



## The politics of climate change

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### Seminar report

Climate change is now a central issue in our politics. However, as yet no substantive framework has been adequately developed to cope with the extensive political challenges of climate change. On 17 July, 2008, Policy Network held a small but high-level roundtable discussion of politicians, policymakers, academics, commentators, and colleagues from the public, private and third sectors to inaugurate a project which aims to fill this gap.

This was the first in a series of seminars, running through the autumn, which focuses on the political challenges of climate change through a “best practice” comparative analysis of the experience of industrialised countries. A conference to debate the key issues arising from this comparative analysis will be held in the new year.

### Session one: the political challenge within western democracies

The session began with a brief introductory talk by Anthony Giddens on the politics of climate change. Drawing upon the existing literature, Giddens described three diverging schools of risk assessment – ranging from sceptical, to radical, via centrists on a bell-curve – vis-à-vis the chronological intensity, economic effects and environmental impact of climate change.

In explaining the need for a specifically political study of climate change, he offered five key reflections:

- To meet the challenge of climate change requires the creation of a new political paradigm and the return – in some form, at least – of government planning: this paradigm has to encompass a new and more central role for the state than has been thought desirable in the last quarter century, and the establishment of long term cross-party consensus.

- The politics of climate change raise considerable individual-collective actor problems: there are both free-rider issues as well as the well known psychological phenomenon that individuals find it difficult to face up to the need for future, long term action that may have short term costs.
- Energy security issues make combating climate change politically problematic: high oil prices make other energy sources more attractive – coal as well as renewable ones – and increase the likelihood of stagflation.
- The politics of lifestyle adjustment are now seen as mainstream in welfare policy, for example on questions of health as well as climate change. Forging new behavioural norms is a group-orientated exercise: yet how can this be realised without restricting the individual?
- The inevitability of adaptation is now indisputable, given the pre-existing greenhouse gas concentrations and continued carbon emissions in the environment. But how will adaptation be funded? And what will the impact be on social justice?

The wide-ranging roundtable discussion that followed raised a number of inter-connected issues. The most significant of these was the widely acknowledged difficulty in forging a consensual and cohesive political narrative.

The inchoate nature of the scientific research on climate change, it was argued, makes it difficult to forge any form of political narrative, let alone a consensual one, because opponents can always cite its deficiencies. Climate change science is often pigeon-holed into an inverted bell-curve. This made the mechanisms for translating scientific research into public policies both problematic and polarising. For instance, the claim that global temperatures have not risen, or have perhaps even fallen for the past few years – whether or not convincing explanations can be mounted about temporary deviation around a long term upward trend – make it difficult to garner electoral support for early and radical action. They strengthen the argument that a climate change settlement would be detrimental to domestic economies.

Yet, despite these difficulties, the contention was made that a fourth position could be taken in the climate change debate: namely the heretical charge that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has underestimated the science of the issue.

These perceptions of differences in scientific opinion explain in part what some feel is a very relaxed attitude toward the climate change challenge in British politics. Indeed, the dangers of being perceived as an “eco-fascist” were flagged up by those who have stressed the urgency of the problem. One solution proposed, is to form a quasi government of national unity – with an all encompassing remit to combat climate change, which might potentially be legitimated by a referendum.

On the other hand it was argued that this line of reasoning reflects a lack of realism in the political debate. It is unsurprising that public opinion remains sceptical, when forging a domestic political consensus, let alone an international agreement, has not proved possible. Furthermore, it is nonsense to assume both that the morally responsible but unilateral actions of western democracies would prompt similar responses elsewhere, or that widespread behavioural change will take place without the backing of hard economic measures like a carbon tax.

At the G8 in Japan, two opposing political narratives were in evidence. On the one hand, those concerned by the economic costs of combating climate change, when the scientific evidence remains incomplete, feel the rational course of action is to wait. Those taking this view are also suspicious that the climate change challenge is being used as a means to re-introduce statist planning by the back door. On the other hand, climate change “believers” argue that without the commitment to make fundamental economic changes, global doom and gloom would be the greater. A “third way” was necessary, one which balanced rational decision-making with an effective form of risk management.

The onus of the case for urgent action to combat climate change has to be economic. The challenges can only be resolved through recourse to a political narrative that primarily stresses the advantages of green economic growth. The possibility of growth as a result of the actions taken to counter climate change is the most powerful political argument through which to weave a consensual green narrative. The cost to GDP of not combating climate change needs to be highlighted, while the economic cost of the transition to a low carbon economy is, at most, 5 % of GDP. This amount is equivalent to the cost of high oil prices and coping with the sub-prime crisis. Action to tackle climate change should be presented as an opportunity, not only because of the present risks to global growth, but also because the next 50 years will be ones of infrastructural transition, regardless of climate change, which could be used at marginal extra cost to secure a lasting low-carbon legacy.

Some argued that climate change is about to be replaced in public concerns by other issues like food security. On the other hand, climate change should be seen as a multi-faceted issue, where both energy and food security are intimately linked to the climate change challenge.

