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# The answer to an anti-green backlash is to be redder

The transition beyond carbon is a class struggle. That, paradoxically, is the lesson of Uxbridge — and the sooner Labour learns it, the better

By dawn on Friday July 21st, Britain's ruling Conservative Party had been routed in parliamentary by-elections in two of its rural English strongholds. In Somerton and Frome in the south-west, where a military-helicopter base sits alongside picturesque villages, the Liberal Democrats overturned a 19,000 majority. In Selby and Ainsty, which covers farmland between Leeds and York in the north, Labour destroyed a 20,000 majority, establishing a 4,000-vote advantage of its own.

On any other night this would have registered as a political earthquake. But the headlines were set by a third by-election, in the London suburb of Uxbridge — former seat of the disgraced prime minister Boris Johnson. Here, against the odds, the Tories narrowly won.

Uxbridge stayed Tory because its voters turned out to protest against a London-wide clean-air scheme, the Ultra-Low Emission Zone (ULEZ), imposed by the city's Labour (and first Muslim) mayor, Sadiq Khan. ULEZ requires cars to comply with strict rules on emissions of nitrous oxide, which causes 4,000 premature deaths a year in the city, according to research. Cars that breach the criteria have to pay a punitive £12.50 per day to enter the zone.

## Getting rid of 'the green crap'

ULEZ is already in force in central London, where pollution levels are the equivalent of each adult involuntarily smoking 150 cigarettes a year. But Khan plans to extended the scheme to outer London, whose suburban populations are heavily reliant on car transport and whose workforce includes many embodiments of 'white van man' — skilled manual workers and delivery drivers whose jobs depend on their ability to drive.
Despite only 10 per cent of cars needing to be scrapped under the

scheme, according to the mayor, the Tories succeeded in making ULEZ a *cause célèbre*. They pitted the gritty suburbs against the high-rise city-centre dwellers, Tory local councils against the overweening London state, 'ordinary Joes' against the 'woke' eco-warriors. Removing their party logo from posters, the Tories turned the by-election into a single-issue referendum on ULEZ — and narrowly won.

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Though ULEZ is not, technically, a climate-related measure, the lessons were immediately generalised, and indeed catastrophised, on both sides of politics. Suddenly, if only it could get rid of all the 'green crap' — as the last Conservative prime minister but three, David Cameron, once determined — the flailing government of Rishi Sunak could see a route away from general-election disaster next year. Lord Frost, architect of Johnson's 'hard Brexit' strategy, urged Sunak to abandon the commitment to phasing out petrol and diesel cars by 2030. Most Brits, he argued, would benefit from climate change, as cold killed more people than extreme heat.

Labour, meanwhile, entered self-flagellation mode. Its entire electoral focus — in the context of the United Kingdom's unreformed, first-past-the-post system, centring on outcomes in a few marginal constituencies — has been on winning in conservative, small-town or suburban working-class communities such as Uxbridge. It allowed its local candidate to oppose the ULEZ extension, while the party leader, Sir Keir Starmer, adopted a neutral position. In the aftermath of defeat, numerous voices — from the energy unions to the former Labour prime minister Tony Blair — suggested the party should avoid asking voters to shoulder the 'huge burden' of climate-mitigation measures.

For climate campaigners, the fear is that — as with the proverbial butterfly in chaos theory — the votes of 490 people in Uxbridge could tip Britain's two main parties into practical abandonment of the UK's legally-binding 2050 net-zero target. Labour has committed to achieving a carbon-free electricity supply by 2030 and to spending £28 bn a year on decarbonising the economy. But it has already pared back that sum on grounds of fiscal risks and, if Sunak makes a bonfire of green commitments, will be under pressure to do likewise.

## Truth colliding with delusion

The paradox is UK voters are extremely committed to green-transition measures. Research for the *Financial Times* shows that — from the 2030 ban on petrol cars, to a tax on frequent flyers, to tripling public investment in renewable energy — the British electorate is way more positive than its American, German and French counterparts. Just as important, the spread between Conservative and Labour voters is much smaller than, for example, between Republicans and Democrats in the United States.

Radical action on climate change is as close to an issue of political consensus as Britain gets in these days of 'culture wars'. But politicians are right to be nervous: beneath that consensus lies a profound lack of realism about the fiscal and social costs of the transition. Because the UK was the first country in the G7 to legislate quasi-irrevocable decarbonisation targets (which can only be changed if the science changes), it has enjoyed the illusion that these accrue cross-party support.

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In reality, the Conservative government is way off complying with the Climate Change Act. Responding to an action by environmental nongovernmental organisations, the High Court in London ruled in July 2022 that it must provide more detailed reporting. The Climate Change Committee, the government-appointed watchdog, warned in June that the prospects for meeting emissions targets for 2030 and 2035 had 'worsened due to delays in action leading to increased delivery risk'.

Meanwhile, the planet is burning. People in Arizona are dying from third-degree burns sustained by contact with pavements. Forest fires have consumed woodland, from Tunisia to Sicily to Rhodes. Excruciatingly high temperatures in India and record ice melts in the Antarctic complete the picture of a complex ecosystem becoming qualitatively destabilised.

What we are seeing, through such events as the Uxbridge by-election, is truth colliding with delusion. The transition beyond carbon was always going to be a distributional challenge: the technology is substantially there but the radical changes in lifestyle, urban planning, transport modes, energy and food consumption were always going to have winners and losers.

## Who pays?

The more the state could prime the investment, the better the outcomes were going to be. But in the post-2008 world, states are carrying massive debts. Even if, as is morally right, we decide that the taxpayers of the future should shoulder the costs, through increased borrowing now, there are constraints and downsides to doing so, given the low savings rates in developed western economies.

The question 'who pays?' can only partially be shifted into the future. The £110 million scrappage scheme Khan attached to ULEZ expansion — targeted at small businesses and low-income households — was neither enough nor, more importantly, persuasive.

Hard-pressed working people and small-business owners understood they would be forced to scrap their vans and cars. They became receptive to the message that this was being done for the benefit of others, not themselves — specifically, the (highly ethnically diverse) population of inner London, where housing density is high and car use low.

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In fact, a report prepared for Khan's City Hall, but released only after the by-election, revealed that the ethnic inequalities in air toxicity in London, while major, did not fall out in this way. Not only do 'the areas in London with the lowest air pollution concentrations have a disproportionately white population', according to the researchers, but the inequalities are greatest in the outer-London suburbs, where leafy white professional enclaves sit alongside poor areas deprived of public transport, with concentrations of minority ethnicity.

The Tories' genius consisted of grasping the fears and enmities around these issues. They then exploited them implicitly while saying precisely nothing — and nothing precise — publicly.

If the Uxbridge result does one thing for Labour it should be to focus its mind on climate justice. A better scrappage scheme, phased introduction and better messaging could have softened the blow of ULEZ extension. But easing the impact of major reductions in dairy farming and meat consumption, major changes in housing regulations or enforced transition from gas-fired central heating is going to take billions, not millions.

The Conservatives have a clear position on who pays: intergenerational justice, says Sunak, mandates that all climate-mitigation spending should be financed out of taxation of the current workforce. The left needs to have a persuasive alternative: protect the poorest, tax the rich, borrow from the future, have the state lead the private sector where it can and, where it cannot, supplant the latter.

The transition beyond carbon is, in the last analysis, a class struggle. That, paradoxically, is the lesson of Uxbridge — and the sooner Labour learns it, the better.

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