

How to Make Politics Work For Climate

Simon Bryceson, October 2008.

Synopsis:

While there are other approaches open to those seeking action on climate change, most campaigns and commentary still rest on political and government action. Yet because of the way politicians perceive the consequences of taking the actions necessary to seriously affect the emissions that cause climate change, the prospects for effective action in the UK are very poor.

This paper proposes a radically different view of the political situation in the United Kingdom on the issue of climate change from that which most commentators and campaigners may hold.

It suggests that the proportion of the population regarding climate change as the most important political issue is small and possibly getting smaller. To reverse this trend requires an intervention in the formal political process to increase the salience of the climate change issue.

To this end, a campaign is outlined to ensure the highest possible profile for climate change at the forthcoming British general election.

All Hot Air?

There is a foment of public comment about 'climate' and many political pronouncements on it but little effective action, leading many environmentalists and others to feel very frustrated. As someone who has spent many years working both within the formal political system and in frequent touch with elected politicians, officials and major corporations through Public Affairs, I believe that this frustration is, in part, due to a misunderstanding of the realities of the political process.

Democratically elected politicians in the United Kingdom believe that, whilst giving the most passionate commitment to achieving the objective of addressing climate change, it is electorally advantageous to oppose any particular mechanism for addressing the problem.

This position is a consequence of a number of drivers, three of the most significant being:

- A misunderstanding of the distinction between expressive and instrumental questions in opinion polling, leading some to believe that there is much more popular support for addressing climate change than is, in reality, the case.

- A significant feature of the first past the post electoral system is that it both disproportionately downgrades currently minority positions and, consequently, media coverage of those positions.
- An understandable reluctance amongst some leading figures in the environment movement to be seen to intervene in the electoral process.

I have thought long and hard about whether or not it will be effective to air these views in public because they can easily be read as an attack on both the main players who need to make progress, that is, politicians and campaigners. The political classes may see my suggestions as treasonable, and the campaigners as condescending. Some might criticise it for interfering in the 'democratic process'. In the end I have come to the conclusion that climate change is of such importance that it is worth advocating a different, more direct and more intrusive strategy, warts and all.

Retreat

Politicians in the UK are moving away from firm commitments on climate change at a rate of knots. It is fair to say that most environment campaigners are underwhelmed by the government's domestic record and current position. Evidence is emerging that the Conservatives are moving away from publicly discussing the issue: MPs privately say that the party position is closer to that of Nigel Lawson than the pronouncements of David Cameron two years ago.

Evidence can be seen everywhere in what is said, or not said. The move away from the fuel-tax escalator. The move from an ambitious national recycling scheme to 'pilots'. A 50% reduction by 2050. This may sound a deep cut, and it has alliterative resonance. But what it means is 'not on our watch'.

Nothing that would substantially address climate change is currently being proposed by any of the major parties. It would suit each of the major parties if no concrete climate change proposals were debated in the run-up to the next election.

Some in the environment movement, and perhaps some readers of this article, ascribe this to the successful lobbying of industrial interests. This is not the reason; yes, there is lobbying by entrenched industrial interests, but increasingly industry too is becoming frustrated by the lack of government leadership – the knowledge that there will be future action, but no idea about when or what, is delaying business decisions, some of which have ten- to fifteen-year lead times.

The reason for political inaction is that politicians are convinced that any proposed practical measures to address climate change domestically would be so unpopular amongst the electorate as to end their careers.

For the average voter in the UK, they are overwhelmingly correct. This is not because of an aggregation of different types of sceptic – I refer readers to the article on www.campaignstrategy.org *Sustaining Disbelief: Media Pollism and Climate Change*. Purely on the basis of one type of ‘scepticism’ response, namely ‘the defectors’ – politicians believe that voters are simply not prepared to bear any meaningful personal cost (car transport, foreign holidays) to address the issue. In other words, even if the public could be better convinced that climate change was happening, and that it is undeniably critically affected by human activity, and that it will have dire consequences, and that solutions are possible, then *even in those conditions*, to propose the necessary concrete measures would, the politicians believe, be electoral suicide.

No amount of argument rather than evidence will shift this conviction. Consequently the realpolitik is to make the right noises about climate change but not to take much real action. Moreover the polls support the politicians in their cynical view of the electorate.

The box below contains the opening section from *The Independent* in April of this year.

Green tax revolt: Britons 'will not foot bill to save planet'

Majority of Britons are opposed to increases in green taxation



72 per cent of people are not willing to pay more in green taxes like the congestion charge

*By Colin Brown, Deputy Political Editor
Friday, 2 May 2008*

More than seven in 10 voters insist that they would not be willing to pay higher taxes in order to fund projects to combat climate change, according to a new poll.

The survey also reveals that most Britons believe "green" taxes on 4x4s, plastic bags and other consumer goods have been imposed to raise cash rather than change our behaviour, while two-thirds of Britons think the entire green agenda has been hijacked as a ploy to increase taxes.

