

Political Leadership, Collective Action and the Framing of Radical Emissions Reduction Strategies*

Jane Hindley and Ted Benton

Red-Green Study Group, UK

Essex Sustainability Institute/

Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities/

Department of Sociology

University of Essex

***Our apologies that this presentation ended up in a different place from the original abstract.**

“Innocently pursuing their research, climate scientists were unwittingly destabilizing the political and social order. [...] Their research has brought us to one of those rare historical fracture points when knowledge diverges from power, portending a long period of struggle before the two are aligned once again.”

[Clive Hamilton (2013) 'History and Climate Change Denial', in Weintrobe ed. *Engaging with Climate Change: Psychoanalytic Perspectives* London: Routledge, p.18.]

Overview

Introduction

Part 1: Climate Change, Political Leadership and Public Opinion in the UK

- UK Government Framing of climate Change
- Public Opinion and Collective Action
- The Impasse and the Need for a New Collective Development Model

Part 2: Radical Plans and National Development Projects in Historical Perspective

- Social Democracy, Economic Nationalism, and the Welfare State
- Neoliberalism (1983-present)

Part 3: Strategic Lessons and Legitimation Crises

- Strategic Lessons
- Possible Sources of a Legitimation Crisis in the UK
- Conclusions

Appendix Exhaustion of Neoliberal Model and Symptoms of a Legitimation Crisis

Introduction: Engaging the public with climate change

Policy approach:

- Focuses on micro-level individual opinions and behaviour change;
- Informed by social marketing, psychology and communication studies.
- Documents grassroots initiatives and identifies micro-level obstacles to change.

Psychoanalytic approach:

- Provides insight into contradictions between neoliberal culture and need for individual behaviour change
- But focus on denial assumes a well-informed and undifferentiated public
- Individuals as primary locus of change

Focus on individual and micro-level raise methodological problems of generalisation (and levels of analysis), neither well suited to thinking about how to bring about rapid societal change and achieve radical emissions reductions.

Bringing Politics and Political Sociology Back in...

Political and historical sociology

- **Provide valuable analytical tools for understanding social and political change**
- **And addressing the complex relations between individuals, social structures and political processes.**
- **(But in the UK have been marginalised by discourse and social constructivist approaches in sociology departments and by quantitative approaches in politics departments).**

Starting point for our presentation:

- **Social movement theory has shown that the way that new demands and challenges are framed makes a crucial difference to political success and bringing about desired social change.**
- **How have successive UK governments framed climate change and the need for radical emissions reduction in relation to the public?**

UK government framing of climate change (1997-2013)

Blair government (1997-2007) NO BIG PUBLIC NARRATIVE 'WE'

- Emissions reductions policies target business, public sector and industry but bypass domestic consumers
- Carbon off-setting
- Small behaviour change campaigns targeting consumers

Brown government (2007-10) NO BIG PUBLIC NARRATIVE

- Cross-party consensus for new legislation, emissions reduction targets, & institutions: 2008 Climate Change Act; DECC; Climate Change Committee
- New mass, cross-subsidised programmes for home insulation (CERT), and micro-generation (FITS); planning 'Big Energy Shift' for residential sector

Coalition (2010-present): Reversal of Climate Change & Green Agenda

- Abandons electoral promise & leadership on climate change
- Erosion and reversal of policies e.g. reduce FITS, end CERT 2012,
- Increasing hostility to 'green taxes' and policies in energy, transport, etc.
- Deepening Tory climate scepticism and possessive individualism

Why have successive UK governments refused to address the public as citizens in a sustained way about climate change?

- **Failure of political imagination and political will? Ideological faith?**
- **New Labour experience of road-haulers strike?**
- **Short-term electoral calculations (and decisive swing voters)?**
- **Neoliberal reduction of citizens to consumers?**
- **Infantilisation of the electorate (pandering to assumed desires) ?**
- **Powerful corporate lobbying and threats of corporate withdrawal?**

Fundamental incompatibility between the need for radical emissions reduction and the neoliberal development model based on high consumption, corporate profit, market allocation, and minimal state.

Emissions reductions policies in the UK have largely been a matter of ad hoc additions to the neoliberal programme:

- **Social marketing, nudge behaviour change policies...**
- **Green levies/taxes...**
- **Regulation of emissions in business, public sector, industry**
- **Carbon markets (exporting emissions)**

Public Opinion, Informed Citizens & Collective Action

Opinion polls: about 75% of the public are concerned about climate change

- 10-15% have made significant changes (ethical greens)
- Most are confused, ill-informed, don't know how to change etc.

