A hard Act to follow? The evolution and performance of UK climate governance

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A hard Act to follow? The evolution and performance of UK climate governance

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an analysis of the origins and effects of UK climate governance. It is centrally concerned with the relationships between politics and climate institutions, both in how political conditions have shaped the emergence of climate governance, and in how the resulting institutions subsequently structure climate politics. The analysis brings out three key themes. First, a focus on the CCA can overlook the enduring importance of the parallel climate governance architecture provided by the European Union. Second, it is important to see UK climate governance within a wider political and institutional context, as these results of this context, especially tensions between ambition and instability, have influenced its evolution. Third, this design, and other aspects of the evolution of UK climate governance framework, have in turn had implications for the strengths and weaknesses of the framework and how it has met key governance challenges.

KEYWORDS UK; climate policy; governance; historical institutionalism

1. Introduction

The centrepiece of UK climate governance since 2008 has been the Climate Change Act (CCA). This economy-wide¹ legislative approach involving an independent advisory body, the Climate Change Committee (CCC), was highly innovative and has been celebrated and promoted as a model internationally (Fankhauser et al. 2018). On the face of it, the CCA framework has been remarkably successful. It has had a significant impact on climate policy debates amongst political parties, government, business and civil society (Averchenkova et al. 2020), and has proved relatively robust, despite episodes of challenge. Since the Act was passed the rate of decline in UK carbon emissions has accelerated, and so far the legislated carbon budgets have been comfortably met (Committee on Climate Change (CCC) 2019).

This article has a different purpose; it is centrally concerned with the relationships between politics and climate institutions, both in how political conditions have shaped the emergence of climate governance, and in the effects of the resulting institutions on climate politics. These questions remained relatively understudied, both in relation to the UK and more widely.

A key contribution of the article is to place the CCA in a wider context, in two senses. First, a focus on the CCA can overlook the fact that it was introduced into an existing institutional landscape, not all of which was displaced. The wider UK climate governance architecture involves a number of other elements, of which European Union governance has been particularly important. Second, it is argued here that it is important to see the UK’s climate governance within a wider political and institutional context, in order to be able to explain its evolution. This is particularly important for a fuller understanding of the CCA, because this context, especially tensions arising from sensitivity to policy costs, influenced the origin, design and effects of the Act.

The article examines the creation, operation and evolution of institutions over time. Historical institutionalism (HI) is adopted as a broad framework for the analysis, as it is centrally concerned with the way institutional processes unfold over time (Pierson, 2004), emphasising the importance of path dependence, policy feedback and the possibilities of unintended consequences of institutional design (Steinmo and Thelen 1992). However, HI has also been criticised for underplaying the essential role of ideas in the construction and maintenance of institutions over time (Schmidt 2008). It therefore needs to be augmented by an ideational or discursive institutionalism that takes ideas seriously.

I also argue here that, despite the increasing use of ‘climate crisis’ rhetoric, the long-term and diffuse nature of climate change (at least in the UK) means that in practice climate governance has not been simply transformed in clearly defined ‘critical junctures’. Instead it has evolved in a process of more incremental institutional change, involving a relatively high degree of path dependency (Mahoney and Thelen 2010).

The main contributions here are in synthesis and theoretical interpretation, rather than significant new empirical material. However, the analysis does draw on a small number of interviews carried out over the last 10 years with participants in and close observers of UK climate policy and governance.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a brief overview of the key elements of the UK climate governance architecture, along with targets and decarbonisation trends as context. Section 3 provides an account of the evolution of UK climate politics and governance in terms of the domestic political institutions, bureaucratic institutions and the role of ideas. Section 4 then gives an assessment of the model, especially strengths and weaknesses in meeting key governance challenges. Finally, Section 5 concludes.
2. Describing UK climate governance

Climate change first emerged as a significant issue on the British policy agenda with a speech by Margaret Thatcher in 1988. The first formal domestic climate governance instrument was the 1994 UK Programme on Climate Change. Following the coming to power of New Labour in 1997, a new Climate Change Programme (CCP) was adopted in 2000 and subsequently amended in 2006. The failure of the CCP to meet emissions reduction targets laid the ground for the adoption of the Climate Change Act in 2008.

