

Cometh the Hour

Climate Change, Politics and Leadership in Britain Today

Speech by John Ashton CBE to a Friends of the Earth and RSA event, 16 May 2013

1. Did anyone see Question Time three weeks ago? As usual, Nigel Farage was on. With him were: a Conservative Minister with economic responsibilities, call him Mr Blue; a senior Liberal Democrat not in the government known as a champion of environmental causes, Mr Orange; a Labour shadow Minister whose job description includes climate change, Ms Red; and Ms Green, representing her eponymous party.
2. Question one was about the economy. The UKIP leader explained with customary brio how he would get growth going. High on his list was scapping climate change regulation. No surprise there.
3. Nobody kicked the ball into the open goal. Nobody explained why we need a low carbon growth story, in response to climate change, and as part of a strategy to revive the economy and protect it against systemic risks. Nobody took issue with Mr Farage nor even mentioned climate change.
4. Mr Blue might be forgiven for skating over the fact that the government for which he works once advertised itself as our greenest ever. But my goodness, what were Ms Red, Mr Orange and Ms Green thinking? It was as unwatchable as Tottenham Hotspur's penalty shootout a few evenings earlier.

5. I mention this not to embarrass the protagonists - though frankly they should be embarrassed - but because of what it reveals.
6. None of our big national parties is yet serious about climate change. It's not that they don't have policies, even some good ones. But they haven't built a conversation with the country about what climate change means in relation to their values. What it means in the context of our history and our national character. What it means for the choices we now face, about where we are going and ultimately about who we think we are.
7. For many politicians, climate change is still in an awkward category marked "green". They want the label but when the conversation turns to jobs and growth, it doesn't always occur to them to mention it.
8. That's a pity because what happens on climate change will be determined by a political struggle that cannot be separated from the debate about jobs and growth. It's a struggle that is now entering its decisive phase; a struggle between two incompatible ideas.
9. The first can be expressed in three words. *Must. Now. Can.*
10. We *must* do whatever it takes. Otherwise the consequences of climate change will undermine security and prosperity. We must build a carbon neutral energy system, within a generation. So let's get cracking *now*.

11. We have the technology, and the capital. If it feels impossible that's a matter not of resources but of political will, which is ours to shape. *We can* do this.
12. The competing idea is more slippery. It pretends to offer more than it does. It has persuasive spin-doctors. But if it hoisted a flag, the words embroidered on it would surely be: *mustn't; not now; can't*.
13. Of course we should act on carbon, it says. But we *mustn't* in doing so abandon cherished ideas, especially about the primacy of markets, or disrupt the established structure of the economy, which since the industrial revolution has revolved around an energy system dominated by coal, oil, and gas. And we certainly *mustn't* disturb the power balances embedded in those ideas, that structure.
14. Moreover, the time to get moving on carbon is....*not now*. Today our focus is jobs and growth. And, let's be honest in private, the economy runs on fossil fuels. We *can't* kick the habit within 30 years, especially with shale gas changing the game.
15. *Must, now, can* is the best we can do on climate change. It is a credible response. It gives us a chance of avoiding stresses we cannot manage, and managing those we can't avoid.
16. It is also a prospectus for transformation. It will release forces that will reshape our country and our lives. But this will be a transformation of choice. We will be able to control it. And it will build us a better country.
17. *Mustn't, not now, can't* means giving up on climate change. It says: "let's do what's easy to do, not what we know we have to do".

18. Yet it too is a prospectus for transformation. The forces it unleashes might take longer to build. But they will also reshape our country. They will not be under anyone's control, and the country they leave behind will certainly not be a better place.
19. Some point to a third idea. Call it *don't bother*. That idea has a life of its own, on the internet, in some newspapers, on the political right. But in reality it is just an extreme form of *mustn't, not now, can't*. It too says: cling to business as usual and hope for the best.
20. You can't transform a country by stealth. It requires consent and in a democracy that means an explicit political choice. It requires mobilization and therefore a call to arms. It requires honesty about the burdens, and acceptance of measures to help those whose communities and livelihoods depend on the high carbon economy.
21. This is not a new lesson. In Britain in recent years we have seen what happens if you try by stealth to take a country to war, or redistribute wealth, without being honest about what you are doing and its implications. The biggest mistake is to take the people for fools.
22. In the case of climate change, the desired transformation needs to be reflected correctly in other debates. Right now, the central debate is about where jobs and growth are going to come from, and the role of government in shaping the economy. It is meaningless to discuss those issues in isolation from climate change and the response to it. That's why those exchanges on Question Time were so revealing.

