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## Just a Lot of Hot Air

Posted March 5, 2007

An audit of the government's planned carbon cuts shows they will achieve only half of what it claims.

By George Monbiot. Published in the Guardian 5<sup>th</sup> March 2007.

"If," said Mr Blair at the launch of the Clinton Climate Initiative last year, "we do not motivate ourselves to take the decisions commensurate with the gravity of the threat that we face, we will betray in the most irresponsible way the generations to come. That is not something I want on my conscience as a political leader."(1)

Well it looks like he's going to have to live with it. Tony Blair has had ten years in which to tackle Britain's contribution to global climate change, and he has blown it. His bold initiatives and stirring speeches look like little more than greenwash. For the first time, we have the figures to prove it.

With Channel 4's series Dispatches, I commissioned a team of environmental scientists at University College, London to conduct a peer-reviewed audit of the government's planned greenhouse gas reductions(2). The scientists, led by Professor Mark Maslin, estimated the real impact of its carbon-cutting policies. Nothing quite like this has ever been done before. The results are staggering.

The government has two formal targets for reducing Britain's climate changing gases. The first is the one set by the Kyoto Protocol, which commits the UK to a 12.5% reduction by 2012. The second is its long-term goal, of a 60% cut in carbon dioxide by 2050. This target will be made legally binding later this year.

Last year the government's Energy Review found that to show "real progress" towards the 2050 target, by 2020 the UK's greenhouse gas emissions would need to be reduced to between 143-149 million tonnes per year(3). This means a cut of 29-31% on 1990 levels. We asked Professor Maslin's team to assess the policies which are supposed to deliver it.

For an audit, the 2020 aim is more useful than the 2050 target. If we are to have a realistic chance of hitting it, the necessary policies must already be in place or in development. While the Blair government would be only partly responsible if we fail to make 60% by 2050, it will carry almost all the blame if we don't reach its milestone in 2020.

Our audit reveals that the government's assessment of its own policies is wildly optimistic. Instead of a 29-31% cut by 2020, it is currently on course to deliver a reduction of between 12% and 17%(4). At this rate the UK won't meet its 2020 milestone until 2050. This result suggests that the government's claim to be "leading the world on tackling climate change"(5) is simply another product of the Downing Street spin machine. Its carbon-cutting policies are a sham.

How has this happened? You don't have to look very far to find out. In almost every sector, government programmes have been characterised by voluntarism, vacillation and surrender to industrial lobby groups.

Take transport, for example. The government expects that national transport emissions (not counting international flights) will rise by 3.8 million tonnes between 1990 and 2020(6). Professor Maslin's team discovered that the real increase will be between 7 and 13 million tonnes(7).

Faced with a vocal and powerful motoring lobby, Blair's government has sought to cut emissions in three ways, all of which are failing. The first is a voluntary agreement, struck in Brussels with the major motor manufacturers. In 1998, the car makers promised they would bring the average emissions from new cars down from 188 grams per kilometre to 140 in ten years. The deadline falls

due next year, and they will miss their target by half: the real figure is likely to be 164 grams per kilometre(8). They have no incentive to succeed and every incentive to fail, especially in the UK, where we love gas guzzlers.

The second mechanism is the tax we pay to put a car on the road - vehicle excise duty (VED). In 2001, the government replaced the flat rate for VED with a graduated tax. The owners of the most fuel-hungry cars would have to pay more than the owners of efficient models. Seven bands were introduced, starting with A (for cars which produce less than 100 grams per kilometre) and rising to G (more than 225 grams).

A survey carried out by the Department for Transport found that to encourage most drivers to switch to a less polluting model, you would need a difference between the bands of at least £150(9). The government's Sustainable Development Commission went further: if the tax were to be really effective, the difference between the bands should be £300 and the top whack should be £1800(10). But the government's top rate is only £215, and the difference between the bands only £35. When you are shelling out £65,000 for a Range Rover, that's really going to make a difference, isn't it?

If you want to know just how seriously the government takes this issue, take a look at the fiasco surrounding Band A. By 2012, 10% of all the new cars sold in this country (250,000 vehicles) are meant to be in Band A(11), which is exempt from VED. So how much progress has been made? If you check the tables on the Vehicle Certification Agency's website, you will find that there is just one car in this category. Astonishingly, it's the Seat Leon(12).

The Leon is a petrol-snorting, road-eating monster, producing 267 grams per kilometre. It ought to be in Band G. But someone in the agency seems to have moved its noise level, in decibels, into the column for its carbon emissions, in grams. Officially, if you own a Seat Leon, you should not be paying tax.

So where are the real Band A cars? The Department for Transport told me that there should in fact be one car in the band - the Smart Fortwo diesel(13). There's only one problem: it is not currently on sale in the UK.

The third policy is to encourage us to switch to biofuels - diesel or alcohol made from plants. By 2010, the government wants 5% of all our transport fuels to be made this way(14). By 2020, the EU wants to raise this to 20%(15).

There are two massive problems, which the government consistently refuses to address. The first is that beyond a certain point the production of fuel begins to compete directly with the production of food. A study conducted last year by Sarasin, the Swiss bank, placed "the present limit for the environmentally and socially responsible use of biofuels at roughly 5% of current petrol and diesel consumption in the EU and US."(16) Already, when only a tiny fraction of our transport fuel comes from plants, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation reports that the demand for biofuels has helped to cause a "surge in the prices of cereals" to "levels not seen for a decade."(17) All over the world, the poor are feeling the effect.

