

## [Comment] Plan F has lessons for Plan D

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - Last week's change of mind by the European Commission on the use of fluorinated gases in refrigeration and air conditioning will not only help fight the threat of climate change but might also change the political climate in Europe, too.

Under pressure from MEPs, the Commission reverted to its previous policy of permitting tougher standards for the use of these gases (known in the trade as F-gases) in two member states, Denmark and Austria, than apply in the rest of the EU.

First, as Jens Peter Bonde MEP has pointed out in these pages, this was a victory for the European Parliament. It's a welcome indication of the importance of the Parliament, so that those critics who complain that it is toothless and lacking in influence can think again.

In the struggle to build a parliamentary Europe, as opposed to a bureaucratic EU, this is an important indication of what needs to be done. In the wake of the failure of the constitutional treaty in the referendums last year, we must be vigilant against the risk of a slow slide into a bureaucratized EU where the civil servants have the upper hand. No, democracy must reassert itself.

But what sort of democracy? This is the second point.

It is worth looking at why a member state might want to have higher environmental standards in the first place, with the effect of keeping out imports from other member states and pushing up prices for its own consumers. There are two reasons.

The first is a desire to protect the environment, expressed by people who are willing to pay higher economic costs in order to do so. An alternative to F-gases might be more expensive, for example, but it is a bill that consumers in Austria and Denmark have said they are willing to pay.

The second reason is when domestic economic interests want to protect their home market and keep out imports. In this case, higher environmental standards are used as a cover for protectionism, and in fact all kinds of different reasons can be dreamed up for the purpose, not only environmental ones.

Of course, within the European Union, environmental protection is to be encouraged but protectionism resisted. The difficulty is distinguishing between the two, often on occasions when both motives are mixed.

But this is what our highly-paid officials in the European Commission are supposed to do.

In the case of F-gases, they are banned in Austria and Denmark now, and are being phased out in the rest of the EU over the next few years. If anything, the two offending member states are ahead of the curve, not behind it. There is hardly likely to be much of an economic reason behind the ban on F-gases in those countries, and if there is, it will be to encourage the early adoption of less polluting alternatives. The whole point of the European Union is to enable its member states and citizens to achieve desirable objectives, not to prevent them.

But there is a broader lesson here, which is that more variation in EU policy between member states is to be expected in the future than perhaps has been assumed in the past. The recent enlargement to 25, if nothing else, will see to that.

But we can come back to the constitutional treaty, too. The assumption that there was some kind of glidepath towards the unity of Europe has been shown to be hollow. Things will not be that simple. Times have changed.

To take the biggest variation in EU policy, the British opt-out from the euro, no-one now imagines that it will be ended any time soon. Perhaps, when it was first agreed, it could be thought of as temporary, but not any more. Many people might regret that fact – I'm one of them – but they must realise that it is indeed a fact.

If the future of the EU is to be based on popular consent, it needs to incorporate the realisation that different rules will apply to different countries. This variation from one member state to another needs to be balanced with the development of democracy and the maintenance of the single market throughout the EU. If a solution can be found for F-gases, it must be found for democracy as a whole.

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