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# The 1980s: A renewable revolution undermined

Marc O Riain explores how policy on both side of the Atlantic in the 1980s sabotaged a nascent revolution in renewables and energy conservation.

Imagine a time when oil prices were rocketing due to an international existential threat, not today... but the mid-late 1970s, when there could have been a real, transitional shift from oil to renewable energy globally.

After the first oil crisis in 1973, western government policies centred around energy exploration, strategic reserves and investment in both renewables and energy conservation. Government departments of energy were established in most countries.

Ireland created non statutory 'draft building standards' with U-value performances in line with Scotland, and the UK improved statutory standards in 1976, along with grants for energy retrofit.

The UK adopted an energy policy around coal, conservation and nuclear energy (Co-CoNuke) and formed the Energy Technology Support Unit (ETSU) to manage government funding of 'alternative sources of energy', but this was subverted through its control and dominance by the UK Atomic Energy Authority. For military defence reasons, UK energy policy became dominated by nuclear and not renewable energy.

At the same time scientists across the world were turning to solar, wind and geothermal as

public opinion by the Three Mile Island partial meltdown in March 1979, which resulted in the release of radioactive gases and radioactive iodine into the environment. With a new oil crisis sparked by the Iranian revolution in January 1979, oil prices rose again and President Jimmy Carter turned towards renewable energy. Carter signed the Energy Security Act, which consisted of six separate acts covering synthetic fuels, biofuels, solar energy, geothermal energy, marine energy, and other renewable technologies. Carter very publicly endorsed solar power by installing thirty-two solar water panels on the White House during the summer of 1979.

However new charismatic leaders in Thatcher and Reagan came to power in 1979 and 1981, in the UK and the US respectively, and they had very different outlooks on energy security. Thatcher was elected following the 'winter of discontent' in 1978-1979, when unions held widespread strikes for improved pay and conditions against the backdrop of the coldest winter in 16 years.

Thatcher set out to break the power of the National Union of Mineworkers, and moved policy towards the expansion of the nuclear industry after the second oil crisis in 1979, away from coal and away from renewables.

President Reagan gradually shifted public policy away from fuel conservation and back to increasing domestic oil production. "Conservation, of course, is a most helpful thing, and we should be practicing it, but I truly believe the answer to our energy problem is an energetic program of increasing our own supply, and this we have not done," he said.

Reagan's policy changes featured deregulation, the removal of supports for renewable energy research and the very public removal of solar panels from the White House in 1986 which he saw as "a joke" according to his chief of staff. Reagan's position undermined the fledgling renewable sector, seeing many solar industries go out of business, as the technology proved economically unsustainable in a cheap oil market. Market demand for low energy buildings also decreased as oil prices fell. Thatcher and Reagan saw eye to eye on deregulation, believing the market would be the answer to the energy problem, and set out to end oil price controls and regulations.

Reagan rolled back product energy labelling, federal building energy standards, and funding for schemes promoting minimum energy performance standards in new homes.

The early 1980s became a desert for renewable energy and low energy building as deregulation and increased oil supply saw a collapse in oil prices, and by extension consumer demand. However seminal events like the Home World Exhibition in Milton Keynes in 1981 would bring together international low energy housing exemplars for the first time, which I will explore in my next article. ■



(above) Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan at the G7 Ottawa Summit in July 1981.  
Photo: Levan Ramishvili

“ Reagan gradually shifted public policy away from fuel conservation.

renewable solutions to energy independence. These technologies were still largely unproven or commercially unscalable. Denmark would prove wind turbines viable with tax reliefs for investing in community renewable wind energy, and a biofuel revolution occurred in the mid-1970s when fuels like ethanol, made from corn or sugar cane, became economically viable through higher oil prices.

Because other renewable technologies could not establish economic viability at scale, US policy instead promoted nuclear power. However, this policy was critically damaged in pub-

A fully referenced version of this article is online at [www.passivehouseplus.ie](http://www.passivehouseplus.ie)

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