

TILTING AT WINDSTORMS



Watching the exchanges between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, I can't help feeling that my mother would have sent them off to bed without an evening meal; two men, afraid to face the future, bickering about how much can be blamed on the past.

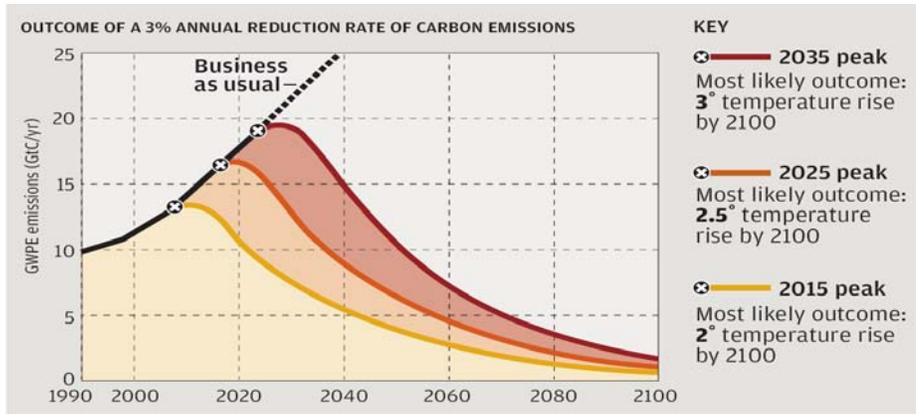
Gordon Brown at least understands that you have to spend your way out of a recession. What he doesn't grasp is that you have to spend the money differently if you don't want to come out in the same place that got you into the mess to begin with. David Cameron understands that there is a different ecological future ahead. He just doesn't know how to get there. What's clear is that neither he, nor anyone else, will find this future in Labour's latest offering – Building Britain's Future.

I have no doubt that building new homes is part of the agenda, but it cannot be at the expense of raising the energy efficiency standards of the ones we have already. In climate change terms, this is where we have to move into a completely new mindset. From 2009, the largest 5,000 companies in the UK are already having to work within (reducing) annual carbon budgets. The rest of us will soon follow. The question is whether it will be soon enough?

If Britain has a future it will only be a low carbon one. Such is the urgency of this transformation that it should have been the centrepiece of everything Labour put forward as a pre-manifesto platform. Instead it was completely absent.

Far away in Mexico, Energy and Climate Change Secretary, Ed Miliband, was trying to sell the idea to world leaders, in the run up to the Copenhagen Summit in December. His argument is that global carbon emissions have to peak by 2020, and dramatically reduce ever after. Within the conventions of 'practical politics' Miliband is being extremely bold. Within the dynamics of the planet it is too little too late.

The graph below sets out the trajectory of carbon reduction strategies and their outcomes. Each of the curves looks reasonable and tempts you to believe it is a matter of mere preference which one we choose. In reality, the difference between a 2°C rise in global temperatures and a 2.5°C rise will determine how much of humanity survives this century and how much perishes.



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majority of those concerned about know that we big lifestyle order to reduce our damage to Most, however, climate scientists

to talk about the specific connections between carbon dioxide (CO₂) levels in the atmosphere and global temperature change. Without becoming overly 'techie', I just want to register that CO₂ concentrations of 400ppm (parts per million) are regarded as the maximum that could enable us to restrict global warming to 2.0 C this century.

As Britain sits in the middle of a heatwave, you can get some recognition of the issues it raises. Good sunscreen lotions are needed, a supply of ice creams and cold drinks, a cool breeze that arrives as a godsend. But what we regard as blessings, the planet experiences as the onset of fever.

For non-techies with an interest in the choices we need to address, it is worth a read of Mark Lynas' book – Six Degrees. It takes you, step by step, through the consequences of global warming. Specifically, it also takes you into the 'tipping points' that will turn climate change into climate chaos. These are the points, beyond which the earth loses its ability to hold on to millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide that have been stored for millennia.

The Greenland ice cap and the Siberian permafrost, once melted, would cause a dramatic rise in sea levels at the same time as releasing huge amounts of climate change gases into the atmosphere.

The warming (and acidification) of the seas massively reduces their ability to store carbon (at the same time as wreaking havoc with marine life). A collapse of the Amazonian ecosystem would be like the sudden collapse of one of your lungs. All these become serious risks in the world beyond a 2°C temperature rise.

We enter such a world when CO₂ concentrations exceed 400ppm. Today they stand at 387ppm. To stay within the 400ppm limit, the global point of no return is 2015, not 2020. All the later curves on the graph are just slopes that go over a cliff. Gordon's manifesto for the future should have defined a different, non-negotiable, starting point. He could have done worse than use Mark Lynas' own words:

"If we are to save humanity and the planet from the worst mass extinction of all time, worse than even than at the end of the Permian [era], we must stop at two degrees."

Britain has to address this challenge on both the domestic and the world stage; compensating for the things we cannot control internationally by making even greater changes at home.

In March 2009, the government received a report it had commissioned from the Center on International Cooperation. The report explores various scenarios about possible outcomes of the Copenhagen Summit. In their own way, each scenario acknowledges that, on this world stage, nations have lied, cheated and prevaricated towards global catastrophe... and are likely to continue to do so.

The Age of Climatocracy explores the world after a summit 'success' built on the usual platitudes that no-one delivers on. The 'Multilateral Zombie' scenario follows an early breakdown of negotiations followed by the emergence of a patchwork of 'bottom-up' solutions. The most optimistic scenario – 'Operating System' – is actually premised on Copenhagen collapsing in disarray and a new framework of international cooperation being forced out of the climate disasters that follow. This, the authors argue, would at least take place within a timeframe when the world could still take effective action. Sadly, it is the best intentions of those who seek agreement that will drive Copenhagen towards the Age of Climatocracy.

Scientists like James Lovelock describe this as our human destiny; that on a planet capable of supporting less than 2 billion people at today's emissions levels, the drive towards 9 billion makes climate chaos unavoidable. Others are less sanguine, but argue that our global duplicity will drive the planet into an era of resource nationalism. Stuff free trade and the WTO rules, countries will become obsessed with their own food security, water security and energy security. Everyone else can fend for themselves.

Some of this defines the urgency of transforming the UK's own domestic 'resource' policies into more sustainable and renewable terms. Internationally, it also requires new funding ideas – ie the World Bank levying a Tobin tax on all banks (or an international carbon tax on aviation and shipping) – to support UN programmes that will include, rather than abandon, the poor.

Domestically, we can make dramatic carbon reductions in a myriad of ways: turning today's housing stock into low-carbon homes by 2020; halving the car distance we travel, from 10,000 miles a year to 5,000; shifting to low carbon vehicles; deriving our gas from the bio-digestion of our own waste; racing into an era of decentralised, renewable energy systems; and re-establishing networks of local/regional food systems.

With or without a Copenhagen 'revolution', this is what our own survival will depend on. It will not be the world of today, in which people are to consume themselves to death. It will, though, be a world in which everyone has work to do, a role to play and an awareness of the fragile interdependencies that make life possible.

Anything else is tilting at windstorms