

Grow back green

The main governments and political parties of the world only want to talk about one thing, the planned great green transition to net zero. They of course have to talk as well about getting on top of the virus and restoring economic life damaged by the anti pandemic policies they have all adopted. They usually link the two, by assuring us that they plan to grow back greener. They expect vaccines to take care of the virus problem.

This is a huge essay in world government. They do all grasp that there is no point in a few countries doing this whilst others take advantage of cheaper fossil fuel energy and expand on the back of it. Last year the USA, the world's largest economy, did not buy into the project. China the world's largest industrial economy, claimed to support, but carried on expanding her coal and other fossil fuel based output, promising reductions later this decade from a higher level. With the world's two largest economies not contributing to the cause it was more difficult for other countries to sell the idea to their public, as they could always ask what was the point if the world's two biggest carbon emitters were not trying to change tack. This year China is talking of bringing forward her conversion to starting to lower carbon dioxide, though that will need pinning down with more precise targets and promises. The USA has converted to being a leading advocate of rapid transition to an electrified renewable world.

There will be no shortage of conferences to push countries to make more specific and expensive commitments. This month brings a US led summit on the topic. The G20 in July will have another. The UN's big global conference is in November in Glasgow. Countries will doubtless advance the dates by which they will achieve substantial cuts in carbon dioxide output. This in turn will spawn multiple targets to increase wind and solar power, to close coal power stations, to end new diesel and petrol cars, to promote battery vehicles, to change people over from gas central heating and to find solutions to power planes and ships in new ways. It will be a world of expanding battery production, hydrogen development and the electrification of home heating.

When asked how there will be growth as we come out of lockdown they all tell us the same thing. The new jobs will come in renewable energy, battery cars and the rest. They do not go on to say that there will also be big job losses in fossil fuels, traditional transport systems and home heating. A lot of the greening will be an expensive switch, retraining the gas fitter to be an electrician and moving a coal miner to be a wind farm maintenance person. As it seems likely governments will prove better at stopping people buying the outgoing technology than they will be at getting enough people to buy the replacements, there could be a painful transition.

The priority must be to generate a full and strong recovery from the pandemic measures. I am all in favour of investment in cleaner air and water, in energy conservation and fuel efficiency. The green revolution still needs to find the iconic products which people want to buy willingly to speed its

pace. In default of those there is a danger governments will slow recovery by their success in putting people off traditional products in a range of sectors targeted by the green plans. Net zero will not restore our economies. There needs to be a wide range of policies to promote enterprise and jobs and these need to encompass recovery in a wide range of traditional activities as well as producing new battery cars and windfarms. .