

Market Politics and Climate Change

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ABSTRACT *Barbara Harriss-White argues that the structure and politics of national energy markets poses a major obstacle to finding and implementing solutions to the problem posed by climate change. Comparative research into these markets and their politics is urgently needed. She outlines some of the methodology needed for the effective study of markets, and proposes the UN give priority to encouraging such research and illustrates her argument with reference to a case study of the UK market for renewable energy.*

KEYWORDS *renewable energy; state participation; media; policy; UN; the Stern report*

The problem

According to both the Stern report of 2006, *The Economics of Climate Change* and the UNDP Human Development Report for 2007, *Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World*, the problem is now very urgent – the world's atmosphere is (probably) at 380 ppm¹ CO₂ and is rapidly accelerating toward the point of 450 ppm which is currently considered to be a critical density that must not be exceeded.

There is now little scientific dispute about the major goals. The global carbon budget needs to be 14.5 Giga tonnes and the world economy must cut Green House Gas (GHG) emissions by at least 50 percent on 1990 levels by 2050. Advanced countries must make deep immediate cuts in GHGs – to at least 30 percent below 1990 levels by 2020, and 80–90 percent by 2050. Developing countries will need to peak at 2020 and then drop by 20 percent by 2050. So new development models are needed not only for developing countries, but also – urgently – for advanced ones.

Policies to address the problem are in the public domain (UNDP, 2007, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2007-2008/>). The mechanism created through the Kyoto treaty and exemplified in the European Emissions Trading Scheme – cap and trade – is necessary but not remotely sufficient.² Financial instruments will be needed for technological change and transfer, for accompanying infrastructure, and for social protection and adaptation. New technology will need subsidies before scale economies accrue. Enforced regulation will be unavoidable, involving carbon taxes as part of reformed tax structures that cut taxes on labour and impose disincentives on carbon emission. The overall tax burden may have to be altered. The implications for competition have to be anticipated and collectively addressed. Carbon will need to be priced at a global level, but at prices that reflect the social costs and risks – not at US\$ 2 as in 2006–2007 –

and in a trajectory stable enough for investment. There is an emerging consensus about a fast move to US\$ 50–100. Massive and binding conservation rules need to be adopted and enforced for both rain forest and grasslands. Shock preparedness also requires physical infrastructure (sea defences, biodiversity conservation and water stress protection), together with the basics of human development: education, health, food security, water and sanitation security, shelter, social protection/security and rights to, and security at, work (ILO *Decent Work*, <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/decent.htm>, accessed 22 March 2008). Emissions reduction pathways will need to involve *all* sectors of the economy in advanced and developing countries, driven by the paramount need for energy efficiency and the conservation of materials. Priority sectors are thought to be transport (public, freight and personal – with a search for alternative fuels and materials), renewable energy, low carbon technology and waste-minimizing technology (with attention to both material waste, dissipated heat and all greenhouse gases, not simply CO₂).

This agenda is daunting enough, but in addition the physical cycles of the changes it affects are incomparably longer than electoral democratic cycles that dominate party-political policymaking and their vista of practical action. Both the predictions and the demands they entail also threaten what Giddens has called 'ontological security', making policymakers exceptionally cautious. Technological solutions exist – the 'R' of R&D has produced results – but the development stage is slow, while policy is characterized by instability and idiosyncrasy. The attitude of major business interests and of government has evolved from denial, through the analysis of 'affordable solutions' (Stern, 2006, http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/independent_reviews/stern_review_economics_climate_change/stern_review_report.cfm6),³ to an agenda of targets for mitigation. But while it is now obvious to both that global public action is needed, the ten major polluting countries are a highly heterogeneous group and have so far found it impossible to act in a concerted way.

