



# Two countries, one planet

Not long ago Germany's green energy transition led the world. So how did Britain come to leave Europe's other old coal power lagging behind?

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**I**n the UK there is now considerable euphoria around decarbonisation. This is, to say the least, a surprise. In the 19th century Britain led the world into the era of fossil fuels, and as recently as 10 years ago it lagged far behind in the energy transition compared to other large European countries. Way back in the 1970s, France had gone the whole hog for nuclear. Under Gerhard Schröder's Red-Green government in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Germany had pioneered solar and wind and ambitious energy efficiency standards for housing. As the 21st century began, Britain was still an island of coal surrounded by seas of oil and gas.

Yet today, the UK's per capita CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are almost 40 per cent lower than Germany's, the country that "progressive" Britons almost reflexively assume does everything "better than us." The UK is a world leader in offshore wind power, one of the most promising sources of renewable energy. The UK parliament was one of the first to commit to net zero

carbon emissions by 2050. The Labour Party went into the December election espousing a Green New Deal more radical than anything envisioned by the German Greens. And though the Labour conference resolution of zero emissions by 2030 may be unrealistic, the end of coal-fired power generation in the UK is in sight—years ahead of Germany.

Energy experts boast about the clear-headed design of Britain's 2013 electricity market reform, which established a price floor for carbon and efficient auctions for renewable capacity. This contrasts with the chronic muddle in German energy policy. But such technocratic self-congratulation is at risk of underplaying accidents of geology and geography, the same ones that made the UK into a fossil fuel giant in the first place. They also underestimate the legacy of history—specifically, Britain's painful economic and social restructuring in the 1980s and 90s. This weakened the established national interests that defended coal, and created an energy sector dominated by transnational corporations highly responsive to policy incentives and market signals. This has enabled some quick wins, even if its ability to facilitate the deep decarbonisation required ahead remains to be seen.

## Old kings' coal

**I**n the last century Britain and Germany were the pre-eminent coal powers of Europe. Coal, the most poisonous of fuels for the climate, was the foundation of their national economies and their international power. It was not by accident that the coal industry was nationalised by the 1945 Labour government, or that France's effort to corral Germany's power began with the European Coal and Steel Community. Mineworkers were a power in the land. In Germany they led the demand for workers on boards. In 1974 when Ted Heath asked the electorate whether it was Downing Street or the miners who ruled Britain, the voters showed him the door.

But when the Tories returned to power in 1979, breaking the nexus between energy and labour was a priority for the right. The path to privatisation and liberalisation, which soon became the norm in Europe, was first bulldozed in Britain through the defeat of the mighty National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). By September 2019, as a left-wing Labour Party conference adopted the Green New Deal and cheered the end of coal-fired power generation, the epic strike of 1984-5 had been consigned to another age. Nowhere else in Europe was the rollback of industrial labour more dramatic.

The contrast with Germany is stark. Within the last year, Chancellor Angela Merkel has been personally involved in month-long negotiations over the final phasing out of coal, talks that involved not only the electricity utilities but also mining unions and coal communities. The shareholders in the lignite burning power stations of western Germany—some of the most polluting in Europe—include local government. In the eastern coalfields the mainstream parties of Germany

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