my related interests in energy issues, as set out in the register.

Currently, I see two major public behavioural barriers to addressing successfully the dangers of climate change and extremism. One—noble Lords can read about it in this morning’s papers—is exemplified by Extinction Rebellion and its associates. Frankly, they have done untold damage to the climate cause here, hurting a lot of people quite unnecessarily along the way.

The second, more serious, barrier, or problem, is the ocean of wishful thinking that still surrounds the preparations for COP 26 and the UK’s own net-zero goal, as well as the priorities being urged by the Climate Change Committee. Our net-zero goal, if it can be achieved, will of course have no direct impact on rising world emissions; we are brave but too small for that. That is just a statistical fact. Furthermore, the “zero” applies only to the production of carbon and not to the swathes of carbon embedded in the CO₂ we import and consume instead of generating it here, as authorities such as the excellent Professor Dieter Helm constantly remind us.

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The theory, I know, is that, by going all out for UK net zero, which might be attainable in the UK at considerable cost and hardship, we will set an example, offer a model for others and gain moral standing. The fact is rather different. The fact is that global emissions are all set to resume a rapid rise anyway after the year’s pause of the pandemic because, for most of the major emitting nations and regions, while they may note—even admire—our efforts, development and the escape for millions from poverty are the absolute priorities. For China, India, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Brazil, to name but a few, these are goals from which they deviate at their peril. Of course, that is why we can see that some of these countries have rejected the COP 26 wording for an end to coal generation.

As a consequence—this must be faced as a reality—world demand for oil, gas and coal will inevitably continue to grow in the years ahead, thanks mainly to the Asian and African utilities. For the advanced economies, the best path to curbing soaring emissions of carbon and of methane, which is

an even worse greenhouse gas, lies in a different direction to the one we are currently being enjoined to pursue in this country.

The Climate Change Committee asserts that, for us, net zero is compatible with our climate interests and targets. That is definitely not so under present policies. As the emissions figures clock up—as they will—going flatly in the opposite direction of the Paris goals, which require not just levelling but falling numbers, there will be considerable frustration and anger. Talk of betrayal will come not only from the likes of Greta Thunberg.

Legally binding reduction targets, extracted with huge effort by COP 26, will be washed aside by reality, simply because Governments in the big emitting countries, although they may have serious carbon-reduction targets, have no choice but to press ahead with power supply expansion by the quickest and, in many areas, the cheapest available means, including by using the sunk capital in their present energy systems. If we can offer a useful model to assist them in escaping this trap and decarbonising their entire energy grids, it must be built around a massive technology input, showing how all the smoking chimneys of Asian and African electric power, and all the coal stations, current or planned, could be retrofitted or capped with carbon capture swiftly and affordably, allowing an expanding flow of plentiful cheap energy to continue. This is the essential ingredient of sustainable growth.

I note, finally, that many of our own green voices are actively against carbon capture from burning oil, coal and gas, just as they are actively against the search for cheaper nuclear power. That eliminates two of the main means of checking global emissions growth. This is not progress; it is going backwards towards certain failure. Demand for fossil fuels worldwide will grow further before it falls.

If we are truly serious about averting climate catastrophe, we should be looking in other directions. Time does not allow me to expand on those: they are available, possible and should be tackled honestly. The COP 26 planners should be looking at these areas, instead of trying to pull together the shaky bandwagon of net-zero commitments, which will not—indeed cannot—materialise without fundamental changes in

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our policy direction and in the whole of Asia. Nothing short of that will do. Perhaps it is time to be honest, change direction and thereby remove a big barrier of misunderstanding and misdirection for genuinely lasting success for the forthcoming COP 26 conference in Glasgow and our national contribution to the climate struggle ahead.'
