

CLIMATE CHANGE

Elliot Diringer

It is a cruel paradox that the world leader working hardest to rally an effective global response to climate change is denounced at home by both left and right as a climate laggard. By now British Prime Minister Tony Blair knows, better than any politician, the rocky shoals of the climate debate, for he keeps running up on them. On both the domestic and international fronts, the prime minister has set high ambitions, only to fall short. While overzealousness may play its part, there is a larger lesson for Blair and the world: tackling climate change is an extraordinary challenge.

Reaching Too Far?

SINCE HOSTING THE G8 GLENEAGLES summit last year, British Prime Minister Tony Blair has begun to conjure the outlines of a new international approach to climate change, moving beyond the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. In this, he has fallen foul of the Kyoto orthodoxy, and been accused once more of kowtowing to United States President George Bush. But far from threatening Kyoto, the more flexible approach he hints at may prove the only viable way to preserve the agreement and build a genuinely global effort. Yet, there is a danger that the Blair vision overreaches.

Most recently in late March the British government was forced to scale back its climate ambitions with the admission that its goal of cutting UK carbon dioxide emissions twenty percent below 1990

ELLIOT DIRINGER is director of international strategies at the Pew Center on Global Climate Change. The report of the Climate Dialogue at Pocantico is available at www.pewclimate.org/pocantico.cfm.

levels by 2010 would not be met. Most experts had regarded the goal as a stretch when it was set out in a 2003 Energy White Paper. Reaching it was made all the more difficult by stronger than anticipated economic growth, and rising natural gas prices, forcing electricity producers to burn dirtier coal instead.

Britain nevertheless is on track to reduce overall greenhouse gas emissions by up to a quarter, twice its obligation under Kyoto, a feat virtually unmatched in the European Union or beyond. But having reached further and fallen short, the Blair government drew swift condemnation from the Greens and the Conservative Party. Shadow Environment Secretary, Peter Ainsworth, lamented the 'grim admission of failure' and declared the government's response – including tougher targets and levies for industry – 'half-hearted, piecemeal, and timid'.

On the international front as well, Blair's successes have suffered against the expectations he himself helped to create.

Simply by declaring climate change one of the two priorities for his G8 Presidency – the other was Africa – the prime minister did more than anyone before or since to elevate the issue on the international agenda.

In the run-up to last year's Gleneagles summit, the science academies of eleven nations, including China, India and the US, issued a rare joint statement saying the evidence was 'sufficiently clear to justify nations taking prompt action'. Leaders of some of the world's largest companies called for a global policy framework to drive the climate effort.

But the summit itself produced few concrete results. G8 leaders launched a three-year dialogue with major emerging economies on clean energy technology, a process that, if successful, could improve prospects for real agreements.

But the clear if unstated goal for Gleneagles was a breakthrough with the US, and predictably none was forthcoming. Indeed, there was a price

for Bush's consent to even so meek an outcome. The leaders' communiqué, underplaying the established scientific consensus, adopted a distinctive White House formula: '...we know enough to act now to put ourselves on a path to slow and, as the science justifies, stop and then reverse the growth of greenhouse gases.'

U-TURN OR NOT

Blair, however, remains undeterred. In a steady stream of statements since Gleneagles, he has continued to press for a stronger international effort. And he has mused aloud about just what shape it should take. On almost every occasion, he has come under attack for, in his critics' view, straying from the Kyoto line.

'I could talk about nothing but the Kyoto protocol,' Blair responded in *The Independent* newspaper in November. 'That way, maybe people would believe that I am still committed to it. Which I am. But...Kyoto is only a first step.'

The attacks were especially withering after his comments in September in New York on a stage shared by former US President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Saying his thinking had evolved 'in the past two or three years,' Blair argued that, 'No country is going to cut its growth or consumption substantially in the light of a long-term environmental problem,' and that states are not yet prepared to negotiate 'another major treaty like Kyoto.'

His analysis, though quite credible, neglected to include the commitment to Kyoto and emission targets he ordinarily offers in more scripted settings. A headline in the *Sunday Independent* read: 'Disbelief Over Blair U-Turn on Climate Change Treaty.'

