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# Collective action can overcome the climate crisis

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**F**uture generations will be puzzled that we failed to grasp the urgency of climate change and may be furious at the environmental calamity we bequeathed to them. They may reasonably feel that we were given plenty of warning signs of the stress which our lifestyle was putting on the ecosystem, one of which is almost within sight of the Docklands home of much of the British press. When it was first constructed the Thames Barrier was closed only once every two years, but rising sea levels have required it to be deployed six times on average in the past five years.

Part of the reason why such alarm bells provoke no urgent response from even those who hear them is the widespread belief that climate change is a gradual, incremental process which still leaves us a long time to get round to dealing with it. This could turn out to be a tragic delusion. The US National Academy of Sciences has warned that climate change may turn out to be gradual in the same way as the slowly increasing pressure of a finger on a switch, but when it flips the result is revolutionary, not incremental. In the case of Britain, the switch that may get flipped could be the Gulf Stream, which delivers as much heat to our land in winter as the sun. Its disappearance would leave us with the same climate as Hudson Bay, with which we share the same latitude.

Those who find themselves living in the freezing environment we bequeath them will be perplexed at the preoccupations of the current political agenda. Earlier this year the government's chief scientific adviser, Sir David King, was ignominiously forced to retreat from his observation that climate change was a bigger threat than terrorism. But, good scientist that he is, he had the facts on his side. Last year 20,000 more people died in a record heat wave than in all the acts of terrorism around the globe. Increased flood and drought, which are the twin extremes of climate change, are the most lethal weapons of mass destruction of our time. Even the CIA has warned that climate change will stimulate an increase in conflicts over diminishing water and food supplies and proposed seven steps in response which, oddly, did not include a single measure to halt climate change.

All of this makes more depressing the admission this week that Britain looks set to miss the government's target of a 20% cut in greenhouse gases by the end of the decade. True, we are comfortably going

to meet our obligations under the Kyoto protocol, but that is largely because of history and the drop in coal generation in the early 90s. The total level of carbon emissions has stayed stubbornly stable over the past eight years.

In any case Kyoto is too modest a benchmark. The threshold was kept low, ironically, to get on board the US, but the net result was a set of targets that only delay the rate at which matters get worse. To stop climate change we must cut emissions by 60%, which is the government's target for 2050. The beauty of the government's interim target of a cut of 20% by 2010 was that it promised to get us a third of the way within a third of the time from the base year of 1990.

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We miss the point though if we simply berate the government for missing "its" target. The reality is that it is our target and we are all - or at any rate most of us - responsible for the failure to meet it. Government and industry have both delivered cuts of 20% in their carbon emissions. By contrast domestic households and private transport have produced large increases in greenhouse gases. On average each of us now produces over five tons of carbon emissions a year. Imagine the equivalent of two trucks of coal dumped on your doorstep; and then multiply it by each member of your household.

**G**overnment could, of course, do a lot more. All departments need to give the same strategic priority to halting climate change that Margaret Beckett has dinned into the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. A good start would be for the Department of Transport to abandon its aviation policy of expanding capacity to meet demand. Carbon emissions released above cloud level have doubled the impact on climate change, but bizarrely emissions from international air travel do not count in the Kyoto targets for cuts in greenhouse gases.

There is, however, justice in ministers throwing back the problem to the public in a hundred pages of consultative document. There is no prospect of Britain meeting its long-term targets unless the population is willing to sign up to the necessary changes in lifestyle and con-

sumption, or to accept a price for fuel and transport that reflects its environmental cost.

It is a paradox that Margaret Thatcher was one of the first political leaders to accept the science of climate change but was also the foremost proponent of the politics of individualism, which both exacerbated the problem and made it difficult to resolve. Hers was an ideology in which greed was the approved agent of economic progress. But climate change brutally exposes the limits of such material individualism. It is simply impossible for all of us to pursue a lifestyle that maximises carbon emissions without in turn rendering our own and everyone else's environment unsustainable.

Climate change is the classic example of a common problem that individuals cannot solve by acting independently. No family can opt out of climate change or buy their own little patch of retro weather. It is also a spectacular case of market failure as the seismic changes in weather patterns will only produce a shift in the price signal when it is too late to reverse them.

The solution to climate change will be collective and the result of democratic intervention. It will require investment in public transport. It will need common regulation and state subsidy to enforce good standards of energy efficiency and a higher proportion of renewables. It will demand the use of taxes to reflect the real cost to society and its environment of individual consumption. And it brings the bonus of an added argument for equality as extravagant consumption by a few imposes not just a financial cost on themselves but an environmental burden on everyone else.

All this should be meat and drink to a party of social democracy which believes in solidarity, partnership and working together. Labour is well placed to rise to the political challenge of halting climate change. But it first needs to rediscover the ability to talk about collective provision for the common good with at least as much skill and passion as it has recently adopted the rhetoric of personal choice.

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