

TONY BLAIR

BLAIR AND CLIMATE CHANGE – THE RHETORIC-REALITY GAP

Climate change is the greatest threat facing the planet. It is caused by the world's dependence on dirty fuels like oil and coal and is beginning to affect us all. Increasingly frequent floods, storms and droughts threaten the way we live. According to the World Health Organisation, 150,000 people are already dying every year from the effects of climate change. Governments have a responsibility to act. Action is affordable, inaction is not.

THE POLITICAL CHALLENGE

UK Prime Minister Tony Blair has publicly stated that tackling climate change and African poverty are to be his two top priorities during the UK's presidencies of the G8 and the EU. Blair has repeatedly spoken of his climate change commitments while failing to reduce the UK's climate-changing CO₂ emissions since coming to power in 1997. In the run-up to the G8 summit in July, Blair needs to match his rhetoric with action.

THE RHETORIC

Over the last few years, Tony Blair has given several speeches in which he has warned – in increasingly strong terms – of the dangers of climate change, and promised radical action to tackle the problem:

'There will be no lasting peace while there is appalling injustice and poverty. There will be no genuine security if the planet is ravaged by climate change.' *February 2003*

'The single biggest issue facing the world is climate change.' *July 2004*

Climate change is 'a challenge so far-reaching in its impact and irreversible in its destructive power, that it alters radically human existence.' *September 2004*

'To acquire global leadership on the issue then Britain must demonstrate it first at home.' *September 2004*

'But the issue is urgent. If there is one message I would leave with you and the British people today it is one of urgency.' *September 2004*

'This year offers a unique set of opportunities. I am committed to using the UK's G8 and EU Presidencies to try to make a breakthrough on...climate change.' *January 2005*

THE REALITY

Failure to reduce emissions

Labour promised in its 1997 manifesto, and again in its 2001 manifesto, to reduce CO₂ emissions by 20% (from 1990 levels) by 2010. Between 1990 and 1997, UK carbon emissions fell substantially as the 'dash for gas' and decline in coal powered generation continued. But since Labour came to power in 1997, the downward trend has stopped. Indeed, emissions of carbon dioxide have not fallen since 1997.¹

Blair himself has conceded that the UK is currently not on course for 20% CO₂ reductions by 2010. This reflects the conclusions of the Sustainable Development Commission that found in its policy audit of the UK Climate Change Programme (2003) that 'the UK will fall well short of the Government's goal of reducing carbon dioxide emissions by 20% from 1990 levels by 2010'.² The report goes on to say: 'the Government's projections do not yet show the radical shift needed to a low carbon path, nor are there policies in place to achieve more sustainable patterns of energy generation and consumption.'

Failure to confront industry special pleading

Blair has asserted that the UK's efforts to thwart climate change will not adversely affect our economic interests. In September 2004 he said, 'The UK has already shown that it can have a strongly growing economy while addressing environmental issues.'

In April 2004 the Government had announced a draft National Allocation Plan (NAP) – the way in which the UK will implement the European Emissions Trading Scheme. The draft plan included a total of 736.3 million tonnes (MT) of CO₂ in allowances. However, by the time NAP was formally announced in October, Blair had caved in to industry pressure. Following lobbying from the CBI, which routinely exaggerates the likely impact of environmental measures, a dispute had erupted between two UK Government departments – DEFRA and DTI. It was settled by Blair himself³ who again came down on the side of business and asked the Commission for an extra 19.8 MT of CO₂ in allowances. The request was refused by the Commission. The revised NAP would have asked industry (who account for half our annual CO₂ emissions) to make less than a 1% saving in CO₂ emissions by the end of 2007.

Failure to promote energy efficiency

– in practice

Domestic energy suppliers are required to achieve targets for the promotion of improvements in domestic energy efficiency under the Energy Efficiency Commitment. However, the target for reduction of emissions from the Energy Efficiency Commitment is currently just 0.4 million tonnes of carbon per year rather than the 2.6–3.7 million tonnes initially assumed in the UK Climate Change Programme. Even doubling the Energy Efficiency Commitment – as set out in the Energy White Paper – will leave us off course.⁴

– in legislation

On 8 November Blair told his MPs to reject amendments to the Housing Bill that would have helped tackle climate change by increasing home energy efficiency targets.⁵

–in supporting progressive technologies

The NETA (New Electricity Trading Arrangements) were introduced in 2001 and favour 'cheapest' forms of energy. An effect of this has been to make it unlikely that the target to generate 10GW of Combined Heat and Power (CHP) by 2010 will be achieved. CHP installation is now effectively stalled at under half this figure.