The story of renewable energy (RE) policy in the United Kingdom (UK) is briefly outlined here to

illustrate how the character of the market, and of policymaking in relation to that market, pose specific additional obstacles to a solution. The question is why this component of the solution to climate change has evolved so very slowly and ineffectually in the UK.⁴ RE technology, and forms of production capable of deploying it, exist, and are scale-versatile enough to be amenable to decentralization and a range of management and governance institutions. Yet RE technologies are highly controversial in the UK, both attacked and defended on grounds of cost, reliability and compatibility with network engineering (Harriss-White and Harriss, 2006).

The mismatch between the government's rhetorical commitment and its record on climate change is telling. In 2004, Prime Minister Tony Blair called the UK a 'leader in climate change' and declared that climate change was the UK's 'top priority'.⁵ Yet according to the UK parliament the country's record in relation to climate change was already 'seriously off course' (Select Committee on Environmental Audit, 2006, paragraph 26; paragraph 28), and exhibits a 'mystifying institutional inertia' (Wintour, 2006). In practice renewable energy plays a role one tenth as important as it is in European countries such as Denmark, Germany and Spain. An answer to the question why this is so has required an exploration of the politics of *markets*, as well as of state policymaking.

To do this markets, economic phenomena *par excellence*, require re-conceiving as arenas of power with their own distinctive kinds of politics. Five kinds of politics can be associated with markets: (i) direct state participation, (ii) market regulation, (iii) industrial structure and organization, (iv) collective action and (v) social embeddedness (White, 1993). These five will also interact. In analysing these forms of politics we also cannot step outside the language used – this language is constitutive of its politics – but we must reflect on the impact of words, concepts and discourses on practical outcomes.

Furthermore, to understand the politics of new technology markets such as markets for RE it is necessary to understand not only the politics of

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the sector in question, but also the politics of interconnected markets, of path-dependent interests, and of existing sectors that may be threatened by the development of a new one. It is necessary not only to understand the contested contemporary 'statics', but also the historical dynamics, including, in particular, the politics of commodity-creation. This involves the state in several ways, not only via the familiar processes of privatizing public goods and services (Hibou, 2004), and the new national and international state processes involved in commodifying the commons (e.g. turning tropical forests into profitable carbon 'sinks'), but also via the less analytically familiar processes involved in outsourcing the policymaking process itself (in which policy is bought from consultancies and think-tanks) (Leys, 2005).

This is a relatively new way of looking at markets, but yields significant practical results. In the last ten years, it has, for example, been applied to development policy in India; to food security in Tanzania; social policy in Argentina; and health, the media, the policymaking process and party politics itself in the UK (Leys, 2001; Szlezac, 2006; Court, 2008; Harriss-White, 2008; Vidyarthi, 2008). What research on RE in the UK shows is that there have been very severe governance and policy failures at the national level; that we need to understand much better both the open and the hidden political processes at work; and that a change in policy discourse is one precondition for accelerating political movement on both national and global energy governance. The significant political obstacles to both practical national responses and international collective action that this work reveals also disclose political possibilities.

State participation and state regulation in UK energy policy

The direct involvement of the British state in the governance of energy has been marked by a growing complexity in its bureaucratic architecture (Norgaard, 2003; Helm, 2004; Leys, 2005; Stern, 2006; UNDP, 2007). Government departments

hold overlapping briefs but take different positions on policy issues (e.g. the DTI (industry) and DEFRA (rural development) on nuclear electricity generation and on climate change targets); key ministers for climate change policy are not represented in the cabinet (e.g. energy); the continual re-labelling and re-scoping of departments (the latest being from DTI to DBERR)⁶ and the regular re-deployment of (teams of) expert civil servants involves high and persistent learning costs and loss of institutional memory, all of which create severe coordination problems.

Over the last 30 years, participative intervention has swung from intervention in ownership and technology, and control over quantities and prices, to reliance on an unstable and underperforming set of regulations and incentives for RE, in which the institutional legacies of previous interventionist policies are further serious burdens (e.g. the coal and nuclear sectors: pensions, pollution, waste disposal and land reclamation).⁷

The new culture of regulatory discretion, which has replaced direct state participation, is vulnerable to capture by business (or to 'double capture' – first, of the independent regulator by the state and second, of the state by business, as has happened in the case of coal-fired electricity generation).