FLEXIBLE FRAMEWORK

There had been no abrupt u-turn. Writing later in *The Observer* and *The Independent*, Blair again stipulated his belief in targets and a 'legally-binding' framework. But the prime minister is indeed trying to steer a new course. And while the precise bearings are not yet clear, the general direction is probably right. It is a path that goes beyond Kyoto not by abandoning it, but rather by building around it a broader, more flexible architecture linking countries pursuing a variety of approaches.

This is broadly the same path urged in a recent report from the Climate Dialogue at Pocantico, convened by the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, a US-based nongovernmental organisation (NGO). The dialogue brought together officials and business and NGO leaders from fifteen countries for a series of off-the-record discussions about options for advancing the international climate effort.

They included policymakers from Britain, Germany, Japan, China, Australia, Mexico, Brazil and the US; executives at Alcoa, BP, DuPont, Rio Tinto, and Toyota; and experts from the World Economic Forum and The Energy and Resources Institute in India.

A chief conclusion was that engaging all the world's major economies calls for a more flexible framework allowing different countries to take on different types of commitments. No long-term climate effort can succeed without all the major emitting countries taking part. And, because carbon constraints can create competitive imbalances, none are likely to undertake sustained, ambitious action unless they are confident others are contributing their fair share.

But the major economies are a diverse lot, with per capita emissions ranging by a factor of fourteen, and per capita incomes by a factor of eighteen. The types of policies that can integrate climate goals with other national objectives will vary from country to country – hence the need for different types of commitment.

The Pocantico report envisages some form of targets with emissions trading – like Kyoto – as the principal stimulus for emission reduction in this new, more flexible framework. But it allows for other possibilities. These include sectoral agreements, rather than economy-wide, setting standards or targets in key areas such as transport and power; policy-based approaches, in which countries commit to address climate along with other national priorities, but not to binding emission targets; and agreements to promote the development and diffusion of 'breakthrough' technologies such as hydrogen and biofuels. The central idea is to allow countries some choice of approach while linking them in a common framework and encouraging a more ambitious overall effort.

This seemed very much what Blair had in mind in his May climate address in New Zealand. 'The policy mix is out there,' he said. 'What we have got to do is bring it together and put it within a disciplined framework so that governments know there is a menu of things that they can choose from to do, [and] they know they will be doing that within a framework that is internationally agreed.'

KYOTO STALLED

Implicit is the recognition that, on its own, Kyoto is unlikely to move forward. The Kyoto countries, as required under the Protocol, launched a new round in Montreal in December to negotiate post-2012 targets for industrialised nations. In Ottawa, however, the new conservative government has since made it clear that

The Conference Unit at Chatham House is running a conference on Climate Change on June 26 and 27 at which Elliot Diringer will be a speaker. Please contact Dino Ribeiro dribeiro@chathamhouse.org.uk

Canada will not reach its 2012 target; Europe and Japan are wary of taking new targets without the US; and no matter who succeeds Bush in the White House, the US is unlikely to join Kyoto in its present form.

Kyoto's best and perhaps only chance of survival is as part of a broader, more variable framework. Kyoto purists are right to object that binding targets provide the greatest certainty of environmental gain; but without broader participation, none will agree to targets, and the nascent international effort begun in Kyoto will sputter and fail.

In one important respect, however, Blair again risks reaching too far. He has recently begun to add a new element – an internationally agreed long-term goal. 'We have got to set a very bold ambition for the next stage,' he said in New Zealand, 'and that is to move as quickly as possible to a goal to stabilise climate change.' What type of goal, and how it is to be agreed, he did not make clear.

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change already establishes a long-term objective: stabilising greenhouse gases in the atmosphere to 'prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference' with the climate system. For the EU, that means limiting global temperature increase to two degrees centigrade. But there has been no attempt at broad international agreement on a specific long-term goal, with good reason. Given the layers of scientific complexity – and the extraordinary political stakes – such a negotiation would be likely to grind on forever.

The Pocantico group, too, emphasised the need for long-term goals to drive and gauge progress in the collective climate effort. But it cautioned against putting the issue to negotiation, urging instead that governments and others continue to espouse their own 'aspirational' goals, which could eventually coalesce into a more common, concrete view.

Averting catastrophic global warming calls for societal transformation on a scale never before attempted, except perhaps in time of war. Blair has put Britain at the forefront of this fledgling effort, and offers a compelling vision of the kind of path nations must follow if they are to succeed. True, it would help to know the precise end point we are aiming for. But we must be careful not to let that distract us too much from the immediate tasks at hand.

