

CO2 Emissions Targets

Targets schmargets (or) Don't look at what they say, look at what they DO

by Marc

This article is based on a talk given at a Camp for Climate Action planning meeting in Leeds on Feb 18, 2007.

What we are now doing to the world, by degrading the land surfaces, by polluting the waters and by adding greenhouse gases to the air at an unprecedented rate—all this is new in the experience of the earth. It is mankind and his activities which are changing the environment of our planet in damaging and dangerous ways. -Maggie Thatcher! To UN General Assembly, 8th November 1989.

Climate policy in the UK so far has been utter wank. While we did had made some substantial reductions in greenhouse emissions since the nineties, these reductions have been mainly due to the fact that we switched from coal to natural gas. Burning natural gas produces somewhat less CO2 for a given amount of energy produced than burning coal. Apart from the switch from coal to natural gas, there has not been any strong action to reduce greenhouse emissions.

Still there are some targets, and I guess we need to know them;

Target One

12.5% reduction from 1990 baseline by 2008-12. This is the UK Kyoto commitment. That's been in the bag for a long time, partly because of the switch from coal to natural gas, and partly because emissions from international aviation and shipping are not counted.

Target Two

But in 1997, a little bit drunk on its own power, Labour said “come on Mr Carbon, if you think you're hard enough” and went for “20% reduction by 2010.” They will miss this; they've admitted it.

Target Three

In 2003, using (but not admitting to) calculations based on 'Contraction and Convergence', they said '60% reduction from 1990 baseline by 2050.' This is the sort of target that you will see in the Climate Bill this summer and there will be some Confederation of British Industry types saying “this is excessive, why aren't the Chinese/Indians/Tuvalese doing the same.” This will be helpful to the government, because they will look as if they're taking a sensible middle path.

Target Four

The EU has decided that the 'safe' target to aim at would be 2 degrees warmer than pre-Industrial Revolution levels. This is still a 'fundamentally different planet'.

When that target was set, it was assumed that you could do it by keeping concentrations of carbon dioxide below 550ppmv. All the recent evidence suggests even a 450ppmv target would leave a pretty high risk of exceeding 2 degrees.

On Feb 13th, Tony Blair apparently hinted/let slip that EU target might need to go up to 3 degrees. This would bring about a truly global catastrophe, in which the quality of life would be significantly decreased in virtually every place on Earth.

We're already at 382 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the air (the pre-Industrial level was about 280ppm). When other greenhouse gases are taken into account the current figure becomes 420ppme

(parts per million CO₂-equivalent). In order to have a good chance of not crossing the two degree boundary the level needs to be kept below 450ppme. We're very nearly there already. In the coming decades it's likely that we will continue to cut down rainforests, releasing the carbon stored in vegetation back into the atmosphere, while the oceans, which have been absorbing large amounts of carbon thus far, will become too acidic to absorb any more, and the global temperature will surge upwards. The consequences of this are almost too horrible to contemplate.

Target Five

Another, much more sensible, way of looking at it is how many tonnes of carbon can we emit as our 'fair share' – the amount we could emit if every person on Earth were allocated the same amount of carbon, and we aimed globally not to cross the two degrees threshold. The Tyndall Centre, a leading centre for Climate research, did some calculations. 4.8 gigatonnes between 2000 and 2050 was the number they came up with. But we are in 2007. So, how much of that allocation did we use in the first 10th or so (2000 to 2006) of that time? We used 1.2 gigatonnes. A quarter of the allocation, in the first one-tenth of the time. This is very scary.

Target Six

As if it mattered, we are also busy missing the target of sourcing 10% of the UK's energy from renewable sources by 2010.

All of this is far far far too little, too late. We can't wait for new wonder-supplies of clean energy. We have to reduce our energy demand and keep cutting and cutting and cutting (cos we can't cut and run- there's nowhere to run to). After we cut some more, we cross our fingers...

Politics

A quick point about what Stop Climate Chaos (a coalition of non-governmental organisations) are asking for. This is no more than what the Conservatives, complete with John Gummer (guy who fed his daughter hamburger to prove the British beef was safe from BSE) and Zac Goldsmith (editor of the Ecologist) have asked for. SCC keeps quiet about this, presumably because they don't want to be embarrassed by the fact that they aren't even ahead of the Tories...

www.canihavethebillplease.co.uk/

The list below of government departments is very incomplete, but goes in basic order of power, ignoring the Prime Minister and so forth.

HMT

The Treasury has always been immensely powerful. It, after all, literally holds the purse strings. Even more so recently, given the deal between Blair and Brown; Blair can stride the international stage, doing Bush's talking, while Brown gets to run the UK economy. There is zero evidence that Gordon Brown actually “gets” climate change. HMT came out with the Stern Review last November, saying it's cheaper to fix it now than pay for the consequences later (well HELLO). This review got lots of news coverage. Did anyone ever spot any of these business/government types say “Sorry all you greens, it turns out you were right all along, and we'd better listen a bit more carefully to you in future.” No? I didn't think so.