Bureaucratic capacity is also severely weakened by conflicts of interests. The 'revolving door' through which personnel are exchanged between the state and industry, and the setting of policy agendas and templates for laws and procedure by think-tanks and advisory bodies, which may be being funded or manned by the interests to be regulated (e.g. the Emissions Trading Group, which rejects RE, advising on the operationalization of the Kyoto Protocol) have significant consequences. These include a decline in the quality of evidence, reports whose bias excludes important potential policy alternatives and the further loss of institutional memory – with resulting acute problems for the state's top policymakers.

Energy policy *discourse* also has real material effects. First, while policymaking cannot do without labels, labels are a technology of control – and thus of exclusion of alternatives. In the case of RE, the very definition of the sector has been unstable (for instance its current UK scope stems

only from 2000).⁸ It is tailored to a *realpolitik* of short-term achievable targets as well as to the costs of policy requiring state resources such as subsidies.

Second, *targets* for emissions reduction have been announced more and more frequently and the targets have become increasingly ambitious, while the target dates have receded into the future. The result is that the proposed trajectories for meeting targets have become increasingly disconnected from electoral political cycles, and the goals have become less and less linked to means: – a discursive politics of aspiration divorced from the means of realization – ‘policymaking’ comes to mean policy for policy. Policy for policy may be understood as the creation of an enabling environment for policy; but the very processes involved in creating it act as obstacles to its realization.

A third significant feature of energy policy discourse is the use of the techniques of economics to measure value,⁹ and the prominence of formally mathematized economic analysis as the basis for policy discussion. As Amartya Sen observes, this approach is necessarily reductionist requiring the precise measurement of fuzzy realities, thereby excluding much that is intrinsic to complex problems – including, we might add, alternative ethical evaluations (Sen, 2008, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,2265393,00.html>).

To take an influential example, the choice of discount rate in the Stern Report has been criticized in the US on the grounds that there is no evidence for the value chosen – zero – while Stern’s critics do not address the ethical consequences of their departure from zero (RSE, 2007). Stern’s choice of 450 ppm, as the threshold for dangerous climate change, effectively ignores the dangers entailed – especially for populations already living at the physical margins – if the planet succeeds in not exceeding that figure. The emphasis on optimization and efficiency algorithms centring on GDP and production ignores the full costs of the welfare implications of highly probable catastrophic events¹⁰ for regional ecosystem stability and for political sovereignty at two degrees. Bearing such risks is itself a cost to welfare, categorized by Stern simply as an ‘unfortunate twist of fate’ (Stern, 2006: 443).

Economic analysis is framed in a moral philosophy of fairness with respect to the distribution of costs of reduction of emissions, not to the distribution of impacts and their consequences for social survival, or for the capacities of different societies to follow pathways for emissions stabilization. Not all events are either valuable or able to be valued, not all valued costs are substitutable, and not all distributional losses can be compensated for by aid transfers. The exclusive use of the analytical technology of economics means that social and political imperatives remain hidden, and this concealment edges out alternative discourses and actions – alternative discourses such as justice and equity, alternative focuses such as systemically democratic re-development and alternative instruments such as new tax regimes.

A fourth aspect of climate change discourse is that public information continues to be provided as though citizens do not understand. The affront which the understanding of climate change information gives to people’s sense of themselves and their notions of justice, to liberal values, and to their basic reliance on the constancy of their social and material environments, is ignored. As a result, institutions come into to protect people from this threat to psychological wellbeing (e.g., that the topic is taboo in polite conversation), concerted action is deferred and society is complicit in the perpetuation of conditions reinforcing the problem.

