


Cut out: Brexit would put the EU's efforts to reduce carbon emissions at risk

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*Too little attention has been paid to the EU's contribution to tackling climate change by referendum campaigners, says **Tim Rayner**. The UK has played a major part in shaping carbon reduction policies and has pushed for higher targets in the face of opposition from other member states. If we left the EU, we would no longer have a say in the emissions trading scheme and the progress made across Europe might well falter.*



In the relatively narrow range of issues featuring so far in the EU referendum debate, the environment has been fighting to gain much of a hearing. And within that, spurred by the efforts of groups such as [Environmentalists for Europe](#), debate has centred on possible implications for British wildlife, habitats, and water quality. With some [recent exceptions](#) (including a solitary sentence in the [government's information leaflet](#), and [Jeremy Corbyn's](#) first speech of the campaign) there has been relatively little mention of climate change.

This is a pity, as climate protection (and the closely related energy policy field) is an area where the electorate could hear a rather positive story about the effect of the UK's membership of the EU. Moreover, in climate policy, the effect works both ways: it is not simply a story of 'what the EU has done for us', but of the broadly constructive influence that the UK has also had at the European level. It is also a story where the consequences of Brexit could be significant.



Gwynnt y Môr III, part of Wales' largest offshore wind farm. Photo: [p2-r2](#) via a [CC BY-NC 2.0 licence](#)

In a recently published, impartial academic [review](#) of the relationship between the UK and the EU and possible consequences of Brexit for environmental policy making and environmental quality, climate policy is one of a series of topics addressed. The review, conducted under the auspices of the [UK in a Changing Europe](#) initiative, highlights how UK and EU climate policies have [co-evolved and reinforced one another](#) in important respects, since the late 1990s.

The UK, the evidence suggests, has influenced EU policy in terms of its overall emission reduction ambition, the

specific instruments it deploys, and the way it seeks to convince partners globally to adopt similarly ambitious targets. The UK has [repeatedly advocated higher carbon emission reduction targets](#) than most other Member States, most recently siding with the likes of [Germany and France against laggards such as Poland](#) to secure a commitment to reduce greenhouse gases from the EU by at least [40% from 1990 levels, by 2030](#). It was also instrumental in the adoption of the EU's system of emissions trading, and in [subsequent reforms](#) that have underpinned that scheme's effectiveness. As [evidence to the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee](#) recently highlighted, it has also deployed its sizeable diplomatic resources to great effect as part of the EU's efforts to secure agreements at the global level.

Of course, the UK's own climate and energy policies have in turn been [significantly shaped by EU membership](#). Most significantly, the EU's targets for renewable energy (requiring the UK to achieve a 15 percent share by 2020) have led governments to adopt a much [more interventionist energy policy](#), including new financial support mechanisms. These targets have provided an all-important degree of [certainty for investors in the low-carbon economy](#), in an area otherwise prone to short-term policy change. Most stakeholders submitting evidence to the government's own [review of the 'balance of competences'](#) between the UK and the EU expressed broad satisfaction with how responsibility for developing policy in this area is currently shared, whilst criticising areas – like the use of imported [biomass to meet renewable energy targets](#) – where the substance of policy could be improved.

Emissions trading: the UK sidelined

In the event of Brexit, the benefits – for the UK, the wider EU and indeed the world as a whole – from this generally constructive two-way relationship would be lost, or at the very least jeopardised. Exactly how far they would be lost would depend on the type of new relationship that would then be negotiated: one in which the UK remained within the European Economic Area (EEA), like [Norway \(which implements a great deal of EU legislation](#), including environmental, in return for access to the single market), or one where even that degree of involvement was rejected in favour of some kind of 'free-trade' option.

While an administration overseeing Brexit would likely want to continue trading carbon within the EU emissions trading scheme, to make emission reduction as cost-effective as possible, the UK would lose decision-making power in the design of this and other key policy instruments. Without the certainty and predictability of policy provided by EU membership, investors might cry off expensive low-carbon investment projects, putting both long-term decarbonisation targets and lucrative new economic opportunities out of reach. If the UK opted to dispense with EU climate and energy-related targets (rejecting what might be called the Norwegian option), [some suggest](#) that the UK's landmark 2008 [Climate Change Act](#) would [guarantee the continuation of ambitious decarbonisation](#) efforts. But arguably, without the reinforcing effect of EU targets, [critics of the Act could be emboldened](#) in their efforts to undermine the UK's own, world-leading system of carbon reduction target setting. Moreover, without the UK advocating high ambition from its place on the Council, EU targets would be less likely to keep pace with the UK's, and pressure to weaken the latter would only multiply.

Without the UK's positive influence in the EU's Council of Ministers, it is clear that [more ambitious climate action](#) would be easier for opponents to block, weakening EU policy. And without the UK's diplomatic weight, the EU's capacity to help [broker deals on the global stage](#), like last December's [Paris Agreement](#), would be diminished. In a world where the success of the Paris Agreement is said to depend on countries voluntarily ['ratcheting up' ambition in periodic review cycles](#), in the knowledge that others are doing likewise, foot-dragging on the part of both the UK and the EU would slow progress at precisely the time it is most needed.

Voters in June's referendum would do well to ask themselves how far they are prepared to put at risk the continuing (and growing) efforts to protect the global climate.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE.

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