The findings make depressing reading for green campaigners, who have spent recent months urging the Government to take far more radical action to reduce Britain's carbon footprint. The UK is committed to reducing carbon emissions by 60 per cent by 2050, a target that most experts believe will be difficult to reach. The results of the poll by Opinium, a leading research company, indicate that maintaining popular support for green policies may be a difficult act to pull off, and attempts in the future to curb car use and publicly fund investment in renewable resources will prove deeply unpopular. The reality must be faced; the barrier to political action on climate change in the UK is the widespread belief, founded in evidence, that the electorate will not support such action.

How can this be?

The evidence that climate change is a clear and present danger is as convincing as could reasonably be sought on such a complex issue; at least for initial precautionary action...

It is not the purpose of this note to go into detailed political analysis on why public opinion is as it appears to be. Some of the complicating factors have been more than adequately covered in some of the articles produced in Campaign Strategy Newsletter.

There is an almost universal belief amongst pollsters themselves that a key factor driving the environment down the list of the general public's priorities is the perceived deterioration in the economic situation. To put it another way; people believe that they have more immediate and significant issues (for themselves and their families personally) worthy of their prioritisation. This is almost certainly not an area of argument which it is wise to enter. The essential point is that it is a strategic error to regard our overall objective as the achievement of a majority behind a clear set of mechanisms for addressing climate change. As has been noted in previous editions of this Newsletter, the pursuit of 'behaviour change' as an objective may have perhaps inadvertently led campaigners to think in 'majority' terms rather than selecting smaller segments of the population with strategic influence.

A much more effective way of driving climate change back up the political agenda is to persuade the small but passionate numbers of people who believe it is the overarching issue for humanity at this time, that disciplined action within the rules of the game can change the nature of the game.

A position must be created where those passionate people are disproportionately influential on the whole political process within the United Kingdom.

In campaign terms this is a 'classic' campaign by a minority to achieve a public good even if the majority will not themselves act in the longer term or wider public interest. Is this any longer 'an issue' in a representative democracy? I think not – we have a broad consensus that the necessary actions need to be taken. To accept a collective failure to do so because our use of the political system is dysfunctional, will look like a pretty poor excuse to those in this and future generations who suffer the consequences and bear the burdens of the failure.

A Solution: Concentrating the diffuse

Over ten years ago, 'before Kyoto', someone party to the international negotiations and whom I respect highly, predicted to me that nothing meaningful would happen on climate change until Americans were dying on American soil as a result of changes unequivocally attributable to climate change. As I have watched the issue develop over the last ten years, I fear he may be right.

This is not a counsel of despair: it is a call for more effective campaigning through avoiding self deception. My question is, if it is the case that most rational politicians in the UK will do everything to avoid proposing concrete measures on climate change, what can campaigners do?

My answer is 'concentrate the diffuse'.

As a campaigner and/or party activist over the last thirty years, I have seen examples of interests which were so well organised, so acute, in particular geographies as to make a meaningful difference to constituency politics. An obvious example of a number of years back is abortion. Another is fisheries. Before working on the establishment of the Marine Stewardship Council, I was tasked with seeking improvements to the Common Fisheries Policy. No easy task, hence the market mechanism of the MSC. For the very simple reason that although most people in Europe care that there are fish tomorrow more than they care how many fish are caught today, Europe's fishermen are highly concentrated in certain constituencies, and the concentrated interest always wins out. (For a lengthier examination of this effect on fisheries, go to <http://www.bryceson-levitt.com/unileverfishstockconservation.html>.)

So let us put this into effect for climate change. The UK is 'blessed with' a first past the post, geographical constituency system.

A Campaign Plan For Making Climate Change An 'Acute' Issue for the British Political System

As in the martial arts the key is to understand the forces at work and use them rather than resist them!

First, we have to ask ourselves what do the political and media class currently think?

1. That the "theory" of climate change may in fact turn out to be incorrect. This is the view articulated by Nigel Lawson and covertly held by a large number of senior members of the Conservative party. However, it is also true that climate change is seen as being "just another middle-class obsession" by a significant number of Labour members of Parliament. The media obsession with contrarian scientists and the belief that "every issue has two sides" has provided the perfect cover for those who do not wish to contemplate the political difficulty of doing something meaningful about climate change. And thus taking "no position" is both justified (by the coverage of science) and politically expedient.
2. That the general public's interest in climate change is spasmodic, shallow and likely to be overwhelmed by economic concerns for the foreseeable future.
3. That those who do care passionately about climate change are few in number and generally constitute "the usual suspects". That is, that nothing that the political parties do 'on climate' will cause these people to move from supporting one political party to another.

The proposal is as follows:

We select sixty Parliamentary constituencies that can reasonably be expected to be marginal at the next general election be selected. The sixty seats would then be divided into two groups of thirty; one group of thirty would be the "target seats" the other group would be "controls".

The purpose of the controls would be to ensure that journalists and politicians were able to see objective evidence of the result of any activity.

