

The UK's Climate Change Act, once the envy of the world, faces a stress test

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The Scottish government's decision to row back on its 2030 climate pledge illustrates the crux of any target: it's easy to set one with a big

political flourish, but harder to follow through with a careful plan to achieve it.

Does that mean that targets for reducing the emissions of greenhouse gas driving climate change are worthless? Not necessarily. There are two types of climate target: the empty promise and the calculated ambition. Only one of these works.

Empty promises abound in [climate policy](#). Such targets deflect criticism—look, they say, we take [climate change](#) seriously, we have a strong target. But a closer look reveals, at best, loopholes and at worst, no plan at all.

For example, despite numerous oil and [gas companies](#) pledging to achieve net zero emissions by 2050, [an extensive analysis](#) revealed that emissions from the sector aren't falling and most companies with targets haven't clarified how they intend to meet them.

Targets like this conveniently allow companies to carry on with their core business while promising change. It's no different to lounging on a sofa eating chocolate, proclaiming that you'll join a gym in 2025.

The UK's Climate Change Act, a landmark piece of legislation first introduced in 2008, is the second type of climate target: the calculated ambition. It set a long-term target, amended in 2019 to the more ambitious goal of [net zero emissions](#) by 2050. Crucially, it also set a series of legally binding interim targets or "carbon budgets," overseen by a watchdog, the Climate Change Committee, which reports progress to parliament each year.

As Scotland's example shows, however, a rigorous plan still needs to be executed—and governments and firms underestimate just how far-reaching the necessary changes are.

The best laid schemes...

A target must be achievable as well as ambitious. Before the UK set its net zero target in 2019, it asked the Climate Change Committee whether it could be done—and went ahead reassured by the committee's careful analysis and conclusion that eliminating greenhouse gas emissions is both possible, and also [socially and economically beneficial](#). This is, perhaps, where Scotland went wrong: ignoring the Climate Change Committee's advice and setting a more stringent target without quite knowing how it would meet it.

The UK's carbon budgets may be legally binding, but this doesn't make them watertight. Governments won't sue themselves, so the system relies on others to hold them to account—which is exactly what happened in 2022, when three campaigning organizations took the government to court over its inadequate climate strategy, and won.

Although the Climate Change Act is much admired, it has significant weaknesses that are now difficult to ignore, as [my own analysis](#) has shown. Statutory targets are set at the national level only, and the contribution to be made by each sector of the economy, or by local areas, is not specified. Neither are there clear links to planning or industrial strategy, which is why proposals for coal mines or drilling for oil are being dragged through the courts. Without a step change in climate ambition, future governments are likely to face further legal challenges.

The last few years have seen councils in the UK rush to make ambitious targets in response to protests and campaigns. [A significant number](#) pledge to be net zero by 2030, less than six years from now.

These targets may well have been set in good faith, by politicians impatient for change. Yet there is no consistent methodology to measure

progress and [local authorities](#) have very limited control over policies that will be required to get to net zero, like tax changes to encourage zero-carbon technologies, or investment in transport infrastructure. Without some serious policy breakthroughs, we are likely to see more areas following Scotland's lead, and rowing back on their pledges.

Just because some targets are empty promises, it doesn't mean target-setting is a terrible idea. You may be sitting on that sofa right now, but you can set yourself a fitness plan that, with enough resolve and ambition, will have you running a marathon next year. Whether you're a person trying to get fit or a company reducing your [carbon footprint](#)—or a whole country for that matter—setting a target and working out the steps to get you there helps you achieve that goal.

With all this talk of effort and ambition, it's easy to forget the huge benefits that come with meeting climate targets—like lower dependence on oil and gas imports; warmer homes; more efficient transport systems; or healthier diets. Like getting up off that sofa, it's an effort, but it brings rewards.

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