

Media Briefing

Advance: 28th November – 9th December

THE UK'S ROLE AT THE UN CLIMATE TALKS

UN Climate Change Conference, 28 November to 9 December 2005, Montréal, Canada

International climate negotiations take place in Montreal, Canada, from 28th November – 9th December 2005 when governments from 190 countries meet to discuss the next phase of the treaty. The talks come at a crucial time with scientists saying that urgent action is needed if dramatic climate change is to be avoided. The UK Government, which will hold the presidency of the European Union during the talks, will be a key player in the negotiations and could play a crucial role on this international stage.

The effects of climate change are already being felt in many parts of the world, with extreme weather events, including flooding, more intense hurricanes and above average temperatures in the UK and Europe. Globally, DEFRA figures show the 10 warmest years on record have all been since 1990. Scientists have warned that recent developments, such as permafrost melting, could be exacerbating the situation.

The Prime Minister Tony Blair appeared to recognise the urgency of the situation when he made action on climate change a priority for the G8 Summit in Gleneagles. As President of the EU, Mr Blair will have the opportunity to follow through on his priorities by ensuring the EU stands firmly behind a strong mandate for action at an international level. Clear targets and timelines are needed for action under the second phase (post 2012) of the Kyoto Protocol.

This briefing looks at why the Kyoto Protocol is so important and at what the UK's role has been in the Kyoto Process and sets out why the UK Government has such a crucial role to play in these current talks.

Friends of the Earth Director Tony Juniper said:

“The Montreal talks are a crucial opportunity to move forward international action to tackle climate change. The Prime Minister Tony Blair can play an important role in this as President of the European Union by standing firm on the need for firm targets and a clear timetable for talks. Countries in the developed world must take a lead by acting urgently to cut their emissions of CO₂ and they must also work to develop a framework so that rapidly developing countries such as China and India can be brought on board.

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Former Environment Minister Michael Meacher said:

"The need for urgent action to tackle climate change has never been clearer. We are running out of time for talking and must act. Tony Blair has rightly pushed world leaders on this issue. He must now follow through by ensuring that real progress is made. An agreement to negotiate on firm targets with a clear timetable in Montreal could prove the greatest measure of how successful Blair's year for climate has been. "

Why the Kyoto Protocol is so important

The Kyoto Protocol was negotiated under the UN Framework Climate Change Convention and is the first legally binding international treaty on the environment. While the Convention placed an obligation on countries to reduce levels of greenhouse gas emissions, the Protocol set legally-binding targets for industrialised countries, committing them to taking action to tackle climate change. Negotiations began in Kyoto in 1997 and were completed in Bonn 2003, with the Treaty coming into force in February 2005.

What next for the Kyoto Protocol?

The Kyoto Protocol came into force on 16th February 2005 and so the Montreal talks are the first opportunity for the 36 countries currently bound by the treaty to discuss further action. A total of 140 countries have ratified Kyoto and will also be in attendance. The conference will look for the first time at the next commitment period, post 2012.

Some have interpreted the end of the first phase of Kyoto as the end of the Protocol, but this is not the case. Negotiators have a choice – either they could take a regressive step, and base the 2012 regime on the Convention (UNFCCC), which would entail no mandatory targets, or they could take positive steps to build on the Kyoto Framework. Such an agreement could strengthen Kyoto, by including tougher targets for Annex 1 industrialised countries and start to bring in some developing countries.

It is true that the Kyoto Protocol does not go far enough. If all 36 countries signed up to the Protocol and committed to reduction targets meet their commitments to cut carbon dioxide emissions, global emissions will only be reduced by 5.2 % from 1990 levels. This is an important first step, but further action on a much greater scale is urgently needed. It is widely accepted that to avoid dangerous climate change, global emissions must peak around 2015, with subsequent decreases by 2050.

Friends of the Earth believes that the existing Protocol must act as a stepping stone for further action. Negotiators must not backtrack and waste years of negotiations. The key benefit of the Kyoto Protocol is that it contains reduction commitments for developed countries.

The international umbrella group of environmental organisations, Climate Action Network, has set forth a clear proposal for the post-2012 regime including more ambitious absolute and binding reduction targets for industrialised 'Annex I' countries; commitments from rapidly-developing, non-Annex I countries to advance their development goals in a sustainable manner, largely funded by the industrialized world; and increased adaptation measures for the most vulnerable countries and communities. http://www.climatenetwork.org/docs/CAN-DP_Framework.pdf

Any agreement to launch negotiations in Montreal is not expected to include any details on types and level of commitment. But these negotiations must result in industrialized countries making further, mandatory emission cuts, in the order of 30 per cent by 2020 and 80 per cent by 2050. The

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agreement should also include key elements such as technology transfer, land-use and forestry, adaptation and the legally binding nature of the regime.

The UK Position

The UK Government played a lead role in setting up the Kyoto Protocol and has always been a firm advocate of the need for international action with clear targets and timetables. The then Tory Environment Minister John Gummer played an important role in the negotiations to establish the Kyoto Protocol in 1995.

Speaking ahead of the Kyoto conference, newly-elected Prime Minister Tony Blair was clear on his commitment to the Protocol (June 1997):

“To be really effective, we must act globally. At Kyoto, industrial countries must agree legally binding targets for significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions during the first decade of the next century. The biggest responsibility falls on those countries with the biggest emissions. We in Europe have put our cards on the table. It is time for the special pleading to stop and for others to follow suit. If we fail at Kyoto, we fail our children, because the consequences will be felt in their lifetime. And we must all deliver on the commitments we make. Setting new targets means little if old ones are ignored.”