Slipping up on renewable energy

The Government's target is that 10% of electricity should come from renewables by 2010. Action to meet this has been better than in other areas – the Renewables Obligation is a good policy instrument and the Government has also made capital grants available to promote offshore wind. It is also the first EU Government to give any proper support to wave and tidal technologies.

Nevertheless, its overall performance on renewables is disappointing and the 10% target is in danger of being missed. The Government has allowed OFGEM (a body that is supposed to help deliver government policy) to place obstacles in the way of renewable development. OFGEM is currently threatening the development of a second round of offshore wind farms by making unreasonable demands about payment for grid connections. The Government has the powers to override these demands by giving clear instructions to OFGEM, but has so far failed to do so.

The Government has dragged its feet on promoting small scale, embedded generation such as solar photovoltaics on buildings. The best way to do this would be to strengthen building regulations to require all new buildings to include some element of renewable power capacity, as well as state-of-the-art energy efficiency measures. But resistance from the construction industry and bureaucratic inertia mean that our building regulations lag way behind some other countries.

Government funding of R&D for renewables also falls short. In 2004, the Government pledged £50 million for wave and tidal research and development. Whilst this is welcome, in order to combat climate change the Government must give similar funding across a whole range of technologies designed to reduce CO₂ emissions.

Denial on aviation

The Government's denial of the urgent need to tackle climate-changing pollution from aviation is probably the greatest failure of all. According to the Sustainable Development Commission, the growth in emissions from air travel threatens to negate any reductions made on the ground.

Currently aviation emissions account for 11% of the UK total. Aviation emissions will account for 25% of the UK total by 2030 – this will rise to 33% by 2050. The Government's decision to commit to airport expansion, against Royal Commission advice, demonstrates an utter lack of consistency with its commitments to tackling climate change and an inability to take the real steps needed to address the problem.

In September 2004, Blair pledged to bring aviation emissions into the European Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS). Even if he succeeds, the ETS is currently so weak that it would do little if anything to slow growth – which is presumably why some industry players are happy to support the proposal.

In November, the House of Lords EU sub-committee on Environment and Agriculture strongly recommended that aviation be dealt with in order to combat climate change. The Chair of the committee criticised the Government, saying:

'It is extraordinary that on the one hand the Government is concerned with climate change and on the other hand it's encouraging a rapid increase in air travel.'

Lord Renton of Mount Harry, Chair, House of Lords EU sub-committee on Environment and Agriculture, 10 November 2004

Giving up on integrated transport

In 1998, the Deputy Prime Minister was pushing for policies to reduce road transport. Tony Blair, warned by a Number 10 advisor not to be seen as 'anti-car'⁶, both delayed the publishing of the Transport White Paper and significantly watered it down. Even those policies which made it into the document were kept off the statute book as Blair prioritised other legislation. The year after the White Paper, Prescott's Transport Bill had still failed to make it into the Queen's Speech.

The Government has twice caved into the demands of the road lobby by failing to increase taxes on fuel – in 2000 and 2004. In 2000, whilst Gordon Brown seemed prepared to stand firm, it was the Prime Minister who was quick to hint at a cut on duty, saying that he was 'listening' to the fuel protestors' concerns. Even when defending the tax, Blair cited reasons relating to revenue for basic services such as hospitals and schools, rather than pointing to the necessity of a fuel tax to help secure promised emissions reductions in order to protect the climate. This generated the idea of duty on fuel being a 'stealth tax' which played into the hands of the road lobby and gained them further popular support. Eventually the Government climb-down came as the protests were said to have 'fizzled out'.⁷

Labour's 1997 and 2001 election manifestos pledged to improve integrated transport in the UK, and the government's Ten Year Transport Plan in 2001 laid out specific targets to make these improvements. But by 2003, these targets looked out of reach and in key areas such as rail punctuality and levels of cycling, standards had fallen.⁸

Weakening international policy?

Blair has pledged to use the G8 and the 'special relationship' to re-engage the Bush Administration on climate change. Whilst this would seem to be a noble endeavour, there are indications that Blair may be attempting to weaken international policy in order to achieve this goal. The phrase 'Kyoto-Lite' has appeared in commentaries referring to a possible package of measures designed to be more acceptable to the US than the Kyoto Protocol which Bush has firmly rejected.⁹

The UK presidencies of the G8 and the EU give Blair the opportunity to lead the rest of the world into stronger action on climate change, particularly now that the Kyoto Protocol has come into force. He should build on initiatives such as the Exeter Conference on the science of climate change to ensure that this happens.