The limitations of the present political narrative on climate change has meant that public discourse, though gradually both widening and deepening, remains both unsophisticated and rambling. Public concern is indisputable. But the development of a coherent political response has suffered because climate change is, on the one hand, often relegated to being a mere surrogate of science policy while on the other hand can all too easily become emotive and ideological on the part of people who want radically to challenge the social norms of western capitalist societies on wider grounds.

To overcome this disparateness, necessitates both clear political leadership and strong sustained government action. Once a wide-ranging more open debate on climate change is initiated the challenges will not appear as formidable.

There is a question of how much democratic consent is needed in order to legitimate a more coherent governmental response to climate change. Two somewhat conflicting arguments were made: on the one hand, government has to highlight the tangible benefits of a low carbon economy and incentivise non-governmental actors to make behavioural changes. On the other, the climactic and economic time-constraints of the climate change challenge necessitate stronger and more immediate state interventionism. On this view the state has to become an activist entity in order to formulate micro-level responses to these challenges. Nonetheless, some felt that such a response is ultimately contingent on macro factors such as global scientific research and international agreements. However, despite this disagreement there was a widespread consensus in the roundtable that radically increased investment in research into green and low-carbon technologies is essential. Also subjecting carbon reduction targets to statutory enforcements was widely supported.

### **Session two: the politics of climate change in the UK – national specificities; the links to energy security; successes, weaknesses and contradictions in UK national policy so far**

Discussions began with a very short introductory talk by Anthony Giddens in which he highlighted the infancy of a concerted attempt to address public policy on climate change in the UK.

In discussion four stages of commitment to combating the climate change challenge were identified: denial; moderate; radical; and, ultra. Ultra commitment entails a situation where, once presented with a 2°C rise in global temperatures, the entire domestic economy would be given over to the “total” combat of climate change. The state of play in the UK, it was argued, had been of moderate commitment until spring 2007. But since the EU set its emission reduction targets at that time, the UK has moved to making a radical commitment. According to government advisers climate change is now being prioritised over almost all other policy areas. Government policy is based primarily on market solutions, within environmental limits embodied in legislation. Government policy is on the margin of public acceptability: yet it has made hitherto what were once seen as unachievable targets achievable, such as on renewables.

In response it was questioned whether the government’s policy agenda can adequately take account of unforeseen events and revised scientific research and economic analysis. Could a long term climate change commitment withstand the everyday pressures of politics when the government had recently performed a u-turn

on the 2p fuel tax and the new mayor of London, Boris Johnson, had retracted proposed plans to expand the congestion zone? Could “radical” commitments be sustained over the long-term, across governments irrespective of their political colour?

In determining whether a market- or a state-based solution should be sought discussion focused on the politics of cost. It should not be necessary for the UK government to subsidise any form of energy sources – be it fossil fuels or alternatives. The emphasis, instead, should be on private sector enterprise incentives for investment: the risk then is a sudden fall in the oil price, which had contributed to the demise of the nuclear programme in the mid 1980s. One contributor pointed to the increasing enthusiasm of the building sector in making construction, at the very least, carbon neutral. The crucial importance of an integrated policy agenda was stressed – one which furthered the long-term goal of a national transition to a low carbon economy across government: at present there is a lack of coherence as illustrated by the fact that in the UK the government is calling for universal loft insulation, but simultaneously allowing the creation of new coal plants.

Mandatory legislative targets do have the potential to liberate market forces, as has been illustrated by the relative successes of green economics in countries such as Sweden and Norway.

### **Evening session**

It was agreed that market solutions to the climate change challenge would prove difficult to achieve. Indeed, the roundtable illustrated the serious potential for free-rider problems and the difficulties facing national, as well as regional, institutions in regulating and enforcing legislation to implement a climate change policy programme.

Preferences were expressed for micro solutions: some advocated the social, economic and climactic advantages of personal carbon rationing. This was challenged by an argument that highlighted the regressive impact of carbon rationing on social justice, in that it would penalise people unfairly in rural and infrastructurally impoverished areas. Moreover, the implementation of a carbon allowance system was shown to be difficult, given that the UK is an open and heterogeneous society.

Debate veered toward how a macro solution to the climate change challenge could be achieved. Carbon emissions are now rising in previously modest carbon emitters, such as Spain and the eastern bloc of the EU: under current agreements the biggest per capita emitters in the near future will be the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia. This makes it vital that the EU is seen to be a good, positive model of how to reduce carbon emissions, across a region of the world, demonstrating how economic growth in less developed member states can be combined with sustained emissions reductions. Some felt this would enable the UK and other member states to break free of the

hitherto hegemonic carbon constraint approach and instead move to where the revenues could be hypothecated to promote energy efficient investment as well as social justice and progressive green tax agenda. A further aspect of any macro solution is an energy modernization agenda that uses the increasingly unstable economic climate, fuelled by high oil prices, to pursue an energy security agenda based on increased investment in renewable energy sources.

Finally, the importance of educating the public and promoting more intelligent public debate was cited as a means to increase the legitimacy of an integrated, long-term policy agenda on climate change. Opinion polling suggests that the public are increasingly attuned to the climate change debate and supportive of action to tackle it. This, it was argued, should be harnessed to forge a lasting political settlement.

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