



Needs must: should the environment trump prosperity?

Climate change: the challenge for social democracy

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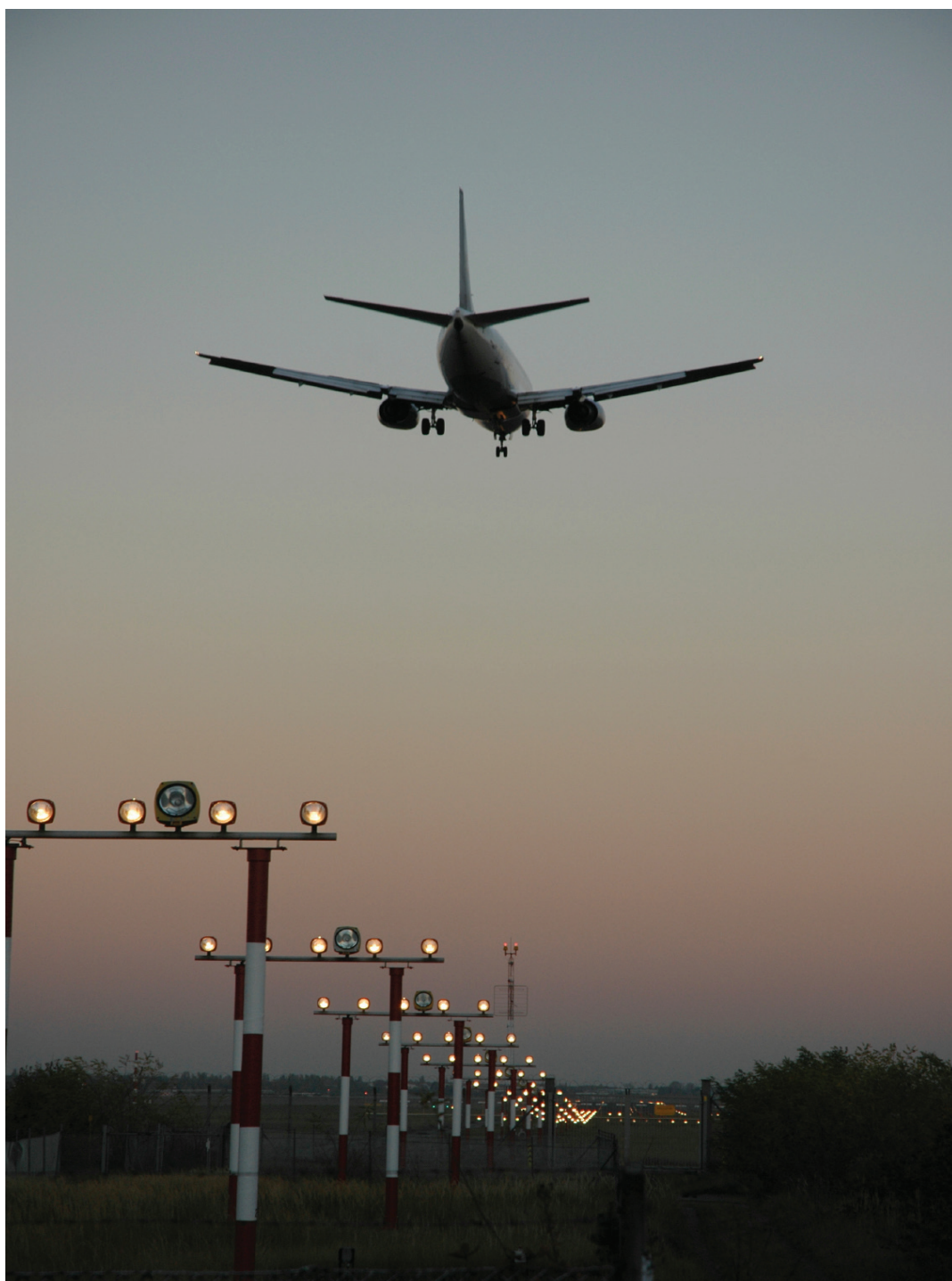
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Climate change: the challenge for social democracy

The need to reduce carbon emissions while protecting jobs and prosperity is a key challenge for progressive politicians, both practically and ideologically. Using opposition to the third runway at Heathrow as a case-in-point, Clive Soley argues that the adoption of negative policies which impinge on individual choice and quality of life are counter-productive and electorally damaging. To lead a low-carbon transition social democrats must facilitate technological innovation and encourage lifestyle changes through incentives and financial inducements, not suffering and sacrifice.