The CCA has received much attention, but there are other elements within the UK’s climate governance architecture. The importance of the European Union in particular has grown over time. The UK participated in the Kyoto Protocol via the EU, and took on emissions reduction targets under two EU climate packages in 2009 and 2020 (Dupont 2015). Policies agreed at EU level included not only carbon pricing through the ETS but also a wide range of targets, policies and rules on energy industry structure, renewable energy, energy efficiency, vehicle emissions, energy labelling and product design, amongst many others (Schubert et al. 2016). Overall, the CCC estimates that policies agreed under EU governance frameworks have contributed around 40% of the reduction in UK emissions since 1990 (Committee on Climate Change (CCC) 2016, p. 8) and would have played an even greater role in required emissions reduction by 2030 had the UK stayed in the EU.

As a large and powerful Member State, the UK has been a policy maker as well as a policy taker (Solorio and Fairbrass 2017), and played an active role in building European ambition on climate change. However, it has also had to accept some policies that it would not otherwise have adopted. Probably the most important of these is renewable energy, where many in government were resistant to the 2020 target, and surprised when it was agreed (McGowan 2011).

The historical importance of the EU for Britain’s climate governance raises questions about Brexit. The UK will retain or replace most EU laws and regulations in areas such as energy and transport as it departs the bloc, but given the terms of the 2020 Trade and Cooperation Agreement it is far from clear that the UK will maintain future alignment. These developments could mean greater coherence of governance, but Brexit also gives rise to fears about the unravelling of climate consensus and an attack on climate policy and science from a resurgent nationalist populism (Farstad et al. 2018). However, it is argued here that this outcome is unlikely because of the underlying structural drivers of climate politics in the UK, discussed below. While these point to a degree of policy instability and caution on costs, they also imply continued ambition and partisan consensus.
In contrast to the significance of the EU as a supra-national institution in UK climate governance, there has been relatively little devolution downwards. Despite the constitutional reforms of the late 1990s the UK remains a heavily centralised state. Westminster-based national government has retained the key role in shaping climate action and in energy policy (Cowell et al. 2017). The partial exception is Scotland, which has adopted its own Climate Change Act, with greater ambition than at the UK-wide level, but even here most important policy making powers and resources remain at the centre. Arguably more important has been the delegation of regulation in the energy sector following privatisation in the late 1980s; since 2000 to an independent body (Ofgem), which also oversees the governance of detailed energy industry codes (Lockwood et al. 2017).

Thus while the passage of the CCA displaced some elements in the existing domestic climate governance architecture, it left a number of others in place. As suggested by Mahoney and Thelen (2010) theory of gradual institutional change, because these parts of the architecture retained veto powers, and with strong enforcement and little room for reinterpretation in areas such as EU Directives and regulations, the new CCA targets and arrangements were layered on top. The resulting picture is thus quite complex (Figure 1). Under this evolving climate governance architecture, the UK has adopted a series of targets for emissions reduction both unilaterally and within international frameworks since 1990 (Figure 2). UK greenhouse gas emissions measured on a production basis have fallen significantly, far more than the OECD average (Figure 3).

The first two carbon budgets under the CCA have been comfortably met (Committee on Climate Change (CCC) 2019). Most of the decarbonisation to date has been concentrated in two sectors: electricity generation and industry (Figure 4). In electricity, emissions reductions have come in two major waves

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**Figure 1.** Organisation of UK climate governance, 2019.
in the 1990s (Helm 2004) and the 2010s (Staffell 2017), both associated with declines in the use of coal. Some of the decline in industrial emissions has been due to restructuring and relocation to other countries, but the majority is due to improvements in energy efficiency (Hammond and Norman 2012).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>International</th>
<th>Unilateral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Target under the UNFCCC to return to 1990 emissions levels by 2000</td>
<td>Stabilise 2005 emissions at 1990 levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Target under the Kyoto Protocol and EU burden sharing of a 12.5% cut from 1990 levels by 2008-2012</td>
<td>20% cut by 2010 from 1990 levels, and 60% reduction by 2050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Target under the Kyoto Protocol and EU burden sharing of a 12.5% cut from 1990 levels by 2008-2012</td>
<td>Target under the Climate Change Act of an 80% cut from 1990 by 2050, with an implicit target in the third carbon budget of 34% by 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Target under the EU climate and energy package of a 20% reduction in 1990 emissions by 2020</td>
<td>Unilateral target of 100% (net) emissions reduction by 2050.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Target under the EU climate and energy package of a 20% reduction in 1990 emissions by 2020</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Target under the EU climate and energy package of a 20% reduction in 1990 emissions by 2020</td>
<td></td>
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Figure 2. UK emissions reductions targets.

