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Britain Hosts Energy Summit while Failing to Meet Its Emission Targets

By Andy McSmith
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Energy ministers from across the world gather in London today to begin the latest chapter in the increasingly urgent international battle against climate change.

Their talks open against a background of growing concern about the visible effects of man-made global warming, such as the disappearance of 40 per cent of Arctic sea ice, and the potential impact of rapid growth in China, India and other fast-developing economies. Tony Blair, who invited the ministers to the summit, is expected to address them today.

The new dialogue was kickstarted at July's summit of the world's richest nations in Gleneagles, Scotland, where Mr. Blair pushed climate change to the top of the agenda - then disappointed many by appearing to concede too much to the United States, the biggest producer of greenhouse gases. The US has refused to sign the Kyoto agreement on climate change.

Britain itself is on course to badly miss its stated target of a 20 per cent reduction in carbon emissions by 2010. Labour's efforts have partly run aground because of government policies that, over the past eight years, have made transport cheaper by private car than by public means.

"The sad fact is that, despite government commitments to tackle climate change, carbon dioxide emissions are rising," Tony Juniper, the director of the campaign group Friends of the Earth, said yesterday. "Annual targets and independent scrutiny of government attempts to meet them are needed to help get things back on track. Indeed, these are the very measures outlined in the Climate Change Bill, which is before Parliament. We call on all parties to support this Bill."

Today's talks will concentrate on clean technology - one solution to global warming that can count on US support. The European Union has already held separate talks with China on new technologies that potentially could meet China's vastly expanding energy needs without increasing the volume of carbon pumped into the atmosphere.

The Environment Secretary, Margaret Beckett, hailed the conference yesterday as a "terrific opportunity" to achieve a new agreement on technology. "It is imperative that we find new ways to co-operate and develop a shared understanding of how the world can respond to climate change. There is no greater challenge facing the world," she said.

The conference, co-chaired by Mrs. Beckett and the Trade and Industry Secretary, Alan Johnson, involves all seven of the world's richest countries, plus Russia. The five "emerging" nations, China, India, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa, are also represented, along with seven other major players in the world economy - Indonesia,

Australia, Spain, Poland, Nigeria and South Korea. The International Energy Agency and the World Bank will also take part.

Downing Street stressed that the conference was not meant to cut across the larger summit being convened by the United Nations in Montreal, from 27 November to 10 December. This will discuss, for the first time, action on climate change beyond 2012, when the Kyoto protocol expires.

Climate change is one of the few major political issues to produce almost total agreement between the political parties in Britain. The Tories, once thought to be less "green" than the other two main parties, are now as keen on bringing down carbon emissions as Labour. Writing for The Independent today, David Cameron, the Tory leadership candidate, has seized the initiative. He insists that climate change is one of the greatest challenges facing mankind.

But the politicians are running ahead of British public opinion, according to a new poll by Populus, for the Stockholm Network, which will make uncomfortable reading for campaigners.

Nearly a third of the 1,003 adults polled - 29 per cent - ranked climate change as less important than terrorism, Third World debt and diseases such as Aids.

Three out of five - 60 per cent - said "the UK has other, more important domestic issues", and more than a third - 35 per cent - believe the problem is being exaggerated by pressure groups. Yet almost 90 per cent had made some contribution towards combating the problem, such as having their home insulated.

The authors, Helen Disney and Dan Lewis of the Stockholm Network, said: "Britons think protecting the environment is important - but is it as important to them as mortgage rates, crime and policing, health and education? The answer is a resounding 'no'. Britons don't believe the environment should be at the top of the priority list of policy-makers, but they don't want it to be just an add-on extra either."

The drive to keep down carbon emissions has led the Government to look seriously at building new nuclear power stations. A document recently published by Mrs. Beckett's department said nuclear power was "consistent with the objectives of sustainable development".

But this provoked an angry response yesterday from the chairman of the all-party parliamentary committee on climate change, Colin Challen. He wrote to Mrs. Beckett saying that, if a decision has been made to build more nuclear power stations, "the Government should say so, rather than taking us down a garden path - then we can have an honest debate, and not one which is about mollifying public opinion."

The Most Important Step Since the Kyoto Protocol

What's the real point of today's climate change meeting in London?

The brutally simple answer: to get China on board in the fight against global warming. The meeting, promoted personally by Tony Blair, has sprung from the great issue which remains unaddressed by the Kyoto protocol: what's to be done about China, India and the other big developing nations? For in the decades to come these countries with their huge and rapidly expanding economies will emit colossal amounts of CO₂ - China will overtake the US as the biggest carbon emitter by 2025 - yet at the moment they are not required to set any targets to limit their emissions, as the industrialised countries are, under the treaty.

What can be done by Britain and her allies to get China and the others on board?