Science and technology have created a very complex world and politics has found it difficult to keep up with the speed of change. This problem is compounded by the desire of the media to look for quick solutions and simple explanations – very often when they are just not available. There are few areas of policy where this problem is more acute for the politician than in the area of climate change and the need to provide jobs and prosperity. It is even more complex when looked at as a global problem where political and economic stability depend on rapid economic growth in the context of an expanding world population.

The tension between policies designed to reduce the threat to our environment and the need to create jobs and protect prosperity is a difficult area for progressive politicians. The easy solution is to say that the new technologies will produce new jobs. Hopefully that will prove to be the case. But it ignores the process of change which is unlikely to be a smooth transfer from our current economic system to the new environmentally sustainable system.

Progressive politicians must be very wary of a return to some of the electorally suicidal and negative policies of the 1980s, and so in this essay I would like to address that danger.

Faced with a serious threat like climate change there is an inherent danger that progressive politicians will reach for the hair shirt. The dark side of progressive politics is the repressive idea that making people behave in the way that we think is necessary to solve a problem will in itself provide the solution. The literature and the music of the left often extols suffering for a greater cause. We need look no further than the words of the Red Flag or the Internationale to see the value we can place on suffering to achieve the greater good. This is not unique to progressives but we have been led astray in the past by such beliefs.

In the context of a pre-industrial world and during the early stages of the industrial revolution this made some sense. Achieving the levels of prosperity that we have today was unlikely to happen without suffering and sacrifice. The arrival of industrialisation, however, linked to the extraordinary advances in scientific knowledge should make us question the need for suffering as a necessary ingredient of making progress. The industrial revolution did change the world and we are still coming to terms with the consequences of this.

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Progressive politicians can get into an extraordinary muddle when faced with the need to make rapid change. The opposite danger to the hair shirt approach is the idea that change can be achieved without any pain at all. In the 1980s many progressives knew that there had to be dramatic changes in the economy but we were so wedded to the idea of protecting existing jobs that we failed to see that our policies were not leading to the creation of more jobs – arguably they were leading to the

opposite. So we argued for the continuation of coal mining and the great iron and steel industries of the past. When the Thatcher/Reagan revolution hit we simply fought on the ground of the status quo. We assumed that our popularity would rise if we defended existing jobs – coal mining was a good and noble cause to fight for even if the job was one of the most dangerous and unpleasant in an industrialised economy.

The electorate as measured by opinion polls at the time told us we had a very large measure of sympathy from the public but it was sympathy based on the dislike of the suffering involved and it failed to translate into votes in a general election. I still have a painful memory of Denis Skinner MP in fighting form as usual warning the Secretary of State for Energy, Peter Walker MP, that working class unity would win it for the miners. Peter Walker brushed aside that attack with the wounding reminder that the unity of the working class was demonstrated by Polish coal being unloaded by British dockers to keep the power stations working. Deep down we knew the miners were not only badly led but also fighting a battle that should never have been fought. What was needed was a way of modernising British industry without causing the unemployment that resulted from the more brutal method of change employed by Margaret Thatcher.

The challenge to progressives today is not dissimilar to that of the 1980s. We have to find a rapid way of reducing carbon emissions at the same time as we protect jobs and prosperity. This can't be achieved without any pain at all but we should not make the policies dependent on behavioural changes that the electorate doesn't want and won't support. If we want progressives to manage this change rather than hand it over to the conservatives the first thing we should do is put the hair shirt back in the cupboard where it should stay.

Climate change and collective prosperity

Climate changing emissions are a pollution problem albeit on a much bigger scale than that of the ozone layer or the great industrial smogs of the 1950s but like most pollution problems they can be solved. The key question is whether we can do it fast enough to prevent very serious or possibly irreversible change.

With our current level of technological expertise it is not impossible for the industrialised world to adapt to more extreme weather conditions. That is not true for many people in the developing world and most importantly it is not true for many plant and animal species that are important to our continuing existence.

When faced with a very serious threat like climate change we should not panic. Although I get exasperated by some in the green movement who can only see doom and gloom I should confess that any diligent researcher could come up with articles I wrote in the 1980s warning that we were going the way of the dinosaurs because we were ignoring this threat. So I have not been immune to panic myself! I am more optimistic now mainly because so many people in decision-making positions in modern society (and not just in politics) are acutely concerned about the dangers. I think that is also true in some of the crucially important developing countries like China, India and Brazil who in the 1980s would not even have considered the matter. Our challenge is doing it in time and doing it without posing a threat to people's understandable desire to have a better and more prosperous life.