Science and economics are asked to project the feasibility of certain kinds of response, the potential for which is meanwhile being sabotaged by the way energy markets work politically. For example, Stern’s stabilization level looks politically feasible at first sight – spending 1 percent of GDP on mitigation now saves 20 percent of GDP that is predicted to be forfeited later in the absence of such expenditure. But it does not address safety or justice on the one hand and market politics on the other, concerns about which can be confidently predicted to make it much less feasible. As an underestimate of the true costs established in order to propose immediate action at the expense of danger and injustice in developing countries, the latter (through the Clean Development Mechanism and cap and trade policy) will buy

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GHG at levels that will threaten the well being of their citizens. In not acknowledging the politics of markets described here Stern avoids social processes which work to reduce the probability of even a 1 percent additional spend being acceptable to the most powerful political agents.

Markets and civil society

The politics of market structure

The struggle between firms for market share generates a powerful politics of its own. The conventional analysis of energy policy in terms of distinct types of sources (coal, oil, etc.) masks the political struggles between firms, and between them and the state. Renewable energy business in the UK exists in two extreme forms, one consisting of RE 'units' inside various corporate capitals, the other consisting of a larger set of small specialist firms, fractured between competing technologies and energy sources. There is little connection between the two. In both the small scale and the 'niched' components, individual CEOs (and their apex political departments) are able to play important political roles, typically focused on ways of preserving short-term profits, while sometimes campaigning simultaneously for longer-term policy change. Corporate capital is also able to engage with impunity in contradictory practices at the discursive and material levels advocating policy change to meet the climate challenge while procrastinating in terms of action.¹¹ This is not only helped by the government's aspirational policy discourse (policy for policy) it also uses a distinctive complementary discourse, involving the selective use of evidence. The result is that corporate capital is able to slow the pace of development of RE while small-scale firms are subject to unstable, unreliable and inadequate state support.

The politics of collective organization

While individual firms seek political leverage, the energy sector is also collectively organized in a dense multiplicity of powerful interests and lobbies, rarely open to democratic public scrutiny.

354 Since no industry can exist without electricity

and fossil fuels, all industrial lobbies are implicated in this kind of politics. A further salient feature of energy-sector politics is the engineering of strongly embedded conflicts of interest, most apparent in the lobbying architecture of the nuclear industry (cemented through networks of party political affiliation, kinship and the career progression of civil servants) (Macalister, 2006). These informal networks develop the political capacity to change policy at both the formulation and the implementation stages. The latter is well illustrated by special exemptions from the Climate Change Levy – exemptions which, in the opinion of Dieter Helm, the leading authority on British energy policy, have 'turn(ed) climate change policy on its head' (Helm, 2004: 353 *et seq.*).

As a result, the state is no longer able effectively to service the needs of the very businesses whose politics have permeated it. For example, while the insurance sector, wishing to factor climate change-related liabilities out of its portfolios, has taken a lead in demanding long-term energy policy parameters for the manufacturing sector, neither it nor manufacturing has so far succeeded in drawing a coherent long-term energy policy out of the state (Porritt, 2005; Wachmann, 2005; Elliott, 2006). Yet these lobbies do have the capacity to have democratic consultation and debate pre-empted, as in the two most recent episodes of public consultation on the future of nuclear power – in both 2006 and 2007 the government announced a decision while the consultation was nominally still in progress. In addition, many of the proliferating climate change think-tanks are political and institutional hybrids funded by – and populated with representatives of – major energy intensive, non-RE, polluting industries. This hybridity inevitably tends to marginalize the interests and weaken the political clout of the RE sector, whose own lobbies are also fractured both between types of source and between types of technology (Helm, 2004: 88–89, 100).

The politics of social embeddedness

British energy politics is socially embedded at all levels, from global military–nuclear security

networks to communities in rural Wales, giving a wide range of interests some political capacity to affect the national policy process at all stages. We will summarize the relevant politics of the media, science, NGOs and labour unions.

