

## A rod for our backs

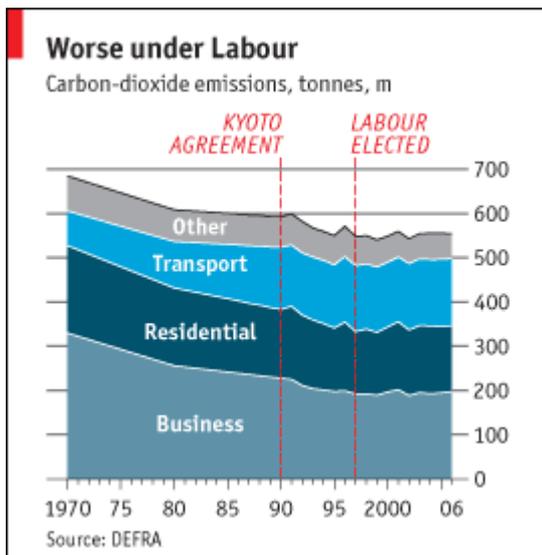


"GIVE me chastity and continence, but not yet," Saint Augustine besought God more than a millennium ago. Those worried by global warming but unwilling to change their behaviour take a similar approach. Evidence of the damage that economic activity does to the planet is mounting, but given the cheapness and convenience of fossil fuels, the temptation to avoid tackling climate change for just another year (and another and another) is hard to resist. This is even truer as economic woes mount.

Britain's government thinks it has a solution, and it is one that so far no other country has adopted. The approach is rather like that of a desperate dieter padlocking his pantry. If all goes according to plan, a climate-change bill will be passed next week that takes the power to set carbon-reduction goals away from politicians and enshrines them in law. A climate-change committee will recommend five-year carbon budgets for different parts of the economy, such as power generation, transport and manufacturing, with the ultimate goal of cutting emissions by 80% from their 1990 levels by the time 2050 rolls around.

Modelled partly on the Bank of England's Monetary-Policy Committee, which was set up in 1997 to take interest-rate decisions out of the hands of ministers, the new Committee on Climate Change (now headed by Lord Turner, the head of Britain's financial regulator and before that the author of important pension reforms) will publish on December 1st the first three carbon budgets, covering the period until 2022. Other countries may have more eye-catching ambitions than Britain (Sweden, for instance, aspires to phase out fossil-fuel use entirely), but nowhere else will the pledges have the force of law. Foreign governments and green groups are watching the British experiment with interest.

It sounds impressive, but British climate policy has never been short of grand visions. Tony Blair, Gordon Brown's predecessor as prime minister, called global warming "the world's greatest environmental challenge", but made precious little progress toward cleaning up the British economy to meet it.

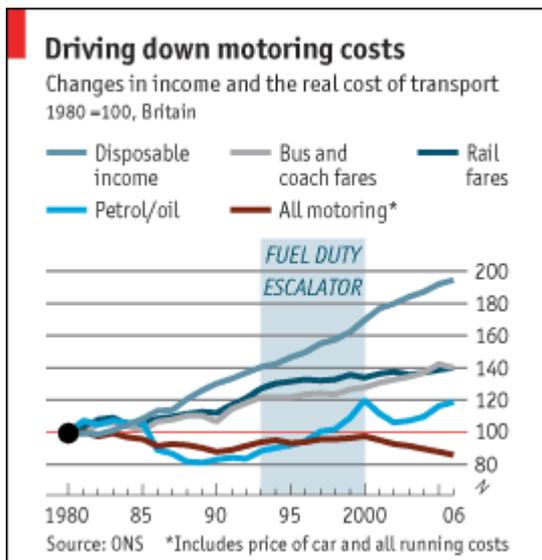


Britain will fulfil its 2010 obligations under the Kyoto climate treaty—a 12.5% cut in emissions compared with 1990 levels—but largely because the energy-market liberalisation of the early 1990s caused a one-off switch from expensive coal-fired power stations to cheaper and, incidentally, cleaner gas-fired ones. Greenhouse-gas emissions overall have fallen only slightly since Labour came to power in 1997, and carbon emissions have risen slightly (see chart). Other pledges, such as the government’s promise to generate 15% of Britain’s energy from renewable sources by 2020, stand little chance of being met. Admittedly, all this amounts to a better record than many other countries can show, but it makes British aspirations to “global leadership” look a touch threadbare.

Ed Miliband, the new climate-change minister and the foreign secretary’s brother, is leading a new drive to get Britain to meet its various targets. Energy and planning bills, shortly to become law, include provisions to increase subsidies for renewable energy and to get new nuclear-power stations and wind farms through Britain’s sluggish planning system. But the core of the effort lies in the climate-change bill’s legally binding targets. “The advantage”, says Martyn Williams of Friends of the Earth, an environmental group that has been pushing the bill for two years, “is that this doesn’t leave things to distant, politically fudgeable targets.”

But although the idea of applying the unforgiving sternness of the law sounds attractive, it is not clear how the planned legal straitjacket is to work. Government targets usually apply to bodies such as schools, hospitals or individual departments which can be punished if they fail to meet them. The emission-reduction targets would apply to the whole country, making any notion of punishment nonsensical. Instead, Mr Williams hopes that judges will enforce the rules against the government itself, citing a recent court case in which the judge agreed with Greenpeace that an official consultation on nuclear power had been unlawfully conducted and ordered that it be run again.

The government insists that the shame of breaking its own law will be enough to keep it in line even if enforcement proves impossible. Maybe; but the climate-change committee’s carbon-budget recommendations can be ignored, the 2050 target is a very distant one and nobody is going to go to jail if it is not met. Hence the worries that the climate-change bill will in the end prove as fudgeable as other government commitments. And, ultimately, any future government can repeal it.



The government's record on meeting other, related, targets does not inspire confidence. In 1997 John Prescott, who was then the deputy prime minister and in charge of transport policy, declared: "I will have failed if in five years' time there are not...far fewer journeys by car." Five years later, traffic had risen by 7%. Attempts to hold down its growth were not helped when, in 1999, ministers retreated from an unpopular policy of above-inflation tax hikes on petrol and in 2000 reduced fuel duty further (see chart and [videographic](#)). Climate-change targets are likely to come under similar pressures. In his report on December 1st, Lord Turner will probably call for more nuclear-power stations and wind farms. But both are more expensive than fossil-fuel plants, and are therefore likely to lead to an increase in electricity prices.

The timing of all this looks especially bad. People are unlikely to be receptive to a message of voluntary austerity in the midst of a severe economic downturn. But if the global economy has taken a turn for the worse, so, it seems, has the global climate. Sea ice in the Arctic is melting more rapidly than climate models had predicted. On October 31st a paper in *Nature Geoscience*, an academic journal, announced evidence of warming in Antarctica, until now the only continent where temperatures had stayed constant. In 2007 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicted sea-level rises of between 18cm (7 inches) and 59cm by 2100. Since then, several studies suggest that those estimates could be conservative.

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