3. Explaining UK climate governance

3.1 Drivers of climate policy ambition

In line with the literature on climate politics (e.g. Harrison and Sundstrom 2010), a number of factors would appear to favour a degree of climate ambition in the UK. While the salience of climate change is low in general (Crawley et al. 2020), there have been clear issue-attention cycles, in the mid-2000s (Lockwood 2013) and again from the late 2010s, that have opened windows for action.

The UK has a relatively strong pro-climate policy coalition that includes environmental NGOs and businesses. With a largely service-based economy, including interests affected directly by climate change such as insurance, the latter group is important and relatively well-organised in networks such as the Corporate Leaders Group on Climate Change and the Aldersgate Group. An opposing ‘brown’ coalition of high carbon interests does exist, but in terms of the most important group, i.e. high carbon industry (Harrison 2015), the UK is in a middling position within the OECD. Manufacturing energy intensity and carbon intensity of GDP are on a par with countries like Germany but far lower than those of other Anglophone countries (Mulder and De Groot 2011). Significantly, the UK lacks the combination of a large coal mining industry (following its destruction in the 1980s) combined with heavy use domestic of coal seen in countries such as Australia and the USA.

Successive UK governments have also been keen to be seen as international leaders on climate both in Europe and beyond. This in part driven by an interest in diverting attention from other aspects of the UK’s international...
reputation, for example, as a way of escaping Britain’s poor international image as the ‘dirty man’ of Europe in the late 1980s (Boehmer-Christiansen 1995) or the UK’s role in the Iraq war in the early 2000s. However, the effect has been to create a need to demonstrate action on emissions reduction at home for credibility.

The key insight of historical and ideational institutionalism is that how forces such as these actually shape climate politics will depend on the institutional and discursive context. Here we consider three factors: domestic political institutions; bureaucratic institutions, and the role of ideas.

### 3.2 Political institutions

Arguably the most important influences on UK climate politics arise from political institutions. There is a long history of analyses that link environmental policy making to electoral institutions (e.g. Fredriksson and Millimet 2004) and institutions of interest representation, i.e. corporatism vs pluralism (Scruggs 2001).

More recently, a set of new analyses bring these two together. Finnegan (2019) argues that in countries with corporatist institutions and proportional representation (PR) electoral systems, high-carbon business interests can avoid fiscal and regulatory costs, while low political competition and blame diffusion allows governments to impose heavy costs\(^{4}\) directly on households. By contrast, in countries with majoritarian and plurality electoral systems, high levels of electoral and political competition mean that politicians seek to place costs on business instead. These countries also tend to have pluralist institutions of interest representation, and without direct access to policy processes, high carbon businesses will attempt to lobby and mobilise public opinion against climate policies. Mildenberger (2020) makes similar arguments, noting that in pluralist systems climate advocates can also be shut out, so policy can be weak to begin with, or ambitious but also unstable.

A further institutional question is the degree to which power is concentrated (for example, in unitary states or majority party governments with few veto points) or dispersed (as in federal states or coalition governments with many veto points). Here the literature suggests that while federalism can encourage experiments, multiple veto points can also slow progress (Harrison and Sundstrom 2010), while conversely in cases with few veto points, we can expect more instability (Aklin and Urpelainen 2013).

The UK has a plurality electoral system (Lijphart 2012), two dominant political parties and high levels of political competitiveness (Kayser and Lindstädt 2015). The country is also often seen as having pluralist institutions of interest representation (e.g. Martin and Swank 2012), and in particular a low index of concertation, i.e. the degree to which business associations have privileged access to policy-making (Siaroff
We might therefore expect to see sensitivity to the costs of climate policy, an inability of business to shape climate policy, and attempts instead to lobby and mobilise opposition amongst the public, possibly leading to partisan polarisation. On the other hand, the UK’s ‘green’ coalition is relatively strong while its high-carbon interests are not as powerful as in some other countries, so we might also expect to see a degree of ambition. In addition, both polity and state are highly centralised in the UK, usually with no political veto points and few constitutional ones. We would therefore expect to see a high degree of instability in climate policy.

How far are these expectations borne out in the UK experience? First, there is plentiful evidence of political sensitivity to the costs of policy for consumers. This includes a resistance to increasing tax on household fuels and electricity by both Conservative and New Labour governments (Jordan et al. 2003, Mallaburn and Eyre 2014), and concerns about costs of policy, including the Non-Fossil Fuel Obligation in the 1990s and the Renewables Obligation in the 2000s, placed on electricity bills. Particularly sensitive have been taxes on transport fuels and other car-related costs, as seen in the abandonment of the fuel price escalator in 1999, the freezing of fuel duty following protests by fuel tanker drivers in 2001 and the dropping of proposals for road pricing following public opposition in 2005 (Maclean 2012).