The media are vital for public understanding, but at the same time constitute a polluting industry, implicated in what they reveal and criticize about climate change. The advertising revenue on which so much of the media depends also promotes lifestyles involving high-energy consumption. The media's role is thus deeply contradictory and compromised.

British science, despite championing climate change science and publicly communicating the urgency of global warming and the need to shift rapidly to a low carbon economy, is itself divided about technological pathways: broadly between nuclear power, carbon sequestration and RE. Scientists also tend to wish to distinguish their expert field from that of 'politics', although the increased role of industry in science funding does not always protect scientific autonomy. Scientists, like other experts including the 'development community', are also not to be presumed proof against the private temptation to behave in ways which deny the scale and urgency of the problem stressed in their public pronouncements.

Mass-membership, environmental NGOs conduct political campaigns based on knowledge resources but without direct material interests. Not all of them have funding that makes them independent of the short-term interests of the energy industry. They work by disseminating information, postal and cyber-activism, boycotts, mass events and sometimes direct action. It is not yet clear whether the proliferation of such organizations and movements can generate a new political culture that can have a real impact on state behaviour, or whether it merely adds to the colourful marketplace of ideas and material procrastination.

Trade unions have been mostly conspicuous by their absence from the politics of collective action – the few exceptions are chiefly those with an interest in expanding nuclear power. Workers themselves are unable to resolve the problems of the destructive nature of capitalism. Rising dispo-

sable incomes have also made workers complicit in the policy drift, and since in recent years mass mobilizations have been met with notable indifference from the political establishment it appears rational for labour not to mobilize.

Visible and invisible politics: processes

In his study of the privatization of the Argentine pension system, Philip Szlezac distinguishes two kinds of political technologies and processes: open and hidden (Szlezac, 2006). His insight is highly relevant to the politics of energy. With respect to energy, open processes include funding political parties, the publicly acknowledged sponsorship of think-tank reports, securing media exposure and coverage, parliamentary debate and expert legislative commissions and committees. Hidden politics include the revolving door between party politics, the 'policy community' (including the civil service) and commercial and industrial interests and lobbies; the instituting of conflicts of interest, which weaken the state's capacity to enforce policies; the exertion of pressure through lobbies and individual favour and affinity; the privatization of data and evidence, weakening quality standards and scrutiny; running 'educational' events for government policymakers with private legal and technical consultants; the neutralization of dissenting argument and the capture of resistance. On the basis of detailed research into the commodification of the policy process in the UK, analysts such as Leys (2007) and Whitfield (2006) have concluded that what Szlezac calls hidden, market-driven politics are a serious threat to open, formally democratic politics. Energy is no exception and the process is being globalized.

Conclusions

What the RE case in the UK shows is that there is no coherent policy practice for the development of renewable energy in the UK, or indeed for the energy sector as a whole. The British state's project of de-participation and de-/re-regulation of energy has left RE marginalized within large diversified firms and otherwise confined to

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relatively vulnerable small specialist firms. RE policy is enmeshed in the interests of capital, and – so far – these interests are being defined in terms of energy technologies for which renewables would be commercially unwelcome substitutes. The sluggish development of RE is also due to the extreme complexity of material interests at work in open and hidden political processes. Such interests permeate the state and undermine its capacity to regulate, even in the long-term interests of business itself.¹² Social consensus and complicity is also driven by the powerful need for ontological security. The consequence is to slow the pace of social and political responses – reinforced by the opiate role of the politics of aspiration and the political ideas emanating from a crowded but disunited civil society and from epistemic communities that do not have material clout. The hegemonic discourse, policy representations and agenda-setting, thought by some to be creating the enabling environment, act to limit options – most importantly public discussion of fiscal reform, of ‘mitigating’ the consumption of energy and polluting materials, and of the just distribution of the costs of adapting to the impacts of waste gas and matter.

