

Why UK climate change policies are pointless

Robin Guenier March 2014

Global greenhouse gas emissions are growing and will continue to grow.

This stems partly, arguably mainly, from events in the 1970s. The then overwhelmingly powerful West, to accommodate 'Third World' aspiration for economic growth and escape from poverty, developed the concept of 'sustainable development',¹ effectively exempting it from environmental constraint. Confirmed at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, this was formalised in 1994 when, under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the world was divided into two blocs: Annex I countries (essentially the developed economies) and Non-Annex I countries (essentially the least developed world, OPEC members and developing and fast growing economies). Under Kyoto (1997), the former were committed to stabilising greenhouse gas emissions. The latter were not.

Over the years Non-Annex I countries, which include major economies such as China, India, South Korea, Brazil, South Africa, Saudi Arabia and Iran, have become increasingly powerful: in 2012 responsible for 67% of global CO₂ emissions.² Nonetheless, they have resolutely refused to change the Annex I / Non-Annex I categorisation. And, at the UN 'make or break'³ climate conference in Copenhagen in 2009, they humiliatingly defeated the West, with the EU not even involved in the final negotiations⁴ between the US and the so-called BASIC countries⁵:

*There was a clear victor. Equally clearly, there was a side that lost more comprehensively than at any international conference in modern history where the outcome had not been decided beforehand by force of arms.*⁶

The victors have been in the driving seat ever since. They were adamant at the UN climate conference in Warsaw last November that they would not accept binding commitments to reduce emissions.⁷ So, as Canada, Russia, Japan and probably Australia are moving away from commitment, countries responsible for nearly 75% of global CO₂ emissions² are most unlikely to agree to reduce their emissions. And, as the US, responsible for about 14% of emissions, will not agree to unilateral reduction, essentially only the EU, responsible for little more than 10%, is left.⁸

The Copenhagen victors, who obviously know all this, are thus given the perfect excuse for continuing business as usual. And for blaming the West. Hence China's current demand⁹ that 'developed' (i.e. Annex I) countries must immediately commit '*without any conditionality*' to reduce emissions by at least 40% on 1990 levels by 2020, whereas 'developing' (i.e. Non-Annex I) countries need do no more than implement their '*already communicated ... nationally appropriate mitigation action*'. And that involves no reduction commitment.⁵ All this,¹⁰ made worse by a demand for '*100 billion US Dollars per year by 2020 ... for developed country Parties ...*', is wholly unacceptable to the West: an impasse confirmed at UN-sponsored negotiations in Bonn last week.¹¹

In any case, the concept of the vast worldwide regulatory and social engineering project that would be necessary to make a global deal possible has always been hopelessly fanciful. Thus ambition for a binding global deal in Paris in 2015, the next 'make or break' climate conference,¹² will not be fulfilled. CO2 emissions will continue their inexorable rise: and the EU, whatever reductions it promises, cannot reverse that. Assertions that it, or even more so Britain (1.3% of emissions), should exercise 'leadership' are embarrassingly out of touch with global reality.

None of this is made any easier by China's view of the science: unlike the West, where it is widely accepted that man-made CO2 emissions contribute to temperature increases, there is no such acceptance in China,¹³ nor perhaps in some other key countries.¹⁴ Yet another obstacle is the understandable ambition of Non-Annex I countries to improve the condition of their very poor, especially when, according to recent research,¹⁵ *'increases in carbon emissions and economic development is widely recognized as a pathway to improving human well-being.'* The best example is again China: because of affordable, reliable electric power derived from inexpensive fossil fuels, mainly coal, it has lifted about 600 million people out of poverty in the last 30 years.¹⁶ It's hardly surprising other developing economies are determined to follow that example.

Given this background, the only rational approach for Britain and the EU is to stop bickering about the science and focus on policy. The object should be to establish an optimum course in a world where we are rapidly losing influence, where emissions will rise and where our trying to prevent that from happening is pointless. Instead we should come to terms with international political reality by prioritising a strong economy, underpinned by reliable affordable energy, and by focusing on long-term adaptation to whatever climate change may occur.

The Author

Robin Guenier, now mainly retired, is a writer, speaker and business consultant. He has an MA from Oxford and is a barrister. After twenty years as CEO of various high-tech companies, he founded (1995) an independent business consultancy, Guenier Ltd, specialising most recently in project risk; an early assignment was as CEO of the Central Computing and Telecommunications Agency reporting to the Cabinet Office. He was founder chair (now non exec. director) of the medical online research company, Medix UK. He has been a regular contributor to TV and radio and has had speaking engagements throughout the world. He has various charitable interests. This note was written in his private capacity.

Endnotes

- ¹ <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-02.htm>
- ² http://cdiac.ornl.gov/trends/emis/meth_reg.html (Go to 'Preliminary 2011 and 2012 Global & National Estimates'.)
- ³ <http://www.ituc-csi.org/make-or-break-for-copenhagen?lang=en>
- ⁴ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8426835.stm>
- ⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2010/jan/12/copenhagen-climate-change>
(Also note reference to Chinese and Indian pledges to cut 'carbon intensity', allowing emissions to grow as the economy grows – see xii below.)
- ⁶ Rupert Darwall: *The Age of Global Warming*, 310
- ⁷ <http://www.rtcc.org/2013/11/20/divide-between-rich-and-poor-at-un-climate-talks-as-wide-as-ever/>
- ⁸ And even the EU has lost momentum: <http://www.rtcc.org/2014/03/21/eu-delays-2030-climate-package-decision-until-october/>
- ⁹ https://unfccc.int/files/bodies/application/pdf/20140306-submission_on_adp_by_china_without_cover_page.pdf (Also see *Reuters* report here: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/03/06/climate-china-idUKL6N0M33V520140306> and this uncompromising position from Brazil, China and Saudi Arabia: <http://www.rtcc.org/2014/03/11/old-splits-emerge-as-un-climate-envoys-seek-framework-to-2015-deal/>)
- ¹⁰ This harsh reality is exemplified by China's plans for yet more coal capacity and for coal/gas conversion: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/01/07/china-coal-idUKL3N0K90H720140107> and <http://insideclimatenews.org/news/20140213/chinas-plan-clean-air-cities-will-doom-climate-scientists-say?page=show>. Also by Bangladesh's plans that 50% of its power will, by 2030, be generated by coal – up from 2% today: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/05/opinion/bangladeshs-coal-delusion.html?_r=0. And, re India and coal, see this: <http://freepressjournal.in/west-cannot-ask-india-to-stop-using-coal-sunita-narain/>
- ¹¹ <http://www.rtcc.org/2014/03/17/trust-deficit-blocking-progress-at-un-climate-talks/>
- ¹² <http://www.eenews.net/stories/1059990766>
- ¹³ <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/jan/14/china-imprints-all-over-copenhagen-talks-fiasco/?page=all> (This article also provides a useful overview of the Copenhagen failure and refers to the meaninglessness of China's 'commitment' to reduce its 'carbon intensity'.)
- ¹⁴ <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/WrittenEvidence.svc/EvidenceHtml/4191>
(See section 3.5, last paragraph)
- ¹⁵ <http://www.nature.com/nclimate/journal/v4/n3/full/nclimate2110.html>
- ¹⁶ <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview>. (Go to 'results') Also see: <http://www.iea.org/newsroomandevents/speeches/131206MCMR2013LaunchRemarks.pdf> (See the opening paragraph.) This IEA presentation provides a good short overview of the reality of coal's dominance of power generation worldwide.