



Waste2Tricity

CAN COVID-19 FORCE US TO REIMAGINE A GREENER WORLD?

By Tim Yeo, Chairman of Waste2Tricity and former Environment Minister

The immediate impact of Covid19 is being sharply felt across the world, highlighting the fragility of the world in which we live. And, as the world grapples with this impact there must be an eye on the horizon, looking beyond today and what life will look like After Covid (AC).

In terms of how society functions there must be an impact on travel. The world was made a lot smaller at the end of last century by low-cost air travel but there will inevitably be less long-haul travel.

Questions will surely be asked by Governments on migration and movement. Will we be free to travel across the globe without restrictions? The ease of travel has surely been a factor in how this pandemic was created.

My hope is that the experience of coming together successfully to tackle one threat to humanity may inspire us to focus more intensively on another equally perilous danger - climate change.

Climate change is an existential threat to the human species. Unless climate stability is restored immediately humans won't survive. To stabilise the climate action must now be taken on a scale never previously contemplated. The nature of this threat has been known for thirty years yet the world remains complacent. Even the language used is misleading. "Global warming" suggests pleasant Mediterranean weather in previously cold countries, not violent storms and floods, dangerously rising water levels forcing mass migration, unbearably hot summers and severe droughts killing millions of people.

Our science and climate models now show that 'business as usual' policies will make much of the world very uncomfortable for humans to live in by the end of this century.

Net zero must therefore be reached long before 2050 - probably not later than 2035.

The point at which climate change becomes irreversible is already perilously close. Tiny glimmers of hope have appeared recently. More people are aware of the threat. Concepts like flight shaming did not exist five years ago. Net zero targets weren't discussed at COP21 in Paris in 2015.

But no country which has set a net zero target yet has a credible plan for achieving it. But can COVID-19 make the world reimagine a life without fossil fuels?

In November COP26 was due to take place in Glasgow with Britain in the chair. This delay, which is understandable in the unique circumstances created by Covid-19, must be used to ensure that when it eventually takes place COP26 commits the world to the most far reaching programme of carbon reduction measures ever contemplated.

Britain, in its capacity as President of the meeting, should seize the opportunity caused by the postponement to demonstrate its diplomatic skills by brokering as much agreement in advance as possible. Maybe a virtual summit meeting of heads of government could take place in November at which the UK could set out its aspirations for what COP26 will achieve in the summer of 2021?

In one respect COVID-19 is creating an unexpectedly favourable backdrop. The economic slump it is causing will be the worst since the Industrial Revolution kicked off the huge unique economic expansion two centuries ago which has enriched billions of people. This slump will trigger the biggest year-on-year fall in carbon emissions of modern times.

In an AC world we will see millions of jobs lost and a sharp decline in GDP in almost every country. And so, nations will re-evaluate how we live as a society. This evaluation must surely factor in a way to live carbon-free. By embracing electricity and hydrogen we can make all surface transport zero carbon now. COVID-19 is making every person evaluate their own lives and indeed the force and power of nature. Surely if we will be changing our habits in an AC world, we can also kick our reliance on fossil fuels and plastics?

By reimagining a world post-AC, we can reduce the carbon intensity of the world economy - one silver lining to the COVID-19 storm that we are navigating. Indeed, the chaos from COVID-19 will be a walk in the park when compared to the chaos that climate change will bring.