Transport policy is a good general example of the way in which progressives should confront climate change without donning the hair shirt. We should argue that the demand for travel is a social good.

Travel broadens the mind and offers opportunities of great importance to people from all walks of life. It is also important for business and for family and community life, enabling people to maintain close links with friends and relatives overseas. So our first principle should be to protect and enhance the right of people to travel when and where they want to.

If we state that clearly and unequivocally then people will listen to our arguments about how we do it and to the changes we need to make in order to protect the environment. They are unlikely to listen if we only talk about how we can stop them travelling, and even if they were to listen, it will be treated in the same way that people treated arguments about the miners' strike, or about increased taxation versus cuts in public services. They will say they support higher tax - and vote against it! For progressives to believe otherwise is the triumph of hope over experience.

As the MP for Hammersmith in the 1990s and later for Ealing Acton and Shepherds Bush I had to confront the competing needs of prosperity and the environment posed by the relative decline of Heathrow

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to its continental competitors. I am currently the campaign director of Future Heathrow, a coalition of trade unions, business, airlines and others.¹ I accept that aircraft are currently a growing cause of climate changing emissions but I do not believe that it is politically possible or desirable to say that Britain alone of the major countries can manage without a modern hub airport. There are 72,000 jobs on Heathrow airport – the UK's largest single site employer. There are another (estimated) 100,000 jobs in London and the Thames valley dependent on Heathrow remaining a premier hub airport.²

Hub airports are the critical interchange points for the emerging EU and global economy. Think of them like the great rail interchanges of the 19th century that made the UK the world's first industrialised and truly national economy. Hub airports are doing the same for Europe and the wider world which is why all countries of any size are currently building them. Our problem is that our main European competitors have already done it, so Amsterdam, Paris and Frankfurt have not only expanded but also linked in to the wider European transport network of rail and road. Frankfurt can fly you to 307 destinations. Heathrow can only fly you to 180 – down from 227 a few years ago. This relative decline will soon become irreversible.³

Are high speed railways progressive?

High speed rail is often quoted as an easy "green" alternative to airport expansion. It isn't. High speed rail uses more energy than lower speed rail – hardly surprising as high speed normally demands more power. The problem doesn't stop there. A high speed line requires a dedicated new track – 400 miles for London to Glasgow alone, and building a rail track requires thousands of tons of concrete, the manufacture of which is a major source of climate changing emissions.

I am in favour of a high speed rail network because I do not believe Britain can afford to exclude itself from the emerging European network, but I do not accept the argument that we should do it for environmental reasons. If our priority was the environment we would use a lower speed option on the existing network.

A high speed line might reduce the number of internal flights but the example of Manchester to Heathrow flights is instructive. 74% of passengers on that route are not stopping in London. They are using the hub airport to get to more distant destinations. They are unlikely to go to London

1. Further details of which are available on the web site: <http://www.futureheathrow.com/>

2. See <http://tinyurl.com/yd3z9sp>

3. This is not the place to expand on the arguments for the expansion of Heathrow but for those who wish to pursue it please look at my speech to the Town and Country Planning Association: <http://tinyurl.com/y8pxsdm>

by train and transfer by tube to get to Heathrow. And although I would hope any high speed line would link into Heathrow it doesn't follow that passengers would prefer to use that instead of a simple airport interchange. They will do what they are currently doing in increasing numbers and go via Amsterdam, Paris or Frankfurt. Increasingly these three airports are seen as Europe's hubs and Heathrow as a struggling outsider in this competition. The economic threat to Britain and to the local community is real. It can't be wished away.

The source of power for rail is crucial to the green argument. The claim that high speed rail is carbon neutral (an unsubstantiated claim) is based on 80% of the power (in France) coming from nuclear generation. I agree this is better than coal or oil power generation. But we are talking about a rail system that won't be operational before 2025. Progressives should not underestimate the speed of scientific and technological advances. Power generated from coal or oil is a key part of the problem and that is why aircraft are so heavily criticised. They fly on oil. But what will they be using in 2025? There is no doubt that it will be a mix of renewables and oil. Given the very welcome pressure on all industries to reduce their dependency on oil and given the likely continuing price rise of oil the aerospace industry has developed an intense interest in renewables – particularly ones like algae which have the potential to assist in the battle against climate change, as they absorb carbon dioxide and emit oxygen. Predicting future scientific and technological developments is notoriously difficult. We cannot sit back and rely on technological advances but it is clear that investing heavily in such research and encouraging companies, particularly in the transport sector, to carry out such research should be an essential feature of any progressive policy agenda.

