

# From Inspirer to Laggard

## Germany's role in EU climate policy

Up until the beginning of this decade, Germany and its *Energiewende*, i.e. the country's transition from fossil and nuclear energy to renewables, posed a beacon of hope for European climate policy. As we near the end of the decade, and at a crucial moment for our climate, Germany has stopped leading the way. In a number of key policies required to drive the European economy towards carbon neutrality, Germany is in fact weakening many of Brussels' proposals. As EU member states closely follow developments in the continent's leading economy, this is a devastating trend.

The *Energiewende* has been a game changer for the EU. Germany demonstrated to Europe that a large-scale shift to renewable energy is both possible and beneficial. The *Energiewende* kick-started the incredible decline in costs of renewable technologies, which made other countries more willing to go down the same road. Germany's transition also ensured Berlin's active participation whenever the EU was hammering out policies on renewable energy. Brussels' 2020 Renewable Energy Directive enacted in 2009 represented the most ambitious package of EU climate policies in a long time. Germany, then ahead of the class, tended to be much more ambitious when it came to negotiating policies for reducing greenhouse gas at the European level.



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Unfortunately, the direction of German climate policy has changed. Last year's revised 2030 EU Renewable Energy Directive is much weaker than its predecessor. It no longer features binding national targets, partially down to low engagement from Berlin. By the same token, Germany has been conspicuously absent from current discussions on increasing the EU-wide 2030 greenhouse reduction target to the minimum level required according to science: An absolute minimum of 55% compared to 1990. What has caused this turnaround? The German energy transition is stuck on the coal phase-out. Vested German coal interests are holding

back Germany’s transition, and, by extension, that of Europe.

Nonetheless, it is not the energy transition that worries me most; renewables are getting so competitive that the future direction is clear. Tackling climate change, however, goes much further. It will require a transition in finance, agriculture, transport, our infrastructure and industry. If we want to prevent global warming by more than 1.5°C, we will need to significantly cut emissions and spur new technologies within a very short time frame. In none of these areas do we have policies sufficiently strict to do so.

Meanwhile, Germany again appears busy with defending vested interests, as demonstrated by Berlin’s approach to efforts to reduce emissions from the transport sector, and automobiles in particular, which continue to rise.

In 2018 the EU passed legislation aiming to reduce automobiles’ carbon emissions by 2030. However, while a rapid shift to electrification would have required stricter emission targets, the European Council, led by Germany, put up an enormous fight with the European Parliament in order to weaken targets. Berlin literally figured as spokesperson for the German car industry, pushing for short-term gains at the cost of our climate and long-term economic benefits. While Germany was trying to stop meaningful legislation, European manufacturers were investing seven times more in

electric cars in China than in the EU. No wonder perhaps, given Beijing’s strict legislation for automobiles.

With regards to efforts to create EU-wide standards for sustainable investments, even a relatively week proposal by the European Commission triggered Germany to pull the brake: Berlin wants self-regulation for the financial sector, and non-binding guidelines. It is as if we are listening to representatives from a German bank.

We are currently at a crossroads. Science agrees that we must drastically reduce our greenhouse gas emissions over the next ten years in order to stand a chance of limiting global warming to a relatively safe level. In other words, if we fail to establish effective policies right now to force significant emission cuts across all economic sectors, the consequences of our inaction will be felt by generations to come.

Germany’s size and strength confer upon it a responsibility to lead. Without Berlin at the forefront, the EU will neither reach the required reductions nor will it be able to lead by example. It is high time therefore for Germany to stop bowing to vested interests and, instead, to start inspiring the way it used to do.