Attempts were made by both Conservative and Labour governments to place costs on business instead. The most important of these have been the Climate Change Levy (CCL) (from 2001) and the Carbon Price Floor (from 2013). However, against the expectations of theory, high-carbon businesses via trade associations were able to shape some of the policies; for example, exerting ‘considerable influence’ on the design and implementation of the CCL (Bailey and Rupp 2006, p. 47) and negotiating a set of voluntary Climate Change Agreements that exempted companies from the CCL in return for energy saving actions which have been less costly (Martin et al. 2014). In addition, energy-intensive industries managed to win compensation for EU ETS and Carbon Price Floor costs from 2013, and compensation for and then exemption from support costs of renewable policies on electricity bills from 2015.

Interest representation in UK climate policy is therefore more nuanced than the comparative theory outlined above sometimes suggests. The implications of climate policy for competitiveness have in fact been an enduring concern for governments since the 1990s (e.g. Kearns 1991, Oshitani 2013). Overall, the UK has actually placed more costs on consumers than on producers, albeit not to the same extent as countries such as Denmark (Finnegan 2019, p. 17).
One reason for this is that political competition in the UK has been relatively muted by the absence of the strong partisan polarisation on climate change seen elsewhere in other Anglophone countries such as Australia, the US and Canada. The analysis of Farstad (2016) suggests that this is due to relatively weak high carbon interests and few veto points facing party and government leaders. For example, the Conservative leader David Cameron embraced the issue of climate change to ‘detoxify’ the Conservative Party’s public image in the mid-2000s, and enjoyed sufficient concentrated power to impose this strategy at first within the Party, despite some unhappiness amongst his MPs (Carter 2008), and then later in government.

Beyond individual policies, the nature of UK climate politics has had important consequences for climate governance. While policy covered by EU governance such as the Renewables Directives exposed governments to some cost risk, the bottom-up climate change programmes of the 1990s and 2000s were relatively easy to reshape if costs became politically risky. In this sense, as a stable, long-term framework the CCA can be seen as a response to the instability of UK climate politics. However, political sensitivity to costs was still evident in its design. As discussed below, delegating decision making to an independent technocratic body was in line with the dominant policy paradigm, political logic and wider governance practice, but it ran up against a deep-seated nervousness about giving up control over costs. The Treasury in particular wanted to retain a veto over the pace and extent of policy, in part because it had been ‘deeply scarred’ by the fuel duty protests of 2000 (Carter and Ockwell 2007, p. 156). The idea that an independent climate body should set policy was never on the agenda. There was some discussion about whether such a body should have powers to set targets rather than just recommending them, but even this was seen as a step too far. As a result, the CCA ended up creating what McGregor et al. (2012, p. 471) call a ‘strange’ form of delegation, a compromise where the independent body (i.e. the CCC) would focus on targets rather than policy instruments, inverting the roles usually prescribed for delegation. Moreover, the Treasury demanded that the delegated body would be required to take into consideration a long list of issues, including competitiveness and fuel poverty. The CCC has been careful to comply, producing four assessments of the impact of the carbon budgets on energy bills between 2008 and 2017.

Because carbon budgets are linked only loosely to a basket of policies in government plans (see below), the flexibility to amend or even reverse particular policies in response to cost concerns did not end with the CCA. For example, such concerns led to the adoption of an explicit mechanism to limit electricity decarbonisation policy costs, which triggered cuts to solar PV and other renewables support in 2015, and very nearly ended the expansion of offshore wind. Conflict over the setting of the fourth budget in 2011
was driven by concerns about competitiveness (Lockwood 2013). A surge in underlying energy prices in 2013 led to Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron famously demanding to ‘get rid of the green crap’ (Carter and Clements 2015), and the moving of energy efficiency programme costs off bills and onto general taxation.

3.3 Bureaucratic institutions

Given the constitutional centralism of the UK noted above, the institutions and politics of central government bureaucracy are particularly important for understanding the climate governance context. The literature on Britain’s civil service points to a number of perennial issues. One is unevenness in the ability to set effective strategy (Pemberton 2018), not helped by high levels of ministerial turnover (Sasse et al. 2020). A second is poor coordination across departments, which has its roots in Cabinet government, whereby ministers act quasi-independently (Foster 2005).

