

## Frequent flyers are rewarded for polluting. Let them pay the full price

Is net zero a “luxury belief”? A strange assumption seems to have become knitted into the climate debate: that the burden of cutting carbon emissions will – must, inevitably – fall hardest on the poor.

This is the logic by which climate activists are sometimes deemed snobby, classist virtue-signallers – and the principle on which, earlier this year, Rishi Sunak signalled a tactical retreat on green policies. “It cannot be right for Westminster to impose such significant costs on working people,” the prime minister said. Because, of course, this is the group such policies would hurt the most.

But this is not a law of nature. It’s a choice. There is nothing inherent to environmental policies that means ordinary people must bear the brunt of them, although we have tended to organise things that way. (...)

10 When it comes to wealth and carbon emissions, flying constitutes an inverted pyramid of sin. One per cent of people account for half of all flight emissions. A *Guardian* investigation last week examined the carbon footprints of private jets belonging to 200 celebrities, oligarchs and billionaires. They were equivalent, it found, to the total emissions of almost 40,000 Britons. (...)

15 Why, at a time when pro-environmental low-hanging fruit is supposed to have been plucked, have we not imposed a steep progressive tax on flying? Such a scheme would be fairly straightforward to devise. Those who fly once or twice a year for a holiday abroad needn’t face extra costs. But run through your carbon allowance, and taxes could rapidly accumulate in line with emissions. (...) Of course, the sorts who can afford private jets in the first place may be able to absorb these extra costs and keep on flying. But that is exactly why we should impose them. We are missing out on a dollop of money that could be  
20 put towards home insulation, charging points for electric cars, or even transforming the air industry.

But we don’t do this. Instead – extraordinarily – incentives run the other way. Jet fuel is not taxed, unlike the fuel used by all other forms of transport. On a private jet you pay the same air passenger duty as you would on a commercial flight. (...)

25 But it’s not just flying (...) penalties are weighted the wrong way everywhere. Flat taxes on the price of fuel punish those for whom energy takes up a larger share of household budgets. Poor people in inefficient housing stock end up paying more for their energy. Subsidies for electric vehicles mainly go to rich people who can afford to buy a new car anyway.

30 But it is not beyond our means to adjust the balance. The economist Thomas Picketty suggests that everyone get a carbon allowance covering ordinary needs – and that activities beyond that are taxed in ever larger increments. (...) If this seems radical, we should ask ourselves why, when it comes to making sacrifices for the environment, we have tended to start with the necessities and leave the luxuries for later. There is a bias that runs through environmentalism: people tend to be in favour of helping the climate until it inconveniences them. Could it be that this bias extends even to a particular bunch of frequent-flying high earners – policymakers themselves?

35 Martha Gill, *The Guardian*, November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023.