23. Nowhere has this struggle been won. But in Britain we had been laying the foundation for a *must, now, can* response. We were admired for that around the world and that enabled us through our diplomacy to build confidence and ambition elsewhere.
24. People didn't just notice we had a Climate Change Act with binding carbon budgets. They noticed that it passed with overwhelming cross-party support. Outside the UK this created the impression that we had managed to build a climate response that transcended the day-to-day party politics.
25. That consensus gave a huge boost to British climate diplomacy in which it was my privilege to play a part. It strengthened the hand of those in other countries pressing for higher ambition. It has been one of the main stimuli for climate legislation around the world.
26. Which makes recent events all the more puzzling to those around the world who have been stretching every sinew in their countries to build a similar consensus.
27. Imagine you are sitting not in this magnificent room but in a nearby football stadium. A plucky underdog, that's got to be England, is up against a stronger rival, say Germany. England got an early lead and kept pressing forward, threatening more goals. A promising second half is about to start.
28. But during the interval, the England lineup has been reshuffled. As the teams emerge from the tunnel, one substitute, the feisty Hayes, who has replaced the steady midfielder Hendry, suddenly turns on his teammate Davey and starts kicking him in the shins.

29. Then the referee, it's Howard Webb of course, blows his whistle. But hang on. Osborne, from the centre spot, hoofs the ball back to Paterson, another of the new substitutes, who smashes it past goalkeeper Alexander into his own net. That's is repeated at each restart. It's like Groundhog Day.
30. Let's look at the replays.
31. A gas strategy that includes scenarios that breach our own carbon budgets. Own goal!
32. A looming carbon budget review imposed by the Treasury that spooks potential investors. Own goal!
33. The Treasury also blocks power sector carbon targets for 2030 that are supported by much of industry and necessary to keep on the track set by the Climate Change Act. Own goal!
34. Fortunately, a cross party group of MPs led by Tim Yeo and Barry Gardiner has, with support from Friends of the Earth, been pushing to get the target back into the Energy Bill. The decisive vote will, it has emerged today, take place on 3 June, less than three weeks away. It is vital that the target be restored. I can't myself see how any MP who votes against the target will thereafter be able credibly to claim that they support an effective response to climate change.
35. But by blocking the target, the Treasury completed a hat trick, because it had also binned a proposed review, supported by the rest of Whitehall, of the risk to the economy from climate and resource insecurity. Own goal!

36. And there's more. Politicians close to some in power are thanks to Greenpeace caught on camera calling for the whole carbon budget system to be scrapped. Own goal!
37. Meanwhile the Green Investment Bank still can't borrow, despite record low interest rates, minimal fiscal risk, and less prohibitive arrangements for financing regular infrastructure. Own goal!
38. The Green Deal is launched at interest rates too high to attract many of its target customers. Own goal!
39. The Department whose job it is to anticipate and manage the stresses of climate change, DEFRA, has just revealed, in response to a freedom of information request by Friends of the Earth, that it plans to cut its team working on climate adaptation from 38 to 6. This news comes just as a major new report that DEFRA has itself commissioned warns of growing climate disruption in our countryside. Own goal!
40. Meanwhile over at the academy - to go back into the sporting metaphor - our youth coach Gove seems determined to scrub all references to "football" from training manuals for under 15's. Own goal!
41. Howard Webb blows his whistle to end the misery. I make it 9-1 to Germany, every goal scored by England.
42. Now our coach is meeting the press. What's that draped over his shoulders, with a neat hole between its eyes, dripping blood? Could it be a husky?
43. Someone shouts: "that husky's dead!" "Dead?" the coach replies, looking shifty. "Dead? It's not dead, it's resting. It's probably pining, yes, it's pining for the

tundra. There, look” he says, jerking his shoulders, “it moved”.