The obvious answer is to encourage China and other developing nations to grow, but to grow in a way that does not damage the climate. In practice this means ensuring that the 500 huge coal-fired power stations which the Chinese are going to build between now and 2030 are fitted with the CO₂-reduction technology which is just being developed in the West. Known as carbon capture and storage (CCS), this involves trapping the CO₂ coming from power station chimneys, liquefying it, and storing it permanently deep underground. It might sound fanciful, but it is already being done successfully by the Norwegians under the North Sea. But how is this technology, and others that are coming on stream, to be transferred to China, and indeed India, Brazil and Indonesia? Who is to pay for it, and how? Is it aid? Is it trade? The meeting is taking an initial look at these very broad issues.

How important is the meeting?

Some would take the view that it represents the most important step forward since the Kyoto protocol itself was signed in 1997. Climate change cannot be dealt with properly without the co-operation of the whole world; and the issue of what to do about the future carbon emissions from the developing world is at last being addressed. It is fair to say it is a signal success for Mr. Blair and his vision of what could be achieved by putting climate at the top of the agenda for Britain's presidency of the G8.

But hasn't Mr. Blair been coming under fire on climate change recently?

He has been by far the most outspoken world figure on the issue of global warming, and with his pronouncements since 2000 he has built up a tremendous momentum of expectation as the natural leader of the climate change struggle. But two developments have tarnished his image. First, Britain's own CO₂ emissions, which fell sharply during the 1990s as coal-fired power stations were replaced by gas-fired power stations (which emit less carbon) have been growing again, partly because electricity generators have been switching back to coal as gas prices have risen, and partly because of the remorseless rise in CO₂ from motor vehicles and aircraft. There is a feeling among environmentalists that Britain has lost its grip on emissions and on our front page today we suggest the sort of radical action Mr. Blair might consider to show he has got his grip back. Second, in comments in New York at the end of September, Mr. Blair seemed to have lost faith in the importance of cutting back emissions - which ultimately will require sacrifices from the people, never an easy thing for politicians to ask for - and instead to be placing his faith merely in technological developments, such as a big increase in nuclear power. He even spoke of after Kyoto - implying that when the present target period of the treaty comes to an end in 2012, there will not be another one.

So will there be a further development of the Kyoto protocol, with new targets for all countries after 2012, including China and India?

The first, very preliminary negotiations about this will take place in Montreal in early December. Britain and other Kyoto ratifiers are committed under article 3.9 of the treaty to initiating a process for considering what will happen in a further commitment period. At least it's a start.

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Climate Change: 10 Ways to Save the World

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Today, Tony Blair will address energy ministers from around the world on tackling climate change. But he is failing to meet his own targets, with British carbon emissions on the rise again. There are, though, measures he could adopt...

1: Set Legally Binding Annual CO2 Reduction Targets

New law to commit the Government to reducing CO2 every year by a fixed amount - say, 3 per cent - audited by an independent body. A radical programme would then have to be implemented to meet the target.

2: Decentralize the Energy Supply System

Do away with the vast power stations serving the national grid: think microgeneration. Give every city, every town, every village, its own power station, fitted with a combined heat and power (CHP) system, which cuts CO2

3: All New Buildings to Be CO2-Free

Put a power station in every basement: change building regulations to make all new buildings provide their own power, with solar panels, mini-wind turbines and CHP systems to soak up wasted heat.

4: Insist on Use of Energy-Efficient Light Bulbs

Ban standard light bulbs all over Britain and force us to use energy-saving bulbs instead, which soak up less than a quarter of the electricity. Hugely symbolic gesture which would save enormous quantities of CO2.

5: Boost Neglected Renewables; Solar, Wave, Tide Power

Start giving proper funding and backing to renewable energy other than wind: solar power, and power from the waves and tides. These have vast potential to supply CO2-free electricity, yet are underdeveloped.

6: Focus Again on Offshore Wind Power

Renew the impetus behind wind farms based in the sea with £1bn of subsidy: after a good start, development is slowing, because of technical and financial difficulties, yet we have unparalleled offshore wind resources.

7: Get Radical with Energy Efficiency

Make sure every house in Britain that can be properly insulated is insulated; bring in much more rigorous labelling that can enable any consumer to see how much energy is used by a product.

8: Tackle the Gas Guzzlers

Raise vehicle excise duty (VED) on cars such as 4x4s; make it more than £1,000 per vehicle and set it to rise further. If you want to be radical, insist on a health warning on the side: This Vehicle Damages The Environment.

9: Curb the Growth in Cheap Flights

Raise air passenger duty to end the cheap flight bonanza, as CO2 emissions from aircraft are the most rapidly rising in Britain and also the most damaging: they go straight into the stratosphere. A vote loser and a tough choice.

10: Have a Late-Night Talk with George Bush

Do anything you can to get George Bush to change his mind about climate change. The world needs America, the biggest CO2 emitter, to lead the fight against global warming. The President is denying the evidence.