(<http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page1045.asp>)

When ministers met in The Hague for further discussions on the Kyoto Protocol in 2000, the UK's then Environment Secretary John Prescott played a key role, finally storming out of the meeting following the failure of other EU countries to agree on targets.

In a key speech on the environment in 2001, Prime Minister Tony Blair again showed his commitment to Kyoto:

“The Kyoto process stands as a monument to enlightened global diplomacy. It represents the first real step down the road of collective action to meet our collective responsibility. For the first time, developed countries agreed to take on legally binding targets to cut their emissions.”

(See: <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page1583.asp>)

And ahead of the 2001 UN climate negotiations in Bonn, where consensus on the Kyoto Protocol was finally reached, John Prescott took to the skies, visiting Japan and the United Nations in New York in a bid to persuade reluctant countries to get on board.

By 2003, Blair had realized that Kyoto would not bring down emission levels fast enough and urged action to go beyond the Kyoto targets:

“So it is clear Kyoto is not radical enough. But it is at the moment the most that is politically achievable. And even the Kyoto targets have proved controversial with some countries, notably America. Many see it as a threat to the pursuit of economic growth.

I believe this needn't be the case. If we harness new technology the evidence is mounting that we can achieve a target of 60% - and at reasonable cost.”

(<http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page3073.asp>)

Even this year, Blair's commitment to Kyoto was further emphasised in a speech made in Davos to business leaders in January 2005 where he said:

“I support the Kyoto Protocol. Others will not and that position is understood. But business

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and the global economy need to know this isn't an issue that is going away."
(<http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page7006.asp>)

And after the G8 Summit in Gleneagles, Tony Blair told a press briefing:

"On climate change, I haven't changed my view on Kyoto, or targets, or any of the rest of it."
(See: <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page7891.asp>)

More recently Tony Blair's position appears to have shifted. After failing to reach agreement on any substantial action at the G8 meeting in Gleneagles, the Prime Minister hosted a summit on clean energy in London where he appeared to move away from a commitment to legally-binding targets, saying talk of specific frameworks and targets made people "very nervous and very worried". He continued:

"People fear some external force is going to impose some internal target on you which is going to restrict your economic growth."
(<http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page8439.asp>)

The timing of the Prime Minister's remarks set alarm bells ringing. A move away from targets at this stage leaves the post-2012 negotiations vulnerable to weakening. But this was followed by a speech at Mansion House (14th November) where Tony Blair re-asserted the need for targets, but also emphasised the importance of including the US and China:

"We urgently need a framework, with the necessary targets, sensitively and intelligently applied over the right timeframe, that takes us beyond 2012. It can only happen if the US, China and India join with Europe, Japan and others to create such a framework. Failure will mean not only increasing the damage to the environment but in a world of greater competition for carbon fuel, real pressure on energy supply and energy prices. Yet such an agreement cannot materialize without the major nations of the world agreeing an approach that is fair and balanced, sharing the most advanced science and technology to tackle carbon emissions. "
(See: www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page8523.asp)

As the scientific evidence makes clear, the targets post 2012 must be strengthened, not watered down.

Earlier this month Lord May, former Chief Scientific Advisor and President of the Royal Society stated:

"I believe it hugely important that this meeting [COP 11] agrees, at very least, to initiate a study of target levels for atmospheric concentrations, as a basis for discussing appropriate plans of action". He went on to add "The blunter truth about the politics of climate change is that countries are not doing enough to sever the link between economic growth and increasing emissions of greenhouse gases."

(See: www.royalsoc.ac.uk/downloaddoc.asp?id=2334)

Recent results suggest that to avoid dangerous and runaway climate change, atmospheric concentration levels of carbon dioxide (and equivalents) should be kept at below 400ppm. Current levels are at 370ppm, rising on average by 3ppm a year.

(See : Malte Meinshausen, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich: "On the Risk to

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Overshoot 2 °C"; presentation held at the UK government's international conference "Avoiding Dangerous Climate Change"; see <http://www.stabilisation2005.com>)

The EU Position

The UK's position will be negotiated as part of the EU delegation. The European Union's agreed position is to seek an ambitious start of formal negotiations for the post 2012 regime under the Kyoto Protocol. The EU has confirmed that it wishes to remain open and flexible to the measures which will be required at an international level to address climate change.

More specifically the EU is seeking adoption of the Marrakesh Accords (agreements reached at the UN climate talks in 2001 which set various rules for "operating" the more complex provisions of the Kyoto Protocol), agreement on funding for developing countries and efforts to make the Clean Development Mechanism work more efficiently. The CDM is part of the mechanisms described under the Kyoto Protocol which allows industrialised countries to contribute towards their emission reduction targets by establishing and financing projects in developing countries. (see http://europa-eu-un.org/articles/fr/article_5136_fr.htm).

What the UK must do in Montreal

Friends of the Earth believes that Tony Blair must take a strong lead in the Montreal negotiations. In particular we want to see a timeline for the post 2012 negotiations agreed (beginning in 2005 and ending in 2008), and confirmation that these negotiations will build on the framework of the Kyoto Protocol

He must also set an example by leading the way in taking action to cut emissions at home. Friends of the Earth is calling on the UK Government to commit to annual reductions in carbon dioxide emissions of three per cent year on year. See www.thebigask.com

For more information

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change has more information on the Kyoto Protocol here: http://unfccc.int/essential_background/kyoto_protocol/items/2830.php

A briefing on the Montreal talks and Friends of the Earth's activities in Montreal is available at: www.foe.co.uk/resource/media_briefing/montrealclimatetalks.pdf

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