If these kinds of politics are not unique to the UK, both national and global collective action and enforcement capacity are urgently needed. While the agenda has evolved from that for which the UN was set up, it remains the only global governance institution with the requisite potential authority. It must put its weight behind new paradigm of material interdependence and energy efficiency, new discourses and new metrics of geopolitical necessity, developmental fairness/equity and ecological–social security, and a new project of global GHG governance. But the UN consists of nearly 200 nation-states, very few of

which are yet acting as though they understood the unique nature of the problem.

Among the measures needed to rectify this is research into energy markets and their politics, on the lines indicated in this article, matching the research on climate change science in which the UN has played a key role. The analysis of market politics needs to begin with, first, the European countries that have made significant progress with renewable energy (Denmark, Germany and Spain); second, North America, whose energy politics is key to stabilizing future world temperatures; and third in China and India, whose production of GHGs is growing fastest. The democratic and undemocratic political constituencies and interests obstructing the effort to achieve climate change security – or advancing and enforcing it – need dispassionate identification. These may include political parties, independent science and media, educational institutions, UN and regional public organizations, international public services, mass organizations including labour unions, global/regional civil society networks, the global insurance, nuclear and energy security industries, other kinds of business interests, banks and venture capitalists, venture philanthropists and others beyond the immediate scope of the case study reported here.

Armed with this knowledge the UN might then enter a new phase, able with understanding to champion the democratically accountable political forces capable of addressing climate change. When domestic policies are bogged down in passivity and/or instability because market politics undermine and re-engineer core policy processes, UN support for the sort of research called for here could play a crucial role in encouraging progress towards national coherence and effective international action.

Notes

- 1 This article has been developed from material in Barbara Harriss-White and Elinor Harriss (2006). The original, long version of the published essay is available at <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/pbrooke/bptdg/programmes/0607%20-/harriss/harrissindex>, accessed 22 March 2008 and at <http://socialistregister.com/sample/3>.
- 2 On the EU’s failure in allocating carbon credits, see Lohmann (2006).
- 3 Stern (2006) who calculates that the benefit of 1 percent GDP spent on mitigation now exceeds the benefit of the ‘business as usual’ scenario.

- 4 The key texts, (Helm, 2004; Stern, 2006), have been supplemented with information from the quality media, learned bodies and the internet – to a cut-off date in 2007.
- 5 Speech on Climate Change, 14 September 2004, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/p6333.asp>.
- 6 DTI is the Department for Trade and Industry and DBERR is the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform. Since mid-2007 some trade activity has migrated to the Department for International Development (the department for overseas aid).
- 7 In other cases layers of reformed regulation persist without the weeding of irrelevant institutions.
- 8 It includes hydroelectric power (lakes of which generate huge quantities of methane), landfill gas (the polluting product of sealed municipal rubbish dumps), wind turbines, photovoltaic and solar energy, biofuels and wave energy (as yet undeveloped around the UK). Geothermal energy is not included (Harriss-White and Harriss, 2006: 73–74, 93). The first two sources dominate the UK's renewable energy profile.
- 9 Ethics have been marginalized from climate change discourse (Professor Simon Carney, Lecture, Vice Chancellor's Forum on Climate Change, Saïd Business School, Oxford University, 12 February 2008).
- 10 Arctic vegetation change, the W Antarctic Shelf and its implications for sea level, the impact on Europe of radical change in Thermohaline Circulation (Schneider *et al.*, 2007: 791–797).
- 11 The UK's top energy majors, Shell and BP have been powerful advocates for responses to anthropogenic climate change yet they are said to be responsible for 40 percent of the CO₂ emissions of the leading 100 companies on the Financial Times' Stock Exchange listing. While their HQs have made cuts in energy inefficiency, BP's products alone account for 5 percent of the world's fossil fuel emissions and in 2007 it compensated for under 10 percent of its CO₂ emissions (King, 2005, <http://www.bp.com>, accessed 27 June).
- 12 There is no long-term steer on investment, energy and carbon prices, and tax structures.

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