44. That’s quite enough. But it’s worse than that.
45. The government may think it has a growth story. Nobody else does. If it would stop looking at low carbon growth in the way the Spanish Inquisition looked at heretics, it could find a growth story in front of its nose. The economy as a whole bumps along the bottom. The low carbon economy keeps growing at nearly 4%.
46. The low carbon economy uses electricity to do more things in smarter ways, while moving to emission-free generation. Getting to it will be a new chapter in the story of a Britain that has always been a pioneer in electricity, energy, and engineering, on land and at sea.
47. An infrastructure makeover, supported by an unshackled Green Investment Bank, in power, public and private transport, ports, and offshore installations. Good for growth.
48. Energy refits for our buildings, some of the least efficient in western Europe, supported by a ramped up Green Deal. It would push down bills and get people off benefits into jobs. Good for growth, much of it shovel ready.
49. A Britain at last getting off the hook of oil and gas dependency, taming a source of inflation and shielding us against price shock recessions. Good for growth.
50. A surge of low carbon innovation coursing along our supply chains. Good for growth.

51. A rebalancing, back to the real economy away from casino finance, and back to our neglected heartlands. Good for growth and good for our country.
52. The point is, we have done ourselves avoidable harm and are missing opportunities. We seem trapped in a pocket of dark energy.
53. Nick Clegg says David Cameron is giving up on climate change because UKIP is pulling his Party to the right. But that's only a consequence of the dark energy. We won't escape from it unless we can find its source. That lies not in opinion polls and local elections but in an idea.
54. It's the idea that has dominated politics throughout my adult life. The idea of a cult whose priesthood thought that when the Cold War ended, they were the real winners.
55. The market knows best. Business will always allocate resources more efficiently than those enemies of enterprise in Whitehall. Government must be shrunk.
56. On the right, animated by such slogans, an English tea party is now in full swing. The rowdy guests seem more intent on ripping up red tape and setting fire to quangos than nibbling the cucumber sandwiches prepared by the vicar's wife.
57. But this faith in markets is not just a feature of the right. It is pervasive. It was part of New Labour, eager as it was to win approval from business and the City. Nor is it the authentic voice of either left or right in our country. Both sides have their roots in deeper reflexes, in values to which the market is blind, in fairness,

continuity, community. That's why the phrase "One Nation" resonates across the political spectrum.

58. This market fundamentalism has really taken root in the machinery of government, where it has become a cultural reflex. That means that however strong the political intent, the implementation of interventionist policies is always an uphill task.
59. The market is a powerful engine. Managed in the public interest it is an engine for good. Hatred of the market is as damaging as infatuation with it.
60. But climate insecurity is not a normal market failure, an externality in the jargon that can be dealt with by adjusting the price signals in a model in some optimal way. It is a threat to the conditions under which a modern economy can function at all. With food, water, and energy insecurity it is the multiplier in a nexus of systemic risk.
61. What matters with climate change is that we should be certain about the outcome - a carbon neutral energy system - and how quickly we will get to it. There can be no room for policy failure.
62. You can fix the climate problem. Or you can cling to a dogma about small government. But you can't do both at the same time - which may be why so many small government enthusiasts seem troubled by the idea that we should deal with climate change.
63. We need a different project. One that speaks in new ways about the relationship between the public and private realms.

64. We keep being told Britain is in a race. Other countries grow faster because they have less red tape and more flexible markets. We must set our market free so we can grow again. Onto the bonfire with planning regulations, employment protection, health and safety rules, gold plating on the environment and on climate. And then we'll be OK.
65. Except we won't. The dragon this story asks us to slay is a shadow on the wall. It is only dangerous because it draws attention away from a greater threat.
66. The current crisis was not caused by too much regulation. High growth economies are struggling to build whole frameworks of new regulation fast enough to maintain the social and environmental conditions for more growth. Would you rather be breathing London's air right now or Beijing's?
67. Of course government should make it as easy as possible to run a successful business. But that's not the key question today.
68. The top public interest question is not about competing against China. It is about working with China and other partners to maintain the global conditions without which no nation can now offer its citizens a prospect of security and prosperity:
- not only a rapid shift globally to a carbon neutral energy system; but also
 - a transition from profligacy with resources to efficiency;
 - a shared effort to build resilience into our national models for growth and development; within

- an open global economy and a culture of multilateralism now threatened by our failure to begin the transition. Recent bans on food exports following bad harvests are a warning.

