

Au revoir Donald: is US withdrawal from Paris an opportunity for European climate leadership?

Blog post by Practice Lead Matthew Duhan, 2 June 2017

On Thursday, self-proclaimed deal maker Donald Trump turned ‘deal breaker’, as he announced his decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. The decision provoked condemnation from an extraordinary spectrum of political and business leaders, and the US now appears on course to leave at some point towards the end of 2020. Soon after the announcement, some European commentators made the counterintuitive case that the Trump decision may actually be an opportunity for European climate leadership. Do they have a point?

Certainly, at the political level, the response from Europe was immediate and unequivocal. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and European Commissioner Miguel Arias Cañete issued high profile condemnations. French President Emmanuel’s Macron’s rebuke, in hailing a global responsibility to “make our planet great again”, was a reminder of the days of George W Bush when baiting America was de rigueur for French politicians. More broadly, the response highlights that since the success of COP21 in Paris, the EU has rediscovered its mojo in perhaps the one area where it has ever felt comfortable providing global leadership.

Indeed, from an EU perspective, Trump’s timing could hardly have been better. Following weeks of prevarication, the announcement arrived the day before an EU-China summit at which both sides issued a strong statement hailing the Paris Agreement as a “historic achievement”, and arguing that climate action is “more important than ever”. With the EU led by Cañete, the summit arguably marks the highest point of European climate diplomacy since his remarkable success in coordinating the ‘High Ambition Coalition’ at the Paris summit itself.

But Cañete and the EU’s ability to provide global leadership will be constrained by internal factors. Three in particular are worth considering. First, Brexit. The UK was conspicuous by its absence in both the immediate joint statement issued by Germany, France and Italy, and the subsequent response of a longer list of countries under the mantle of the High Ambition Coalition. The politics of Brexit notwithstanding, the UK’s omission was remarkable in that it left out one of the EU’s most ambitious member states on climate action. These early signs of disengagement between the EU and UK may presage a weakening of influence for both parties, not least due to the volume and experience of the negotiators the UK has historically put at the EU’s service.

Second, the EU’s climate ambition as a bloc is constrained by an inability to go faster than its slowest member. Today, this means a Polish government which is increasingly intransigent towards climate action under the Law and Justice party. Indeed, among the major emitters, the EU’s commitment at COP21 implied one of the lowest increases in ambition from business as usual (Figure 1). The parties to the Paris Agreement are due to undertake a ‘facilitative dialogue on their commitments in 2018, with a view to possible future increases in emissions cuts. Tough discussions in Brussels over reform of the EU-ETS, and the ‘effort-sharing’ decision of how to distribute

emissions cuts in sectors such as agriculture, transport and buildings are indicative of however difficult that might be.

Third, while Europe enjoys a surfeit of rhetorical leadership on climate action, the reality on the ground is more mixed picture. Germany - in many senses the natural climate leader among EU member states - has actually registered a slight rise in emissions for each of the last two years, as the country's political class continues to duck the question of how to deal with the coal and lignite which generates 40% of the country's power. And while France used Paris in 2015 to forge its own leadership, the idiosyncratic nature of its power sector, which is 75% nuclear, has always made it something of a special case.

The EU's response to the Trump announcement, particularly its joint communique with China, is an important statement of leadership. And for now, the sight of its leaders making the moral case for action will further reinforce the sense in Brussels of a European continent which is beginning to emerge after the crises of recent years. But once the news cycle has turned once or twice more, Europe's leaders have plenty of hard work to do before their climate actions match their words.