MAKING THE SWITCH: FROM RHETORIC TO REALITY

If Blair is to live up to his promises on climate change he needs to put his fine words into action. First he must ensure that real and effective measures are put in place at home to reduce emissions. Unless this happens, not only will the UK's domestic efforts to combat climate change be hampered, but also Blair's credibility as global leader on climate change will be lost.

Internationally, Blair needs to ensure that the 'special relationship' does not become a distraction and that his response to US intransigence on climate change is not to make international policy so diluted that it becomes palatable to Bush. Blair's priority should be to raise the ambition of the world's effort to tackle the problem whether the US is on board or not. If Blair is truly a global champion on climate change, he must move other governments to strengthen their positions, and not play into the hands of President Bush.

DEMANDS

Greenpeace publicly challenges Blair to back up his words with actions, and take the following ten significant steps towards halting climate change in order to prove his climate credentials.

1. Ensure rapid expansion of renewable energy

In particular, the Government should fund power connections for offshore energy to facilitate the development of wind, wave and tidal power capacity.

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| <p>1 In 1997 UK CO₂ emissions were 152.65 million tonnes. This rose to 152.70 million tonnes in 2003, an increase of 0.03%, www.sustainable-development.gov.uk/indicators/headline/index.htm</p> <p>2 14 September 2004</p> <p>3 The Independent Government scales down carbon emissions targets 28 October 2004</p> <p>4 SERA Waiting for the Green Light 2003 www.sera.org.uk/traflit.htm</p> <p>5 Amendment 190 on energy efficiency standards in social housing and Amendment 191 on improving home energy efficiency by</p> | <p>20% by 2010</p> <p>6 The Independent, Prescott quits key campaign team role, 29 June 1999</p> <p>7 Telegraph Online, Thanks to the truckers, Blair's party is over for good, 15 November 2000</p> <p>8 Commission for Integrated Transport, 10 Year Transport Plan: Second Assessment Report 2003</p> <p>9 Grist Magazine On the Right Track 04 February 2005 www.grist.org/news/muck/2005/02/04/little-repubclimate/?source=daily</p> |
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2. Support expansion of combined heat and power (CHP) generation.

All new housing developments and public and commercial buildings should be required to include CHP plants for heating, hot water and electricity. The Government should fund changes to local electricity networks to encourage uptake of CHP and domestic renewable energy generation.

3. Set tough environmental standards for all new buildings

Regulations should ensure that all new buildings are built to zero-emission standards. Buildings should incorporate renewable power such as solar water heating and photovoltaics, along with state-of-the-art energy efficiency measures.

4. End fuel poverty and encourage energy efficiency

High energy-efficiency standards should be set for social housing, and financial incentives and grants provided to encourage energy efficiency improvements in existing buildings. Energy-efficient housing should be eligible for reductions in council tax and stamp duty. In addition, there should be zero VAT on energy-efficient building products.

5. End all government subsidies for dirty fuel industries

All subsidies for oil, coal and nuclear power – including export credit guarantees – should be stopped, and this money invested instead in renewable energy schemes.

6. Reverse the recent decision to allow UK industry to emit substantially more CO₂ under the EU Emissions Trading Scheme

7. Increase the cost of petrol and diesel

The Government should send a clear message to car manufacturers and the public that current levels of CO₂ emissions from private transport are unacceptable if we are to combat climate change. Revenue raised should be used to improve public transport.

8. Make Vehicle Excise Duty (VED) progressive

VED should be dramatically increased for inefficient vehicles such as SUVs. Incentives should be provided for state-of-the-art fuel-efficient vehicles.

9. Withdraw the Airports White Paper

The Government should include emissions from aviation in the EU Emissions Trading Scheme. There should also be a tax on aviation fuel and an increase in air passenger duty (APD) to reflect the true environmental impact of flying. These measures would help reduce air travel and make new runways unnecessary.

10. Fund hydrogen pilot projects

The Government should fund local authorities to pilot the infrastructure needed to move to a hydrogen economy.

Visit www.choosecleanenergy.com to find out more about the world's biggest climate criminals, how to stop them and other ways you can be part of the solution.

Greenpeace's clean energy campaign is committed to halting climate change caused by burning oil, coal and gas.

We champion a clean energy future in which the quality of life of all peoples is improved through the environmentally responsible and socially just provision of heating, light and transport.

We promote scientific and technical innovations that advance the goals of renewable energy, clean fuel, and energy efficiency.

We investigate and expose the corporate powers and governments that stand in the way of international action to halt global warming and who drive continued dependence on dirty, dangerous sources of energy, including nuclear power.

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