HMT also have the Climate Change Levy and the Renewables Obligation. Yawn.

DTI

Our old friends at the Department of Trade and Industry have links with other departments on climate change- especially the Treasury Department and Defra. (Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs). The DTI exists to grow the economy. And while bunging the odd subsidy at wind-farms doesn't worry them, it is all about economic growth. They control the science side of

things (see below for that).

Ministry of Defence

The MOD is getting interested in Climate Change. Figuring out who they might have to drop bombs or food on. Or both. They run the Met Office, and will use that as a bargaining chip come any budget cuts.

The Royal United Services Institute (their thinktank) held a conference on January 24th on Climate Change and the Global Security Impact.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

The FCO recently got into the climate game in a big way. The Foreign Secretary, Margaret Beckett, was Environment Secretary for a while. The key person is John Ashton, their 'climate change ambassador'. They'll probably show up at G8 in June, whispering in Blair's ear, and also at the COP-13 international climate negotiation meeting in Bali. He and a couple of other extra-ordinarily well connected guys had/have an outfit called "E3G", meaning third generation environmentalism ("only enlightened capitalism can save the planet"). Sad thing is, they may be right.

Cabinet Office

These are the guys who 'co-ordinate' other departments. They run the civil contingencies stuff (remember the Civil Contingencies Act of 2004. In a state of emergency, forget your civil rights. What's a state of emergency? Whatever the government says.) Check out all their stuff on 'resilience', if you want to give yourself nightmares. Basically, between them and the MOD and bits of the Home Office, these are the guys who will be booking our one-way helicopter trips out over the North Sea about 10 to 15 years from now...

Department of Transport

Airports. Say no more. If the British State had a clue about climate change, they'd be turning runways into allotments, not building more of the fucking things.

Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)

Headed up by David Miliband at the moment (though Ed Balls may get the job after Blair goes). Ian Pearson is the Aviation guy, who gets to mouth of about Ryanair as the unacceptable face of capitalism, while building the infrastructure that makes it all happen. As best I can see, DEFRA is very good at the production of hot air. And not much else. If you want to, you can wade through the "Climate Change Programme 2006", which is their baby.

Suggestion: talk to the organ grinder, not the monkey.

Economics

The Stern Review

The Treasury Department hired a former World Bank Chief Economist to do a report on the economics of climate change. He found that, if the atmospheric greenhouse gas concentration rose to 550ppm of carbon dioxide (the UK government's long-term target) positive feedback loops in the climate system would kick in, leading catastrophic changes, globally, including a world-wide recession. The report shows that, even apart from moral concerns, it would be cheaper in the long term to drastically reduce emissions and keep the planet from warming beyond two degrees.

Treasury also has a "climate change levy" on business, which is sort of a nice little earner, but doesn't reduce the amount of carbon dioxide being emitted to any serious extent.

There is a "renewables obligation" for energy usage. It's fairly feeble.

The UK government is up to its eyeballs in the EU Emissions Trading Scheme, but that's another story.

Science

The British State is good at throwing money at the very best minds and asking them to come up with answers. Sadly, it's equally good at ignoring any answers that it doesn't like.

Most non-military research and development is funnelled through the Department of Trade and Industry. The Chief Scientific Adviser is David King, who you'll know for his 'climate change is a bigger threat than terrorism' comment. He thinks 550ppm is the only feasible target.

The Hadley Centre is part of the Meteorological Office. Which is part of the Ministry of Defense! The Hadley Centre was set up in 1990, and is home of one of the most respected climate modelling projects, climateprediction.net (they got the BBC to ask people for unused PC time so they could crunch more numbers).

They also did a conference in the lead up to the 2005 G8 meeting. "Avoiding Dangerous Climate Change." There's a book by the same title, published by Cambridge University Press and available for download at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/climatechange/research/dangerous-cc/...>

The Tyndall Centre

Established in 2000, this is a cross-university and cross-disciplines research centre. It absolutely rocks. It has lots of good briefing papers for free download as PDF's.

UKCIP

Set up in 1997, based in Oxford, the UK Climate Impacts Programme does lots of good work. They publish a monthly free digest of latest research. Cheerful bedtime reading.

NERC

Natural Environment Research Centre.

Funds a lot of cool stuff on a variety of topics, including climate change.

Don't be fooled by their confidence, their 'authority' and their ease with numbers and statistics and plans. These people with their fancy educations and limos and suits and guess-work policies have NO IDEA what to do. Their so-called plans will make life a living hell for our children and grandchildren.