Both of these were evident in climate policy. There were attempts at providing coordination in the 1990s via a cabinet committee and departmental environmental reporting (Oshitani 2013, p. 180), but without much effect (Boehmer-Christiansen 1995). Despite increased ambition under New Labour from 1997, the dispersed departmental approach remained in place. The 2000 CCP was housed in a newly formed department that bracketed the environment with food and rural affairs with little purchase over energy and transport. Strategy setting was also weak. While emissions reduction targets notionally provided strategic direction, both the 2000 CCP and a 2006 successor provided what Carter and Jacobs (2014, p. 125) call a ‘model of incrementalism’. This kind of approach allowed governments the flexibility they wanted to be able to manage costs, but it was recognised that it lacked long-term credibility and certainty.12

The CCA, with an economy-wide, top-down governance framework involving an independent advisory body, can be seen as a response. At first glance, the CCA appears to propose a solution that works through the delegation of decision-making to ‘non-majoritarian’ institutions, (i.e. technocratic bodies outside of the democratic political sphere – Thatcher and Stone Sweet 2002). This was an increasingly common approach in post-1980s UK governance (Flinders 2008); for example within days of coming to power in 1997, New Labour created the independent Monetary Policy Committee (MPC). This model was influential in energy and climate debates on what was to become the CCC (Helm et al. 2003, Clayton et al. 2006, Cameron 2007). It is also a model that fits the political logic, since alternative mechanisms for credible commitment such the agreements between political parties seen in Denmark were not an option in the UK (Lockwood 2021). However, as discussed above, because of the political risks of strong
delegation of climate policy making powers, in the end the role of the CCC was restricted to advising on targets.

Thus while the Act was intended to provide both strategic direction and departmental coordination, the roles of government departments in making and implementing climate policy were not displaced. Poor coordination has persisted; for example the focus in the decade following the passage of the CCA has in practice remained mainly on electricity generation at the neglect of transport and other areas (see below). The bringing together of the energy and climate change briefs together in a new Department (DECC) (later BEIS) at the time of the CCA, explicitly seen as necessary for the delivery of the carbon budgets (Lockwood 2013), may have exacerbated this problem, since the CCC has focused much of its relationship with government on DECC.13

A final theme in bureaucratic politics is the dominance of the Treasury, which since the 1990s has used its control of and veto over spending to shape departmental agendas more proactively (Pemberton 2018). Treasury influence can be seen in the instigation of specific climate and energy policies, such as major reform of support for low carbon electricity generation and the introduction of the Carbon Floor Price. It was also evident in the development of the CCA as a new climate governance framework, as discussed above, and in the post-CCA period (Sasse et al. 2020). The Chancellor was also a key figure in conflicts over the fourth carbon budget (Lockwood 2013).14 All of this has not taken a formal shape within the Act, but rather has worked informally within the normal arrangements of cabinet government.

3.4 The role of ideas

Insofar as the climate problem has not been viewed in practice by policy makers as a major crisis, ideas for climate policy and governance have had to work within the dominant paradigm, and be framed in ways that allow decision makers to legitimise them with constituents (Schmidt 2008). There is a large literature, going back to Hall (1993), that emphasises the establishment of a dominant economic policy paradigm in the UK described variously as ‘neo-liberal’, ‘free market’ ‘market fundamentalist’ or ‘market-led’ since the 1980s (Hay 2001, Schmidt 2002). There is substantial evidence that this paradigm did dominate energy policy from the late 1980s (Helm 2004). But it is also clear that the nature of the climate change problem, framed a serious market failure, presented a challenge to the paradigm in its purest form since it called unambiguously for government intervention, including carbon pricing (Helm 2005, Rutledge 2010). We can therefore see the influence of the paradigm more clearly as working through a strong preference for interventions that mimicked markets. This was the case, for example, with the UK’s approach to the NFFO and the Renewables
Obligation, where a tradeable certificate approach was taken to avoid ‘pick-
ing winners’ through administratively set feed-in tariffs (Woodman and
Mitchell 2011, Toke 2002). Oshitani (2013) also argues that this was the
case for UK climate policy more broadly.

This way of thinking also encompassed a resistance to the idea of using
climate policy instruments to meet other goals, for example as industrial
policy. Arguments for climate policy, such as the promotion of renewables
and nuclear, on energy security, jobs and investment grounds have been made
at various points (e.g. Kuzemko 2014). However, evidence suggests such
framings do not necessarily increase public support (Lockwood 2011), and
a climate, or carbon-centric, framing has remained central to public debates.

