

An open letter to Gordon Brown

Tim Root argues the choice is fight climate change or see a further loss of Party members

In the face of protests at rising oil prices you appear ready to sideline your green commitments in pursuit of short-term political gain. Yet last year you said that overcoming the 'climate change crisis...must be the great project of this generation.' Al Gore has said that to reduce climate change 'We must quickly mobilise our civilisation with the urgency and resolve that have previously been seen only when nations mobilised for war'. Your current vacillation, plus the government's record over eleven years, shows no such urgency. This prompts me to consider whether I should now leave the Labour Party, as over half of members have done since 1997.

Research highlights the cruel irony that 98% of the victims of weather disasters are in the developing world, which has neither the lifestyle which has caused the problem, nor the infrastructure and resources to limit the devastation. Yet your government, having trumpeted its plans to help desperately poor nations adapt to climate change, is making only a derisory offer of loans with interest. What has happened to your previous commitment to help the poorest people on Earth?

The very low priority you give to climate change was shown again by the lack of any specific emissions reduction plans in May's draft Queens Speech. The government has long admitted that it will miss its target to cut Britain's Carbon Dioxide (CO₂) emissions by 20% from 1990 to 2010. Most of our emissions cuts are due to the 1990's decline in the use of highly polluting coal, not due to any Labour government actions. Britain has the best position in Europe for wind power, but is using only a fraction of this potential. We have over four million poorly insulated homes. You are committing vast sums of public money to road expansion, while promoting the

growth of aviation. The Tories are proposing statutory limits on power station CO₂ emissions, making Labour now appear to be the party which puts profit before people.

Recently an estimated 128,000 people died in the Burmese cyclone, another terrible example of the extreme weather events which are becoming ever more frequent as the temperature rises. However the government's recent electoral disasters seem to have blinded you to the need to help consumers and business adapt to cutting their CO₂ emissions. Instead you are hoping for increased oil supplies to bring prices down. But last year's cut of the tax rate to 20p has not endeared you to the public, because the main determinant of their votes is not their own financial position. The recent Financial Times inequality poll showed that no less than three quarters of Britons want taxes to be cut for poor people. Even though most people think that overall the government does not put tax revenue to good use, the majority oppose general tax cuts on the grounds that they would hurt public services.

It appears that Labour's popularity plunge is much more due to your abolition of the 10p tax rate than to voters' personal financial concerns. Many of the public retain Labour values; over a quarter think of themselves as Labour, while just a quarter think of themselves as Conservative. You do not need to base your strategy on fears of a resurgence of right wing individualism.

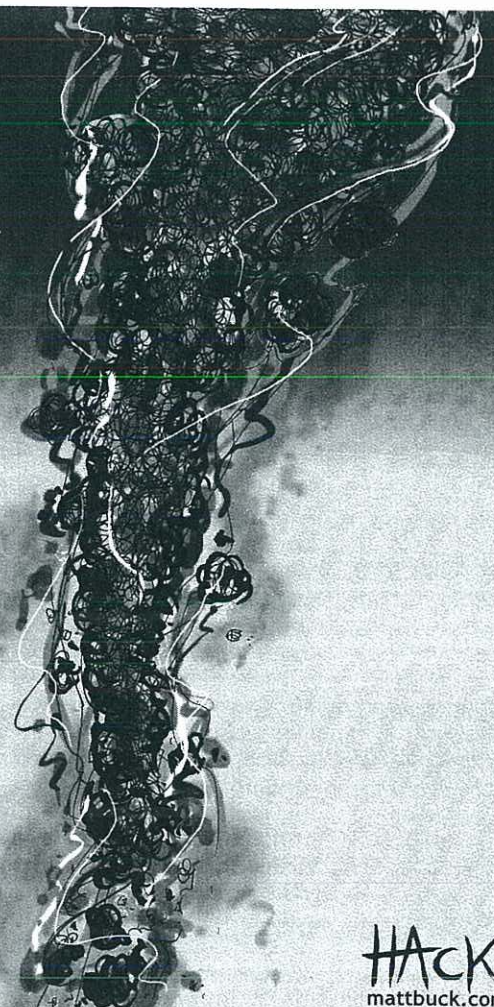
Drew Westen's well-known book *The Political Brain* explains how politicians can best win public support by making clear appeals to voters' emotions. You need to emphasise that climate change is the overriding moral and practical issue of our times, threatening all Britons but also causing awful suffering now to

