

Labour MPs issued with briefing on the Climate Change Bill

Friends of the Earth has been sent a copy of a briefing note (dated 19 September 2006) produced by the Parliamentary Labour Party to advise their MPs on how to respond to the Big Ask Big Month Big Lobby. This therefore offers big clues as to how your MP may respond.

The note has six bullet points – the first three are background information on Labour’s position. The crucial points are contained in the later sections. Most important of all is bullet 5, which says

- **However, proposals for legally binding annual targets are flawed. Emissions fluctuate from year to year due to factors outside the Government's control, such as the weather and the prices of different fuels, as well as the economic cycle. That is why international climate change policy frameworks such as the Kyoto Protocol and EU Emissions Trading Scheme are currently based on five-year phases.**

This completely misunderstands what the Big Ask is calling for. Friends of the Earth has always recognised that emissions are unlikely to fall in a perfectly straight line, and that there will be annual variation as a result of weather changes and so on. The Climate Change Bill that was presented to Parliament by Michael Meacher specifically allows flexibility to take account of this. The Bill is available here (<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmbills/043/2006043.pdf>)

The Bill takes the approach of setting a very precise target for each year, and placing a duty on Minister to do what they believe is necessary to meet that target (Clause 1). Progress must then be reported to Parliament annually (Clause 3) and in the event that the target is missed it sets out a very sensible, graded response to this, which is based on how serious the breach is, and always subject to the approval of Parliament (Clause 4). So it may be that in one year there is a minor breach that has nothing to do with Government policies being inadequate, and is solely the result of unseasonable weather, or a short-term glitch in energy prices. In such a situation, the Government would find it easy to persuade Parliament of that fact, and MPs would vote to approve their action plan, which would be to continue existing policies.

However, the existence of the annual target would at least ensure this reason was tested. This means that if it were found to be an unconvincing excuse in any one year, Parliament could refuse to approve a Government proposal to make no amendment to their policies – or in the case of more serious breaches, Parliament could propose new policies through Select Committees. In the most serious cases, Select Committees could also recommend Ministers were censured – though again this would be subject to a vote of all MPs.

There are numerous other ways such flexibility could be introduced – for example the Government already produces temperature corrected emission figures, specifically designed to “remove” the effect of a cold winter. A three-year rolling average could be another way, or a system in which you could “bank” any cuts you made of more than 3% and then “borrow” them back in years when the cuts were less – though this would have to be over a limited period (a Parliament perhaps).

For the avoidance of any doubt, we have repeatedly told Labour Party officials that we accept the need for a level of flexibility to account for weather and other such matters. It is also absolutely clear that the Bill we drafted with Michael Meacher provides such flexibility.

Nevertheless, we accept that ours is not the only solution, and that there are pros and cons to the different ways of providing this. But Parliament can only debate and test the differing approaches if time is made available to do so. This is precisely why we need a Bill in the Queen's Speech.

- **A further weakness of the Bill proposed by Friends of the Earth is that it wills the ends without willing the means, containing no actual measures to reduce emissions.**

This again completely misunderstands the purpose of the Bill. At no stage has Friends of the Earth argued for a Bill and for the Government to do nothing else. What the Bill provides is a framework against which the effect of the many other things we are calling for (*energy efficiency, sustainable transport, renewable energy*) can be measured.

And of course, it of course remains entirely open to the Government to put a Bill in the Queen's Speech that includes a robust legal framework on the lines we are calling for **and also includes** a series of legal changes that make it easier for low-carbon technologies to make progress.

Finally, there is a real difference between the "targets" in this Bill and many other targets. The targets we propose for carbon dioxide emissions add up to a total level of emissions from now until 2050, which we cannot afford to breach if we want the UK to play its role in keeping global temperature rise below 2 degrees C. They are not simply aspirational things it would be nice to achieve if we could. They are different to the subjective judgements involved when Government bodies decide, say, how long it is reasonable to wait for a bus, or how fast a passport should take to process. The targets in the Climate Change Bill are based on what scientists are telling us we need to do to avoid the worst impacts of climate change.

Other points in the briefing

Labour's Manifesto Commitment

The briefing provides as a background an extract from Labour's manifesto saying

"The UK has already met its obligations under the Kyoto Protocol. We remain committed to achieving a 20 per cent reduction in carbon dioxide emissions on 1990 levels by 2010, and our review of progress this summer will show us how to get back on track. A 60 per cent reduction by 2050 remains necessary and achievable."

It is actually impossible to have “already met” the obligations under the Kyoto Protocol, since those obligations are to restrict emissions across a five year period we haven’t even reached yet. It is true that emissions of the basket of five greenhouse gases are currently below the average level required in that period – but carbon dioxide emissions (the most important of the six gases included) are rising, and unless this trend is turned, we could rise back above the Kyoto levels by the time the obligations are actually measured.

The Government has of course accepted it will no longer reach the 20% target it set (this is mentioned in the second bullet point of the briefing) and we are heading in the wrong direction to meet the 60% target, which in any event is now considered inadequate by scientists.

And in case you think it is all doom and gloom, there are some nice bits too:-

- Government recognises that we need to do more to make progress towards our long term goal of cutting CO2 emission by 60 per cent by 2050. Interim targets and milestones have a role to play but do not of themselves reduce emissions.
- We welcome the contribution made to the debate by Friends of the Earth and the Stop Climate Chaos coalition. There is a serious debate to be had about legislative frameworks and the role of targets and milestones. The Government is currently looking at the role of carbon budgeting as a means of helping to deliver our goals.