These ideas played important roles in the evolution of climate governance.
Beyond renewables support, the dominant paradigm favoured market-
mimicking interventions running through the early climate frameworks.
The 1990 white paper which led to the 1994 Programme on Climate
Change was notable for a move away from the existing regulation-based
approach to environmental governance towards market-based instruments
(Kearns 1991). New Labour’s CCP accelerated this change (Jordan et al.
2003). The design of the CCA also fitted well within the dominant policy
paradigm, in two ways. First, the approach of delegation to a technocratic
independent body in politically sensitive areas originated in a body of
economic thought influenced by public choice theory (Rogoff 1985).
Second, an approach based on setting high-level carbon budgets was very
much in line with the concept of technology-neutrality, which also fitted well
with the carbon-centric framing of the CCA.

4. Assessing UK climate governance

As discussed above, the evolution of UK climate governance has been shaped
by a number of factors, including the enduring relationship with the EU, the
nature of political and bureaucratic institutions, and the nature of the
dominant policy paradigm. The nature of the resulting climate governance
has consequences, some unintended, for how it has performed.

Climate governance needs to meet a number of challenges in order to be
effective (Dubash 2021). One of these is the ability to produce strategic
direction, including mechanisms for emissions reduction goal setting and
deliberation (e.g. Morseletto et al. 2017). The EU-related and CCA climate
governance elements have both provided medium- and long-term economy-
wide targets, while the CCA also includes a pathway set through carbon
budgets and a rolling programme of assessment and reporting against pro-
gress. Strategic direction is therefore one of the strengths of the UK framework.

However, because the CCA framework was informed by a policy para-
digm that valued maximum flexibility and a desire by government to
maintain control over policy costs, carbon budgets also allow the government considerable discretion in setting policy. As discussed, this tends to be structurally unstable, and in some respects incoherent (Gillard 2016). For example, sudden changes or reversals in carbon price floor and fuel duty policy, the framework for carbon capture and storage, support for onshore wind, low carbon housing policy and energy savings schemes have been seen at various points. It might be argued that as long as the budgets are met, with ‘guardrails’ such as Parliamentary accountability to avoid backsliding, this does not necessarily matter for strategic direction, but the resulting policy instability has sometimes impacted on investor confidence (Lockwood 2016).

A second challenge is coordination and integration, since climate change requires a response that cuts across and integrates policy domains (Candel and Biesbroek 2016). As spelled out above, this challenge is considerable in the UK context, where there has been considerable institutional path dependence. The CCC and DECC have done a good job of coordinating and integrating policy development across the CCA and the EU climate governance elements. However, coordination between policy and regulation in the energy sphere has continued to lag. For example, there is no explicit link between Ofgem’s primary duties and the net zero target adopted in 2019, producing a degree of regulatory inertia (e.g. Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) 2007). Equally, while aspects of the CCA framework offered the prospect of a new approach, poor coordination and unevenness across government departments has also continued to be an issue (Fankhauser et al. 2018). Ministerial turnover in departments relevant for climate policy has not declined since 2009 (Sasse et al. 2020). The creation of DECC brought together the climate agenda and energy policy, but also meant that delivery of what are supposed to be economy-wide carbon budgets are still seen as the responsibility primarily of a single department. A new commitment to greater departmental coordination appeared to be signalled with the creation of a Cabinet Committee on Climate Change in 2019, but it remains to be seen how effective this will be (Sasse et al. 2020).

The problem of unevenness can be seen, for example, in the contrast between electricity and surface transport policies, reflected in strikingly different emissions pathways. In the former case, the CCA and the 2009 EU renewable energy Directive were important drivers for a major set of policy changes introduced between 2010 and 2013, known as the Electricity Market Reform. While movements in fuel prices also played a role (Staffell 2017), these policy changes along with EU pollution control regulations played a major role in a consequent collapse in coal-fired power generation and a dramatic fall in emissions from the power sector. By contrast, there has been no major reform programme to reduce transport emissions. Two of the
more important policies, i.e. supporting bio-fuels and emissions targets for new vehicles, have been set at the EU level. The impact of the CCA has been minimal compared with electricity. This cannot be explained simply by a lack of opportunities for abatement at comparable marginal costs (e.g. Gross et al. 2009). There appears to be a number of reasons for this, including the greater momentum for decarbonisation in electricity policy that predated the CCA, and a lack of high level political engagement in the Department for Transport, especially after the 2010 election (Environmental Audit Committee (EAC) 2016). Also important was the particular political sensitivity of taxes in transport policy (see above).

