

Politics of fear or complacency on climatic and ecological collapse?

John Grant*

Sheffield Hallam University

General: Environmental overview

All the parties seem to be trying to judge what the public see as an acceptable environmental improvement within their manifestos. Recently the press has revelled in the tree planting promises or other superficial changes to be perceived as environmental improvement but with limited changes in lifestyle and certainly NOT addressing the climate crisis. Not surprisingly the Green Party has the strongest policy with a spending plan of £100 billion **ever year for 10 years**; this (in my opinion) may be significant to have a “chance” in achieving our global commitments to limit Global Heating to 1.5oC. All the other parties suffer from “Optimism Bias” thinking that we can seriously expand our traditional economies while still able to meet these global targets. The IPCC recently published that a reduction of 42 per cent of carbon emissions would give a 50:50 chance of not overshooting 1.5oC and possibly initiating “self-reinforcing feedbacks” which would take humans out of the equation for limiting climatic and ecological collapse.

I find the lack of scientific underpinning of their policies tantamount to “ecocide!”

Labour

Labour's; New Green Deal is a great start and if this was 1990 I'd be whooping with joy, but we have doubled the carbon burden in the atmosphere since then and although all the; investment, tree planting, retraining, zero carbon homes and infrastructure development are all good things they are not even close to achieving 43 per cent reduction in carbon by 2030 never mind trying to meet our responsibility of “the” developed country that invested the industrial revolution so our historical carbon budget still puts us as third largest carbon emitter on the planet. There must be a change in attitude that we can “grow” our way into a sustainable economy, considering the scale of the problem we need a step change that just isn't in the manifesto.

That said, the labour manifesto is still the best of the “big four parties” perhaps when the “costs” of adaption and resilience are seen to actually add value to the economy a more decisive level of change will be pursued. It's certainly possible moving from Labours Plans? (sigh).

Green Party

The Green Party also has Green New Deal and sets a 2030 target for zero carbon, Sheffield City Council also has a 2030 target, earlier this year they took advice from the Tyndell Centre (Manchester University) they explained that “business as usual” will consume Sheffield’s Carbon Budget by 2026 (this is the maximum carbon Sheffield can emit based on global targets set by the IPCC in 2018). They then outlined a plan to reduce carbon emissions within this target and reach zero carbon by 2038. Sheffield City Council took this on board and to their credit, **decided to shoot for zero carbon by 2030**. This means at least a 14 per cent reduction in our emissions (compared to the yearly reducing emission level of carbon) the scale of this local target puts the national targets into context.

The budget of **£1,000 billion** gives us a chance of adding resilience for the changes already “baked in” to climate change that the UK must face with regards extreme weather events and food security. In addition to the retrofitting the 30 million homes and non-domestic buildings as well as moving our transport to zero carbon and a full restructuring of the energy grid to allow the utilisation of both the burgeoning renewable energy production but also critically the management of the grid via batteries in vehicles and large scale systems to optimise energy use and utility. There is even a small section of agriculture, not an enemy of the planet but an opportunity to draw down carbon and enhance the ecologies currently so harmed by an industry pursuing profit at all costs.

Conservative

The Conservative manifesto sets the current Government target of zero carbon by 2050 and celebrates it as a step change in policy – even though the IPCC set a challenge to developed countries to aggressively reduce carbon as developing countries are suffering the effects of climate collapse and do not have access to the technology for the “switch over” to zero carbon.

The manifesto fundamentally looks at what is currently or soon to be profitable regards environmental policy, so off shore wind is given support. The next generation wind turbines (12MW) will almost certainly see an energy cost equal or lower than traditional fossil fuel energy provision. In addition the latest “Future Homes” policy is not even a zero carbon target which considering the massive challenge of retrofitting current housing. All new build housing will also require retrofitting if they are to achieve zero carbon by 2050. Current analysis of the policies find the policies would be unable to achieve Zero Carbon by 2050. To summarise the policies allow a business as usual with some improvements to the local environment (e.g. completion of the HS2 network and reduced plastic in the ocean, 30 million new trees planted and a freezing of fracking) but the large sweeping changes required for the global challenge is lacking.

Liberal

Although better than the Conservatives as their target of Zero Carbon is 2045, this is significantly beyond the global targets set by the IPCC. There is a retrofit programme outlined for all houses to be insulated but this is only a nominal improvement there is a requirement for housing to be zero or near zero carbon and this policy although good is

insufficient for a zero carbon target – requiring a second tranche of retrofitting (VERY expensive). A policy outlining 300,000 houses to be built a year, there is no mention of the energy performance of these new houses. Again it is at this stage that massive cost saving may be achieved?

The good news is £100 billion on renewable energy over five years to achieve an 80 per cent of our energy from renewables. This is policy is second only to the Green's for a transition to renewable energy. In addition a frequent flyer tax and freezing of train fares are also planned as is the completion of the HS2 rail link which although offers some transport opportunities there are significant environment impact i.e. tree felling but it is argued that the large tree planting program (double that of the Conservatives) would offset these losses – 60 million trees.

Scottish National

When it comes to Scotland it is the energy resources that this country excels, that said the zero carbon target is the same as the Liberals at 2045. This is almost certainly a response to the significant economic value of the oil and gas in the north sea. There is a desire to “strand” the assets in the north sea but concerns of job losses make for major policy for training first (retraining is a key part of Labour's; New Green Deal?). However, the huge wind resource and tidal stream mean that low cost renewable energy is a key element of the grid even though there are no plans for large scale battery of grid restructuring to utilise these resources most effectively.

Transport policy includes a plan to only sell electric cars in Scotland from 2032 as well as promotion of walking and cycling (all parties say this but SNP allocated £80 million/yr.). Fracking is already banned in Scotland but again this is less contentious with the north sea part of Scotland's territory.

Conclusions

Although all the parties have policies on the environment, only the Green Party accept that we currently face an existential threat if this is not addressed as one of “the” policies equalling those on; education, NHS and defence?

I had hoped that the wide ranging aspects of climate change would result in policies address this challenge would be embedded in ALL the other areas rather than in a separate “environment” or “climate change” policy. Unfortunately, it seems there is an ongoing belief that the 30 years of discussion by governments of the world and the 100 years of research into this field and the detailed plans regards the responses required for adaption and to add resilience will be sufficient when the time comes to act?

* Correspondence address: John Grant, Sheffield Hallam University, Howard Street, Sheffield, S1 1WB. Email: j.f.grant@shu.ac.uk