69. Our biggest challenges today arise from our interdependence. We cannot address them by putting ourselves at the mercy of markets or by turning our backs on each other. The only way to keep control of our destiny is to maintain the will and the confidence to share sovereignty on equal terms with others, in order to tame forces that originate in the operation of global markets, that acknowledge no borders, and that will if untamed erode our sovereignty anyway.
70. For Britain even to contemplate leaving the European Union in these circumstances is madness. Clearly, deep cracks have opened up in the political foundation of the European project. But our national interest lies in working with our partners, as “we together” not “them and us”, for a reformed and politically revitalized EU capable of looking beyond the current crisis.
71. Nobody has yet explained why leaders representing hundreds of millions if not billions of people, when they meet to decide all our fortunes, should pay the slightest attention to one representing 60 million. To leave the EU would be a betrayal of the British people not a liberation.
72. Interdependence is the condition that now defines us. We cannot escape it. With a politics and diplomacy of shared endeavour, we can harvest its opportunities while managing its risks. If we distract ourselves with false dragons - paper tigers the Chinese call them - governments will find that the buttons they press will not

deliver the outcomes they seek. That response to interdependence will destroy us.

73. And we cannot show one face to the world and another to our next-door neighbour. The only politics we can have is the politics we grow at home.
74. That's why, since I left my Foreign Office role last year, I've been doing my best to understand what the British public think of our politics.
75. We think politics is broken. We have no confidence that it will rise to the challenge. We feel in the grip of forces that our leaders do not understand and cannot manage. So we feel anxious about the future, we don't look forward to it.
76. We don't join political parties in the numbers we used to, spend our spare time knocking on doors for them, nor turn out in elections. Our mainstream politics is less connected to the base of society than for generations.
77. Into that gap scurry opportunists, attention-seekers, populists, pied pipers and demagogues, always good entertainers, peddling the illusion of simple solutions in a complex world.
78. We don't feel close to our politicians, or trust them. They are a class apart. We think they are more interested in listening to each other, and to an equally self-regarding media, than to us; more interested in running the headlines than running the country.
79. We yearn for a real conversation about who we are and where we are going as a country, a vision for the future. It was because of that appetite to explore what we can accomplish together that the Olympics tugged

so much at our hearts last summer, and Danny Boyle's opening tableau so lifted our spirits.

80. Meanwhile, the social contract forged by my parents' generation after they had fought a war is coming apart. They were not wealthy, their cities were still strewn with rubble, yet they had no higher priority than to build a society in which everyone could enjoy freedom from want, freedom from squalor, freedom from disease, freedom from ignorance and freedom from idleness. They did have a vision that drew them together.
81. The most serious tear in the fabric of that settlement is between my generation, the over 50s, who have our hands on the levers of power, and our children, those still under 30. The consequences of our decisions will be their inheritance.
82. They are the first modern generation who, as they look at the future, see a prospect that looks worse than the prospect their parents saw. They know something has gone wrong and needs fixing, but they see an elite too busy clinging to the old system, for comfort or profit, to start a conversation with them about how to build a new one.
83. It might have been the goal of the Olympics to inspire a generation. But that's not what young people today feel the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, and Labour are trying to do.
84. Nick Clegg's U-turn on tuition fees was for many the last straw – not because of the debts they will be saddled with, but because the original promise had persuaded many to vote Liberal Democrat and they felt duped. I've lost count of the young people who have

said to me: “that’s the last time I will believe any promise by a politician”.

85. So their generation has turned its back. There can be nothing more corrosive in any society than a collective turning away by its young people.
86. A renewal of the contract between generations should be the first priority for a renewal of politics. It will need to begin with an open conversation about the future. But if whatever emerges is not credible on climate, it will not be credible at all. If there is one group of people who know a *must, now, can* response is the only response to climate change, it is our young people.
87. A renewal of politics will not happen by itself – whether you are over 50 or under 30; whether your life is in diplomacy or government, business, a university, a think tank, an NGO or wherever. As Kennedy understood, renewal begins with what you do, not what you demand of others. The first step is to understand that we all have agency, we are all responsible for how we use it.
88. Each sector of society should ask itself honestly how it can renew itself in order to contribute to national renewal. But tonight I’ll only highlight one group - environmental NGOs - not because they are especially unrenewed, but because Andy asked me to speak honestly about them when he invited me to give this talk.
89. You have won the battle your founders founded you to win. You have forced your concerns, not a moment too soon, into the public consciousness and onto the political agenda. It is a significant victory, one to be celebrated.