A third challenge is the mediation of political conflicts arising from climate policy. Climate governance in the UK involves mechanisms for distincing decision-making from national level politics; to the arena of the EU, to an independent energy regulator, and to the Climate Change Committee. However, this does not mean that decisions cease to be politically controversial (Flinders 2008).

In the case of the CCC, while it has developed a strong reputation for authoritative, high-quality analysis (Averchenkova et al. 2020), its nature as a technocratic body means it has limited ability to engage in the political sphere. Ultimately it has to rely on a range of allies – environmentalist groups but also some politicians, officials, academics, journalists and supportive businesses – who also stand as a line of defence against the weakening of the CCA. The most serious challenge to the framework came in 2011 with conflict within government over the setting of the fourth carbon budget, in part driven by lobbying by energy intensive industries (Lockwood 2013). The CCC recommendations were eventually accepted, but only after counter-lobbying from environmental organisations and the opposition party. More recently, the framework has been tested by government foot-dragging on the policy plan for the setting of the fifth budget in July 2016, which did not appear for well over a year, and eventually did so only after sustained pressure from environmentalist groups, energy industry actors and the CCC itself.

Beyond specific battles against backsliding, there is also the question of how far the climate governance framework has more widely transformed the underlying politics of climate policy. The 2010s did see a drop off in the salience of climate change and the Conservatives banned new onshore wind farms in 2015 and attempted a shale gas boom (Gillard 2016). However, they did not abandon climate policy commitments. The leaders of the three largest political parties all signed up to a statement on climate actions at the 2015 election. There was no pivot to scepticism from the Conservatives, even in the face of competition on the right from the climate sceptic UKIP. The CCA is sometimes seen as underpinning this relative consensus (Fankhauser et al. 2018). However, this view risks overlooking the structural basis of consensus, as discussed above. Indeed, it is structural consensus that has meant that
challenges to the CCA and other parts of the climate governance framework have been relatively minor, partly explaining its robustness.

More important for mediation of conflict have been indirect positive feedback effects of climate policies driven by both the CCA and the EU frameworks, especially in the electricity sector. Support mechanisms have produced a huge expansion of renewable energy, especially as costs have declined both globally and within the UK, most recently for offshore wind (Staffell 2017). There were important negative feedback effects working through local opposition to onshore wind in areas with Conservative leaning publics and party members, leading to the ending of support policies in 2015. However, the design of support policies worked particularly well for large-scale corporate actors (Woodman and Mitchell 2011), especially the incumbent utilities. As a result their interests have been gradually reshaped away from high-carbon generation towards renewables, and they have now have become strong supporters of climate policy (Kattirtzi et al. 2020).

Unexpected success in areas such as offshore wind have also created a new enthusiasm for the idea of climate policy as a source of jobs and investment. When DECC was merged into a Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) in 2016, environmentalists initially feared a downgrading of climate priorities. But in practice a growing belief in the potential of low-carbon opportunities produced an industrial strategy that was framed in terms of low-carbon growth (H.M. Government (HMG) 2017). Equally important has been the rapid decline in coal-fired power generation, helping to build a view in the Conservative Party that meeting CCA carbon budgets and EU targets turned out to be far easier than feared. While these outcomes were far from inevitable,23 they have proved important in keeping the Conservative leadership engaged with the decarbonisation agenda, as evidenced most recently by the publication of a ‘10 point plan for a green industrial revolution’ by Prime Minister Boris Johnson in late 2020.24

5. Conclusion

Analysis of UK climate governance usually focuses on the 2008 Climate Change Act. However, because of the strength of institutional veto points at various levels, the CCA did not displace all of the pre-existing climate governance architecture. As a result, UK climate governance in fact has comprised a number of elements, including EU climate and energy frameworks, energy regulation falling under the aegis of the independent regulator, departmental policy making and, to a lesser extent, devolution to Scotland and other UK nations. While some of these elements are reasonably well integrated, others are not.

The evolution of this wider UK climate governance can be understood within an historical institutionalist framework as a process of gradual
institutional change heavily influenced by the UK’s political institutions, with a considerable degree of path dependence. These factors have produced a highly distinctive climate politics, characterised by a combination of relative partisan consensus, together with a sensitivity not only to policy costs for households but also for sections of industry. The result has been a relatively high level of ambition but also policy instability and unevenness, succinctly characterised by Lorenzoni et al. (2008) as ‘hot air and cold feet’. The nature of UK bureaucratic institutions has exacerbated these problems through weak coordination and integration of climate policy across government departments. Finally, while a carbon-centric framing for climate policies has worked reasonably well politically, these policies have also been heavily shaped by a dominant paradigm that drives a market-mimicking design for interventions. Early climate programmes were very much characterised by these qualities. The 2008 CCA can be seen as an attempt to respond to the problems of instability and weak coordination and strategic direction, but because its design was shaped by the same ideational and institutional context, it has only partially succeeded in doing so.