In the thirty seats chosen as targets the objective would be to build a group of people - after consulting psephological colleagues I think a number somewhere around 1000 would be adequate - who are agreed that climate change is the issue of overwhelming priority to them politically.

These people could be found by all the usual methodologies but the key factor for success would be the generation of considerable media interest in both the constituency concerned and at a national level. Were such publicity to be of sufficient scale it might well be the case that the numbers of people necessary would find the organisation rather than the other way round.

These individuals then become a tightly knit group of politically motivated people. They would be supported by a network of people expert in climate change and all matters relating to it. The maintenance of morale amongst the groups joining the organisation in the various constituencies is one of the critical factors in the potential success of the project.

The distinguishing feature of this group is that its members have publicly committed to vote for the candidate in that Parliamentary constituency who manages to convince the group as a whole that they are the most committed to real and immediate action on climate change.

Far from demonstrating that these people are in some way representative of the general public, our objective would be simply to show that they were passionately committed, had foresight, and were determined to vote in a block. Were we able to convincingly demonstrate this, it would prove an almost irresistible running story during the general election.

Under no circumstances should these organisations ever put up a Parliamentary candidate of their own.

Parliamentary candidates who are seeking the endorsement of the organisation should be encouraged to be as specific as possible as to what they personally will do when in Parliament to further the overall aims and objectives of those who care about climate change.

An intensive briefing campaign should be maintained in order to ensure that all political journalists covering the general election and the period running up to it are fully aware of what the organisation is doing and in which constituencies.

Results

To understand some of the points made above it may be helpful if I explain what I hope the outcome would be.

My assumption is that, all other things being equal, the major political parties in the United Kingdom (and I remind you that I am here talking only about the United Kingdom) will wish to avoid making any unpopular commitments at all. Unless something radically changes in the next eighteen months, it seems reasonable to assume that the next general election will be based on the same sort of "happy talk" as usual. The aim of the Parties will be to appear "emotionally appealing" whilst avoiding any discussion of hard choices. It is possible that the deterioration of the United Kingdom economy will proceed so rapidly that in fact the General Election will take place in political terrain that it is difficult for us to conceive at this stage. In that scenario, it seems to me likely that that political context would be even more hostile to a realistic discussion of the options on climate change than is the case currently, which would make this all the more worthwhile..

The media, having for different reasons to also stay in the "happy talk" box, will not press the issue. I would be astonished if any of the major interviews that usually take place with party leaders prior to polling day gave anything other than perfunctory consideration and time to the issue of climate change.

If these assumptions are correct there is nothing to be lost from trying to radically change the game.

What I would hope, therefore, is that the organisation of the disciplined voting blocs in a significant number of marginal constituencies would produce the following result:

- Individual candidates in these constituencies would begin to depart from the National party line in order to improve their electoral prospects.
- Commitments would be made that were incompatible with the party's national manifesto.
- The possibility that a significant number of marginal seats would show results that departed from the national trend would excite particular interest in those seats amongst political journalists and analysts.

The decision on which candidate 'the thousand' would vote for would be taken by the members of the organisation in that particular constituency. However, I think

that their decision should be guided by a continuous process of interaction with respected national figures campaigning on climate change. This would provide a process with a whole series of news hooks built into it.

Since the objective of this project is not the creation of a mobilised consensus in favour of climate change but rather to make climate change politically salient, the more distinctive 'the thousand' are the better. I would regard it as a significant achievement if these groups in the constituencies found they were subject to vitriolic criticism from the established political process. The political classes would be likely to see an initiative such as this as highly threatening to their traditional modes of operation. It is possible that this would lead to significant splits within the political parties themselves.

The debate about which candidate to endorse in each constituency is likely to be a highly emotive. For the project to work it would be unlikely that the thousand would endorse the Green Party candidate in anything more than a handful of constituencies. The objective of the project being to make the difference in the competition between the political parties meaningfully in competition for winning the seat.

If the project had even a modicum of success, in terms of having measurably different results in the constituencies in which it had intervened, then the media narrative subsequent to the general election will have been changed, in my view probably permanently. "Thirty seats this time, three hundred seats next time".

The vitriol and hysteria likely to be aimed at the project by its opponents, (perhaps think of an odd combination of Nigel Lawson and Jeremy Clarkson!), and the popular resonance that that opposition would be likely to find, might finally crack the reality denial in the environment movement. For the Political Classes, of which of course I am a member, it would be a wake-up call of a different kind.

In Conclusion

The central problem with addressing climate change in the United Kingdom is that the political class believe that doing so would lose votes.

Because of the unusual electoral system used in the United Kingdom, it is possible for a campaign to show that there is a distinction between losing votes nationally and winning or losing votes in particular constituencies.

Such a campaign would rely on taking a minority of voters and creating a culture amongst them that makes them a coherent and disciplined voting bloc, voting solely on the issue of climate change.

This would make the issue of climate change electorally and therefore politically salient - transforming the nature of the media coverage.

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