The second problem is that the new market has stimulated a massive expansion of destructive plantations, especially of oil palm. Palm oil planting is the major cause of tropical deforestation in both Malaysia and Indonesia. As the forests are cut down, the carbon in both the trees and the peat they grow on turns into carbon dioxide. A study by the Dutch scientific consultancy Delft Hydraulics found that the production of every tonne of palm oil causes 33 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions(18). This makes oil palm 10 times worse than petroleum. Already nine new palm oil refineries are being built, in Malaysia, Singapore and Rotterdam, specifically to meet the growing demand from the European biofuel market(19).

The government urges us not to worry - a "second generation" of biofuels will eventually become available, made from straw, wood and waste. But there is no guarantee that these will outcompete their cheap but destructive rivals, or that they will be ready before the last rainforests in south east Asia have been felled.

In every sector the audit found similar oversights, elisions, and deceptions. In housing, for example, the government has loudly proclaimed its intention to use better building regulations to make new houses more energy efficient - by 2016, it says, every new home in the country will be "zero carbon"(20). But since the energy efficiency regulations were first introduced in 1985 there has not been a single prosecution for non-compliance(21). Building inspectors treat the energy rules as a joke - in one recent survey they dismiss them as "trivial" and "not life threatening"(22). A study by the Building Research Establishment of new houses passed by the inspectors found that 43% of them did not meet satisfactory energy standards(23).

In the power sector, the auditors uncovered what looks like a conjuring trick. The government claims that Phase 2 of the European Emissions Trading Scheme (which allows power companies to buy and sell permits to pollute) will cut carbon emissions by 8

million tonnes against 1990 levels(24). Professor Maslin's team found that the cut appears to be not a reduction in absolute emissions, but a reduction in future gases which might have been released if the scheme did not exist(25). Somehow this figure seems to have been muddled up with savings made against real emissions of carbon in 1990.

But the biggest greenwash of all involves flying. Under the Kyoto protocol, the pollution from international flights does not count towards a country's emissions. The government has taken this as a licence to ignore flying even when setting its own targets. The emissions simply don't appear on the balance sheet. Otherwise it couldn't justify its instruction to the UK's airports to double their capacity between now and 2030(26).

Because they were assessing the government's own programme, the auditors didn't produce figures for aviation. But even the government proposes that carbon emissions from planes will rise by 10.5 million tonnes between 1990 and 2020(27). Had it been incorporated into the audit, this figure would have reduced the cuts for the whole economy by 2020 to between 8 and 13%.

But the government's figure is almost certainly a wild under-estimate. It counts only half the emissions from planes flying to and from our airports, on the grounds that only half the passengers belong to this country. In reality, 67% are UK citizens(28). It also ignores the other greenhouse gases - especially high-level water vapour - that flying produces. If international flights were counted in the national total, they could wipe out all the cuts in the UK's emissions between 1990 and 2020(29).

What makes these failures most shocking is that Blair's government took office in 1997 with a massive head start. In 1990, the UK's carbon dioxide emissions were 161.5 million tonnes. By 1997 they had come down to 149.6 million tonnes(30). This had come about through energy efficiency, power stations switching from coal to gas, the maturing of the nuclear power programme and a few small tweaks to some obscure industrial processes, like capturing methane from landfill sites and nitrous oxide from explosives factories(31).

When John Major left office, the UK was one of the few nations on course to meet its Kyoto commitments, with plenty of emissions to spare. That advantage has already been squandered. Today the UK is turning out slightly more carbon dioxide than it was in 1997 (though other greenhouse gases have declined)(32) and we will just scrape in beneath the Kyoto bar, while falling way beneath the trajectory for meeting our long-term target.

And even if the official aim - of a 60% carbon cut by 2050 - were met, it would, I believe, be too little, too late. Climate scientists warn us that if global temperatures rise by two degrees or more above their pre-industrial levels, the warming is likely to trigger runaway feedback. We are already beginning to see some signs of this. In parts of the West Siberian peat bog, the permafrost has begun to melt, releasing methane, a powerful greenhouse gas. The more methane escapes, the more the planet warms, so the more methane escapes. The West Siberian bog alone is believed to contain 70 billion tonnes of the gas whose liberation would equate to 73 years of current manmade CO2 emissions(33).

If runaway feedback sets in on a large enough scale, the biosphere takes over from human beings as the primary source of greenhouse gas emissions. At that point the problem is snatched from our hands - there is nothing more we can do. So it is critical that we make big enough carbon cuts to stop this from happening. But everywhere - in Westminster, in Brussels, even in the Stern report - politicians and officials seem to be abandoning the two degree target, which would mean an 80-90% cut in emissions(34). It is perceived as just too difficult. The government is failing even to hit the wrong target.

Instead of real action to deal with the greatest menace of the 21st Century, the government has sold us a set of fake policies, designed to make us feel better about ourselves, without political pain. Next time Tony Blair gives a heart-rending speech about his legacy to future generations, don't believe a word of it.

George Monbiot presented Dispatches: "Greenwash" on Channel 4 at 8pm last night.

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our leadership in tackling climate change and make real progress towards our 2050 carbon reduction goal", MtC emissions (note C, not Ce) must come down to 110-120 by 2020 (from 151.5MtC today). This, it said, required further cuts of 25-35MtC, rather than the proposed 19.5-25.3MtCe (in the case of these proposed cuts, MtC and MtCe can be regarded as equivalent). UCL's audit found that total cuts on 1990 levels by 2020 will amount to between 19 and 30MtCe in the four sectors examined (domestic, business, energy and national transport). It assumes for the purpose of the study that the government's proposed cut of 7.4MtCe in the remaining sectors (agriculture, forestry, land management and public) will be delivered.

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