Main Findings DECC's Big Energy Shift Citizens' Forums (Ipsos Mori: 2009)

Participants, once informed about climate change and the need for reductions

- 1. Were willing to change: they 'would like to see change and are impressed and shocked by the scale of the problem [of climate change'].**
- 2. But pragmatic: they felt individuals on their own can't make a difference; 'business as usual and tinkering with existing frameworks will not deliver change'.**
- 3. They wanted active leadership from government:**
 - Participants want government to do much more in terms of legislation and subsidies, and for government, business and individuals all to do their part.
 - Public sector should lead by example (visible micro-generation etc)
 - NEED for a clear 'overarching narrative from central government'.

The Impasse and the Need for a New Collective Project

- Without a visible collective project, most citizens won't act to reduce emissions on ethical grounds. This is not just apathy or denial, but a **PROBLEM OF COLLECTIVE ACTION**.
 - Individual fatalism or inaction in the face of government policies is a **REALIST STANCE**: e.g. my individual action stopping flying won't make a difference if government policy is to build more airports and everyone else is flying more, so why bother?
 - Neoliberal political elites will not willingly abandon neoliberalism (Coalition policies are rapidly deepening neoliberalism, reducing capacity for state action, and reversing climate change policies)
 - Technocratic interventions and nudge policies won't work (given the scale of the problem and the speed of change needed).
- The **CORE DEVELOPMENT MODEL** is the problem.
- **WE NEED A NEW COLLECTIVE (national) DEVELOPMENT PROJECT**

How do new development models come into being?

- **Development models re-work and transform society, culture, and politics as well as the economy. They are best conceived as political projects, but involve new social and economic forms, as well as cultural transformation.**
- **What can we learn from recent historical shifts and transitions?**

Social Democracy, Economic Nationalism + Welfare State (1945-1970s)

Late C19th onwards incremental advance of the **labour movement + party**

1929 Wall Street Crash and crisis of free trade regime

1930s **Legitimation crisis**: great recession, mass unemployment
+ rise of Nazism

1939-45 mobilisation + empowerment of working class as citizens in war
effort (cross-class coalition)

1940s elaborate radical plan within the Labour movement: Beveridge Report

1945 **electoral mandate** for and implementation of Labour's radical plan

1950s **cross-party consensus** behind economic nationalism and welfare state

Neoliberalism (1983-present)

1940s seminars of radical libertarian economists (Friedman + Hayek)

↓ Right wing think-tanks and university economics departments elaborate and evangelise neoliberal radical plan → send graduates out to core spaces of decision-making (national bureaucracies, World Bank, other universities etc).

1970s Thatcherite revolution inside Conservative party

1970s Economic crisis and legitimation crisis of post-war model: oil shocks → economic crisis, 3 day week, power cuts, trade union mobilisation, etc..

1979 electoral mandate + nationalist mobilisation during the Falklands War

↓ 1983 onwards Conservative party implements the neoliberal model

1990s Blairite coup inside Labour party → New Labour

1997—present: neoliberal cross-party consensus

Strategic Lessons

- Slow, patient, political work
- Reclaim the collective 'we'+ 'us' (national framework?)
- Clear, simple, moral vision
- **Collective task for activists, academics, intellectuals, and think-tanks:**
 - a: **elaborate a radical new collective development model to inspire and enable political change and transition to a socially just, low carbon society:**
(What will be the core social, cultural, political and economic forms?)
 - b. **Educate and inspire public (especially) young people about alternatives to the neoliberal project to enable change: provide conceptual & analytical tools about alternative intellectual and political traditions, as well as empirical evidence about what's technically, economically and socially feasible.**
- **Which political party, if any, might be the vehicle for a radical plan?**
 - **Labour party?** (strong electoral base but no plan)
 - **Green party ?**(radical plan but weak electoral base)
 - **Social movement?** Non-violent mass protest, direct action & disruption ?
- **Seize opportunities provided by legitimation crises (see appendix)**

Possible Sources of a Legitimation Crisis in the UK

What is a legitimation crisis? Put simply, a withdrawal of public support for a political project, and the political elites who are continuing to implement that project. Often occur when there is a gap between government claims or promises and the realities lived by a majority of citizens (and an exhaustion of national development project, evident in economic crisis and policy contradictions).

Gap between government climate change targets and failure to reduce emissions? UNLIKELY

- Too abstract to mobilise most people
- Too low priority for most households
- (very few clear messages in the media)
- (green is now being scape-goated by the right as a cause of economic problems).
- (MAYBE FRACKING?)

