

Content Date: 05/11/2005

Page: 15

Don't blame global warming, let's just deal with the floods

Subhead: *Dan Lewis is director of environmental affairs for the Stockholm Network.*

A Climate For Change

FIVE years ago, Deputy PM John Prescott claimed that the Yorkshire floods were a wake-up call to nations to tackle global warming.

It's so easy to blame global warming for every new bout of extreme weather. It's also wrong.

As Noah knew all too well, flooding is one of the world's oldest environmental problems. And if Britons choose - often unknowingly - to live on flood plains and fail to prepare for a statistically certain flood, this will happen again. These floods should instead have been a wake-up call to the Government to tackle flooding.

And that's the real lesson of the recent floods in New Orleans - government failure to deal with the patently obvious.

For decades, it had been known that the flood defences were not strong enough. Yet incompetent local government did not take the straightforward action to strengthen the flood walls. Whatever it would have cost, it would have been worth it.

Regrettably, however, the UK finds itself today in a similar position. It's astonishing that, in an island nation replete with a history of flooding, some two million Britons are allegedly not aware that they live in flood-risk areas.

This is really a staggering indication of how Tony Blair's Government has failed to get the environmental priorities right.

Labour's 1997 manifesto said: "We will put concern for the environment at the heart of policy-making, so that it is not an add-on extra, but informs the whole of government, from housing and energy policy through to global warming and international agreements."

Yet these last eight years have been a sorry tale of lobby-group capture, of vast, misallocated resources, of a messianic belief in international agreements like Kyoto and of an extraordinary growth of environmental regulations and the quangos whose jobs depend on them.

The result has been a costly example of how to fail in public policy. When analysed, it can be faulted at three levels: deciding priorities, implementing policies and attaining

environmental goals.

To start with, it should have been made clear what public resources were available to tackle environmental issues and then these should have been classified in order of importance through cost-benefit analysis.

A more considered policy would have scoured the globe to seek out the optimal techniques which would deliver the best results at lowest cost and then applied them to Britain.

There's ample evidence that environmental outcomes are most acceptable to the public when they are tangible - reduced air pollution or cleaner rivers rather than reduced carbon - the latter is a benefit that markets can't price further out than a few years.

In other words, I don't know if the beefed-up regional flood development committees can stop floods, but the Environment Agency's annual budget of nearly £250m can buy a lot of sandbags!

The Government has displayed its usual preference for bureaucracy and process over practical results.

The Thames Barrier in London, as an example of the latter, has now paid for itself many times over. And there is certainly a very good argument for building a tidal barrage on the River Severn; this, while stopping flooding, could also provide power equivalent to eight nuclear-power stations.

The Government's environmental failure might not have happened if there had been more public consultation about how important the environment really was to people in comparison to everything else. In no other field of public policy has there been such a great gulf between what government and lobbies tell us we should do and think, compared with what we, the voters, actually want. It really is no accident that the Green Party is such a feeble performer in general and local elections.

Writing in these pages earlier this week, Richard Sadler described climate change as "... the one issue that really matters". Yet he could hardly be more out of touch with public opinion.

In a new poll by the Stockholm Network and Populus, when asked to assess global threats, climate change came bottom, way behind international terrorism (which was top), Third World debt and poverty and Third World disease.

On the domestic front, those polled were of the same mind. The biggest Government priority was providing good public services, followed by protection from criminals and terrorists, ensuring economic stability. Protecting the environment was least important.

The truth is that the floods in Yorkshire, and how we deal with them, boil down to an argument about environmental priorities - are they global or are they national?

Money spent on subsidising wind turbines and solar power could have been used for flood prevention. How could Britain's CO2 reductions even begin to compensate for the carbon emissions released by Chinese industrialisation and the vast increase in energy consumption that is fuelling it?

We can all say what we like about climate change, it's now obvious that there is no way China, India and the United States are going to stop burning their enormous coal

reserves. So there's little point in Britain doing anything other than pushing the new case for environmental and energy technologies, rather than growth-restricting anti-solutions.

Tony Blair, to his credit, has now realised this. That's why he has moved from calling climate change "The single most important long-term issue" to saying "...I'm changing my thinking on this - no country is going to cut its growth or consumption substantially in the light of a long-term environmental problem".

Adapting to the climate if and when it changes - as we always have done - promises to be a much better bet.

Environmentalism will only come of age when economics is put in the driving seat.

What is abundantly clear, however, is that there are very real benefits to be enjoyed through taking effective and timely measures to prevent future floods.

The insurance industry won't hesitate to endorse that.