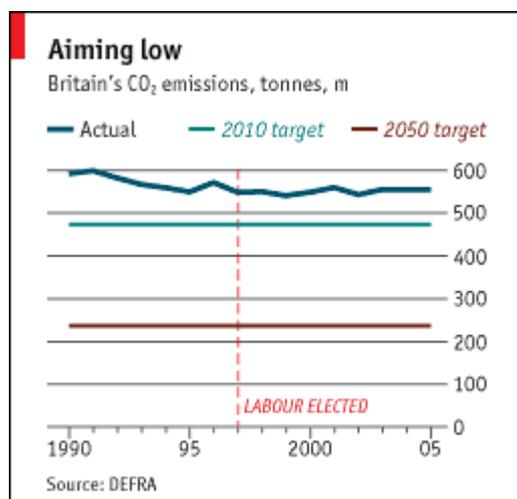


A hot topic gets hotter

Politicians are competing to see who can be most eco-friendly, but the public may not be as enthusiastic as they suppose

FREE-MARKETEERS have long argued that competition improves products and services. If they are right, Britain is on its way to having the best climate-change policy in the world. This week David Cameron, the Tory leader, and Gordon Brown, the chancellor and Labour's leader-in-waiting, clashed head-on as each brandished claims to be the more ostentatiously and radically green.

The spur was the publication, on March 13th, of the government's climate-change bill. Britain has longed fancied itself a world leader on the matter. It is on track to meet its obligation under the Kyoto protocol to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions by 12.5%, compared with 1990 levels, by 2008-12. Indeed, so confident were ministers that in 2003 they set themselves two voluntary targets alongside their Kyoto obligation—to cut emissions of carbon dioxide (the main greenhouse gas) by 20% by 2010, and by 60% by 2050.



That looked ambitious at the time. Now, with only three years until the first target must be met, even the government admits it is unlikely to be (see chart). Stung by criticism that their apocalyptic rhetoric (Tony Blair describes climate change as “the greatest challenge facing humanity”) was so much hot air, ministers last year promised a fresh approach.

The new bill, expected to be law by next year, aims to elevate the 2050 target from a voluntary aspiration to a legally binding obligation. It proposes a system of “carbon budgets”—rolling five-year limits on carbon-dioxide emissions, planned 15 years in advance. An independent Committee on Climate Change will advise ministers on how to meet their aims and give annual reports to Parliament. Fired with radical spirit, David Miliband, the environment secretary, said that his bill was “the first of its kind in any country,” although the French have had something similar since 2005. Even Mr Brown, not known as a tree-hugger, seized the chance to buff his green credentials in two speeches. On March 13th he called for a “new world order” to sort out the climate and for more co-operation within the European Union (which has recently agreed to carbon cuts for all its member states).

Indeed, climate change has become as much a political battleground as health, education or immigration (see article). On March 12th Mr Cameron—author of his party's arboreal new logo—made his own assault on the moral high ground. In a speech in London he rubbished Labour's environmental record, pointing out, correctly, that carbon dioxide emissions are higher now than when the Labour Party came to power.

Some of the Tory leader's proposals were uncontroversial: he called for improvements to the EU's emissions-trading scheme (which allows carbon-heavy firms to buy emissions permits from cleaner ones). Others were bolder: he suggested personal aviation-mileage allowances

that could be exceeded only by paying progressively higher taxes, as well as annual national targets for carbon reduction, something the government has sensibly rejected as being too rigid. This puts the Tories in unfamiliar company: Friends of the Earth, for example, an eco-lobbying outfit, also supports annual reductions. Mr Cameron was able to call on some high-wattage publicity by revealing that Al Gore, once America's vice-president and now the world's best-known climate-change campaigner, was to address the party's front bench—quite a coup, given that Mr Gore's Democratic Party has traditional links with Labour.

But the crusading spirit has not reached every corner of society. Some question how committed ministers really are, since the bill is unclear about what sanctions will apply if targets are missed. Business views are mixed: the Confederation of British Industry is broadly happy, but the Engineering Employers' Federation, which represents industrial firms, worries about the bill's effects on competitiveness.

The ever-greater predominance of climate change in public discourse may be making dissenting voices shriller. Lord Lawson, a former chancellor, has cast public doubt on whether man-made greenhouse-gas emissions really warm the planet. The Centre for Policy Studies, a right-wing think-tank, produced a pamphlet to the same effect earlier this month. And last week Channel 4, a commercial-television station, broadcast a documentary arguing that the sun, not mankind, was to blame for climate change.

Critics point out that the arguments used are flatly untrue or misleading, or else ignore recent evidence. Carl Wunsch, an oceanographer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has complained that the way his views were portrayed in the programme "comes close to fraud". Martin Durkin, the programme's director, has engaged in similar shenanigans before. In 1998 Channel 4 had to apologise after another of his documentaries was found to have distorted contributors' views. Most of the talking points are imported from America, where contrarian views on climate change have a long pedigree.

Pinning down public opinion amid all this sound and fury is tricky. Greens like to point to polls in which people say they would happily pay higher taxes on environmentally unfriendly things such as jet travel and large cars, or to buoyant sales of rooftop wind turbines, as proof that the public has been converted. But Peter Kellner, the boss of YouGov, a polling firm, counsels caution. "The public is convinced about the science of climate change," he says. "But most of the things they're willing to do are ones that are either easy or that other people pay for."

Fonte: The Economist, v. 382, n. 8520, p. 60-61, 17 Mar. 2007.