90. In winning it, you have won the trust of the public on the issues you have raised. That trust is all the more valuable for being in short supply elsewhere. But it gives you a heavy responsibility. How you now make use of it will be critical in building the consent for transformation I talked about earlier.
91. The next battle cannot be won using the techniques with which you won the first. It will be about outcomes not issues. It will be about how you use your power, the power that comes with trust, not just your voice.
92. The fact is, we can't fix the climate problem, or any of the other problems on the agenda you have set, unless we can now fix politics itself.
93. Fill the gap that politics has vacated. Connect with the base of society. Mobilize coalitions to offer people solutions to problems that politics in its current form ignores. And do that on the basis of a more strategic assessment than I suspect you have of what is to be done and where you can change the game.
94. In everything you do, put politics first. There's no point in being right if you don't also get your way. Focus on the outcomes that need to be secured. Don't be taken in, as government so often is, by the false allure of process, of the endless generation of text, of policy for its own sake, of getting in the papers. Think more about how as a movement you can expand the limits of the possible, as you are beginning to on climate, and perhaps a bit less about how much recognition you can each win within the current limits.
95. What happens in any society is the result of an interplay of forces. If you have the confidence at this

crucial moment to see yourselves not as commentators on that interplay but as one of the shaping forces, outcomes that long seemed out of reach will drop into your hands.

96. Andy, that's been forthright as you asked. I hope it's also been useful.
97. What of politics itself?
98. We get the politics we deserve. If we turn our backs, we choose impotence. If we think that politics can't give us what we need, we can engage with it and change it.
99. It is not enough to occupy the vacant spaces. We must take our places in the crowded rooms where choices are made.
100. We must say: "don't tell us what we must do to be accepted into your tribe. Tell us what you will do to inspire us again".
101. There is one thing we need that only politics can give us. Leadership.
102. Our British myths tell us that leadership will present itself at our hour of need. In Masefield's dream of midsummer, the waiting king stirs each year at midnight from his centuries of slumber under the hill and declares:

*But when the trumpet summons, we will rise,
We, who are fibres of the country's soul,
We will take horse and come
To purge the blot and make the broken whole;
And make a green abundance seem more wise*

103. I don't know about the trumpet. From here I can hear an entire brass band on the march, complete with euphonium and big bass drum.

104. Authentic leadership will rally us, and remake from our collective will the link that has snapped in our broken chain of progress, our belief that we must and we can, now, pass on to the next generation the prospect of a better life.

105. I know what I am waiting for.

106. Leadership that yes, says *must, now, can* on climate change.

107. But leadership whose quest is not to win the headlines but to heal the wound in our political body.

108. Leadership that speaks in a language that brings us together, shunning callow appeals to envy and resentment; a language that gives us confidence to look out into the world so that we can draw strength from our neighbours and influence their choices, not waste energy in futile attempts to put up walls to hide behind.

109. Every leader holds up a mirror. Most who hold office are no worse than we who put them there, but no better either. In their mirror we see ourselves.

110. Occasionally we see something else. We see not only who we are but who we were at our best and who we can be again. That's the leadership we need today.

111. I will say more about the international picture in a talk at SOAS next Thursday. For now, let me just say this.

112. Of course we will fail on climate change unless *must, now, can* prevails globally. British diplomacy can influence this, perhaps critically; the argument that we are just too small to count is nonsense. But our diplomacy starts at home.
113. I have been personally involved in British climate diplomacy for most of the last 15 years, at the heart of it for much of that time. Nothing that we accomplished could have been accomplished if we had been faltering at home as we are now. You cannot expect others to act as you ask, or even listen to what you say, if you are not doing yourself what you want them to do. If we in Britain appear to be giving up on *must, now, can* we will be out of the game. That is why I spent so much of my time as a diplomat, close to half of it, on domestic policy. And its why I've focused on the home front today.
114. The next two years will be decisive, with a Summit next year, and a climax in the UN talks in Paris in 2015. The biggest danger would be an effort, driven by the US because of its Congressional constraints, to persuade the rest of the world to abandon the legally binding approach that, as with our Climate Change Act, is at the heart of the *must, now, can* idea. Such an effort to build a new Washington Consensus on climate, as Tom Burke has called it, must not succeed. The roles of Europe, including the UK, and China will be critical.
115. But let me give someone else the last word. Recently I had an email from an undergraduate at a well-known English university. He said: "if you gave this project to the Victorians, or to those who led Britain after the War, they would just have got on with it. They had the confidence and self worth to do what needed to be done".

116. He's right. For each of us in this room the question is:
do we?