Failure of neoliberalism to deliver developmental promises of managing the economy and society? MOST LIKELY

- Political science shows that economic factors are very important in political behaviour
- Social movements theory shows that moral outrage at injustice is a powerful cause of social & political mobilisation

Conclusions: What's good for the planet is good for us (the 99%)

A new development model integrating social justice and smart ecology:

- **Start from an analysis of where we are after 30 years of neoliberalism:** e.g. weakening of the state means re-nationalisation of some strategic industries may be impossible. May need alternative non-profit economic strategies, that sidestep rigged markets, concentrations of economic, corporate power, and help people reduce market dependency
 - **Ecological concepts are 'good to think':** they help over-come the legacies of high modernist, industrial thinking: e.g. 'small is beautiful', self-reliance, mutual self-help, webs of interdependence (rather than economies of scale and industrial provision)
 - Build on lessons of **what's feasible, desirable and fun:** technical feasibility of reducing emissions, successful grassroots initiatives, and sub-national hubs of green-social innovation e.g. Bristol and other progressive cities
 - **Draw on residual culture of post-war project:** Orwell's 'decency', equality, public spiritedness + longer non-conformist and satirical traditions?
- **Need for strategic alliances between actors with alternative visions challenging the neoliberal model → social movement for change.**
 - **Strategic political work in the public sphere: publicising iniquities of neoliberalism + feasibility and desirability of a transition to a convivial low carbon society transition.**

Appendix: Symptoms of a Legitimation Crisis and Exhaustion of Neoliberal Model?

1995-2007: During the boom years neoliberalism was successful in its own terms and achieved economic prosperity in the UK. Households enjoyed rising living standards and disposable income at the same time as socio-economic inequality increased. (Partly due to New Labour social subsidies e.g. working families tax credit). This success changed social norms, expectations, and habits.

2008 financial crisis FAILURE OF ECONOMIC MODEL but mitigated by New Labour bail out of banks)

2010: start of austerity policies (but time-lag until felt by households)

2013 austerity + energy policies tangibly affecting household budgets and their unequal impacts covered daily in the media

FRAGILE ECONOMIC BASE OF RECOVERY ?

- **UNSUSTAINABLE** levels of consumer debt + overheating housing market

Examples of Failure of Neoliberalism to Deliver Promises in the UK

‘We’re all in this together’?

CONTRAST Between

- **Bank bailouts + VISIBLE class coalition** of very wealthy, corporate elites + elite politicians (greedy bankers & the Eton cabinet)

AND

- Declining wages and rising living costs (especially energy) for most households
- **BLATANT Exclusion of young people from benefits of the model**
 - Lib-Dem broken electoral promises over university fees
 - 1 million 16-25s unemployed
 - Unaffordable housing (promise of home-ownership becoming impossible)
 - Retirement at 70

‘The Private sector is more efficient’ ?

Growing evidence of:

- Corporate profiteering (e.g. energy companies),
- Corporate incompetence (e.g. G4S Olympic fiasco),
- And corporate corruption (bank scandals, Murdoch press etc).
- Irrational privatisation of valued & valuable public assets

Possible Early Symptoms of a Legitimation Crisis?

2013 SHIFT IN PUBLIC MOOD ?

- **Disaffection from party politics** (and growing discontent with the neoliberal model?)
- **Return of the ‘nasty party’?**
- **Moral outrage? Violation of residual values of post-war project:**
(George Orwell’s ‘decency’ and fairness)?
- **(2011 Riots of young people)**
- **Growing politicisation of students?**
 - e.g. Manchester economics students demanding alternative curriculum
 - London University students protests about corporatisation of universities: right to protest; casualisation, lecturers’ salaries and cleaners’ pensions
- **Russell Brand/ Paxman debate ?**

Bibliography

- Department of Transport (2011) 'Public Attitudes Towards Climate change and the Impact of Transport' (available at DTI website).
- Ipsos Mori (2009) 'The Big Energy Shift: Report from Citizens Forums' (available at DECC website)
- McMichael, Philip (1996) *Development and Social Change: A Global Perspective* London: Sage
- Mirovski, Philip (2013) *Never Let a Good Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*
- Pidgeon, Nick (2012) 'Climate risk and public perception in international negotiations' (Presentation available at DECC website)
- Weintrobe, Sally, ed., (2013) *Engaging with Climate Change: Psychoanalytic and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* London: Routledge
- Whitmarsh, Lorraine, Saffron O'Neill and Irene Lorenzoni, eds., (2011) *Engaging the Public with Climate Change: Behaviour Change and Communication* London: Earthscan