Nevertheless, in many ways the UK climate governance model has worked well, especially in comparative perspective. The CCA and EU elements have clear, if somewhat different routes of accountability and have proven robust. Strong capacity and astute leadership has allowed the CCC make the most of the reputational governance mechanisms available to it (Muinzer and Little 2020) and to radically improve the nature of debate on climate change and policy in the UK. The CCA in particular has meant that the key governance challenge of ensuring strategic direction has been met at a high level in the UK, even though policy instability, coordination and integration remain challenges. The evolving governance framework in itself has had only limited means of mediating political conflicts over climate policy which, while tempered by an absence of strong partisan polarisation, have been present throughout. Rather, political sustainability has been helped by policy feedback effects arising from specific policy elements, especially major changes in the interests of energy utilities and perception of the feasibility and costs of targets amongst parts of the Conservative Party.

Finally, while the relative success of UK climate governance has encouraged some to hold the CCA up as a model for other countries, the specific context and conditions under which UK climate governance has evolved suggest that there will be limits to how far this may work effectively. First, the CCA was born out of political competition for stronger action during the peak of a climate issue-attention cycle, whereas climate legislation has been adopted by followers largely in the 2010s, in the wake of the financial crisis and economic depression when the salience of climate change had collapsed. Second, strong high carbon lobbies, multiple veto points and partisan
polarisation all militate against the easy adoption of climate legislation in other Anglophone countries. Lastly, in many countries in continental Europe that have passed climate change acts, the approach of delegation through legislation was not a particularly good fit with political institutions created by PR electoral systems and corporatism (see Torney 2019 for Finland, Lockwood 2021 for Denmark). As a result, despite being consciously inspired by the UK’s CCA, these laws, while not being entirely symbolic gestures, have often lacked the carbon budgets and soft power arrangements for advisory bodies that characterise the CCA (Nash and Steurer 2019).

Notes

1. Except for international aviation and shipping
4. Including not only financial costs, but also psychological costs, e.g. perceived impacts of technologies on landscapes, and disruption resulting from measures required in homes, such as insulation or new heating technologies.
5. There have been episodes in which attempts at building more corporatist institutions in the UK have been made at economy wide level, for example in the 1930s and 1970s (Martin and Swank 2012).
6. This remains the case even with the relatively populist leader Boris Johnson – https://www.ft.com/content/24b55395-5e95-403f-9ef3-76b74f3e9960?utm_content=bufferc4dc8&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer
7. Interview with former Treasury special advisor, 23 November 2012
8. Interview with former DEFRA special advisor, 20 November 2019
9. Interview with former Treasury special advisor, 23 November 2012
10. The Levy Control Framework, later renamed the Control for Low Carbon Levies (Lockwood 2016)
11. Interview with former director of Green Alliance, 30 September 2020
12. Interview with former DEFRA special advisor, 20 November 2019
13. Interview with CCC secretariat member, 9 March 2020.
14. Interview with former director of Green Alliance, 30 September 2020
16. Uneven action is also facilitated by weak links between the setting of carbon budgets and official cost–benefit analysis of policy impacts, which is not based on the CCA or the carbon budgets.
17. As evidenced in the 2009 Low Carbon Transition Plan (H. M. Government (HMG) 2009) responding to the setting of the first two carbon budgets, references to the CCA in the EMR white paper, and ministerial speeches. E,

18. Interview with CCC secretariat member, 9 March 2020.
19. Interview with former DfT special advisor, 22 November 2019
20. See Posen (2010) for the example of monetary policy. In recent years the CCC has used its reputation as a basis for more proactive engagement with Parliament, business and civil society (Interview with David Joffe, CCC Secretariat, 25 April 2018)
23. https://www.green-alliance.org.uk/resources/Leaders_Joint_Climate_Change_Agreement.pdf
24. The decline in coal-fired power generation crucially depended on shifts in coal and gas prices (Staffell 2017) and the government came very close to cutting support for offshore wind in 2015 (Interview with former director of Green Alliance, 30 September 2020; Interview with former special adviser at DECC, 2 December 2020)

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