millions of people in poor countries. You could reach agreement with the Tories and the Lib Dems to show the British people a cross-party consensus that taxes to cut CO₂ emissions will be offset by reductions in income or other taxes. Green taxes were nearly a tenth in value of all taxes in 1997, but under your control have fallen to be only 7% now. Yet you tax the beneficial activity of work by imposing National Insurance contributions of 12.8% on employers. You need to show that green taxes are not just a revenue-raising ruse by explaining how the government is investing to preserve the Earth for our children.

However, you deserve credit for introducing the Climate Change Bill, which is about to start its committee stage in the Commons. The bill is your government's response to a massive mobilisation of public opinion by Friends of the Earth, who won the support of no less than two-thirds of MPs. The bill will become the world's first law committing a national government to binding CO₂ emissions reductions. It will put pressure on other governments to follow Britain's example. It could thus finally break the logjam of world leaders' irresponsible failure to cut climate change with the urgency the scientific evidence demands.

It appears that perhaps you have at times seen that fighting climate change is a vital expression of your core beliefs. As a Labour member since 1976, I share your longstanding concern to reduce poverty. I also share your wish to increase community cohesion and avoid social conflict. Climate change is by far the greatest threat to these aims. The United Nations has estimated that due to climate change the number of people suffering from malnutrition could rise by a staggering 600 million by 2080. Last year's floods in South Asia displaced a massive 19 million from their homes. The United Nations

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states that if global temperature rises by 3-4°C, no less than 330 million people could be flooded out of their homes. If climate change is not reduced, before long millions of environmental refugees will flood into Europe, making the 2005 East European influx seem puny. This would be a huge threat to social cohesion.

There is now a clear scientific consensus that developed nations should cut their CO₂ emissions by at least 80% by 2050. Nicholas Stern, whom you commissioned to report on the economics of climate change, backed this target last year. If all the developed nations copied your current proposal in the Climate Change bill, and cut CO₂ by only 60% by 2050, global temperature would rise far above the 2°C increase which world governments have agreed should be the maximum. You need to enshrine the 80% minimum cut in what will become the Climate Change Act, both to ensure that future governments cannot fudge the depth of cuts needed, and to give a clear signal to other nations of the radical action required.

You also need to restore some

of your credibility by including emissions from international aviation and shipping in the bill. The United Nations has calculated that by 2050, unless we change policy, international aviation and shipping will increase Britain's CO₂ emissions by over a quarter. Britain might apparently hit your 2050 target, but the exclusion of aviation and shipping would mean that our emissions cuts were nowhere near the level required. Your government has said that there is no internationally agreed method for calculating a nation's share of the emissions from international flights and voyages. However the government already makes such a calculation in order to report these emissions under the Kyoto protocol. Omitting these rapidly growing sectors from the Act would suggest to other governments that you were not serious about tackling the problem.

This would undermine your negotiations with them. Which developing nation would agree to help tackle climate change, for which the West bears practically all the blame, if they perceive our targets to be dishonest?

Tim Root is a Friends of the Earth activist, and author of Love, Empowerment and Social Justice: Personal Relationships and Citizen Action (Open Gate Press, 2005):
www.timroot.net
Email:
tim@timroot.net

History will judge you by your contribution to cutting climate change. You can throw off your Mr Bean tag and regain public respect by showing real leadership on this most important of all moral issues. The Climate Change Act could prove to be a groundbreaking measure. But if you stick with the 60% target, and also omit international aviation and shipping, it will be a tragic missed opportunity. I hope I will not have to conclude that Labour has lost its commitment to by far the largest group of distressed people on Earth, the present and potential future victims of climate change. The Lib Dems have put forward a range of radical climate proposals, including seeking international agreement to limited but equal emissions per head for all nations, rich and poor.

They also have a much higher proportion than Labour of councils with good environmental performance. By following your triangulation strategy, Labour has grown more and more similar to the Tories. Does morality now suggest that I consider joining the Lib Dems instead?