The pressure on aviation to contribute more in the fight to reduce pollutants has produced very real results. There are many ways in which the industry can reduce emissions. It includes a range of options from pursuing carbon neutrality on ground based operations through to aircraft and engine design as well as alternative fuel research.⁴

The recent report of the Climate Change Committee stating that we can still meet our emissions reduction targets even if Heathrow has its third runway is an example of how quickly the arguments change in relation to this issue.⁵ Only months ago it was assumed that we could not expand Heathrow and meet our commitments. This is why we need a strategic approach to emissions and industry and one that does not rely solely on targeting some industries but instead puts pressure on all to reduce emissions.

The electoral dangers of division

If progressive politicians allow themselves to drift into policies that tell people what they can and can't aspire to we will rediscover the politics of electoral defeat. Telling people they should not fly is not only unrealistic in the wider world but would be a difficult policy to sell in one country when the rest of the world is very unlikely to accept that solution. Even trying to price people out of planes in one country is unlikely to work and painfully reminiscent of the Duke of Wellington famously saying in the 1840s that the trouble with expanding the railways is that it encouraged the "lower orders" to travel!

As the complexity of the policy choice becomes clear it is tempting for governments to take the route that protects employment and prosperity rather than pursue policies that prioritise protecting the environment. There then follows a real danger of a significant minority of progressives looking for more unrealistic solutions to protect the environment, for example, to ration flying or even to stop

4. The following two links will give more details of progress already made and the progress that can be expected in the near future: <http://tinyurl.com/yehvh89> and <http://www.sbac.co.uk/community/news/download.asp?a=6207>

5. Climate Change Committee (2009), Meeting the UK Aviation target – options for reducing emissions to 2050, December. Available from: <http://www.theccc.org.uk/reports/aviation-report>

it by pricing it above what is affordable to many people or to limit supply by refusing to allow any airport expansion. This will lead to splits in the progressive movement.

Splits amongst progressives occur when there are major differences over key policies, philosophies or between leadership candidates. We cannot know what the situation will be after the next general election but the issue of climate change has the potential to be a policy area which produces a splintering because of the different perceptions around the question of urgency and the need for compulsion set against the concern for jobs and prosperity. The trade unions will normally put jobs and security for their members before issues like climate change even though they are sympathetic to the argument. Middle class and younger supporters are likely to give a higher priority to issues like climate change and will try and duck the immediacy of the jobs issue by saying that the new economy will create new jobs. True, but it doesn't carry much weight with an industrial worker in the current economy.

Whether this causes a serious splintering or whether it leads to an informed and tolerant debate then depends on the way leadership groups handle the issue and the extent to which they respond to the

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views and concerns of the electorate. The danger is that some progressives will attempt to set the movement on a course that will alienate the electorate: telling them not to fly is one such example. This has some similarities to the nuclear weapons issue of the 1960s where a large and articulate section of the progressive movement called for unilateral action. There was considerable support in polling results for that policy but it was never enough to win the hearts and minds of a majority of the British people. Importantly the working class were less attracted to that argument than the middle class and I think that would be the same for the climate change issue. Therefore I don't think it is progressive for the Labour Party to commit itself to no airport expansion and a heavy tax on flights at a time when the rest of the world is expanding aviation. Rather, it is of vital importance that we find other ways of resolving these complex policy issues.

Science, technology and behaviour change

Britain is a key leader in the science of climate change. We are also a key leader in the aero space industry. The two facts are not unrelated. We would have a small fraction of our knowledge about climate change if it was not for the work of the aero space industry so it is important to keep the industry at the forefront of science and technology. To meet the challenge of climate change we need to encourage advances in science and technology and to combine these with changes in patterns of behaviour.

The link between science and technology and behavioural change is crucial in this debate. It is very easy and tempting to argue for behavioural change in relation to flying. But people don't easily or willingly vote for behavioural change that is enforced upon them and is perceived as having a negative impact on their everyday lives. The double standards are very apparent in the debate. For example, I am an enthusiastic member of the RSPB. Our magazine is strongly opposed to airport expansion. But our magazine carries many adverts extolling the joys of visiting the homes of exotic species – presumably before we wipe them out by travelling to see them! The readers of our magazine will vote against airport expansion and continue to fly to exotic destinations so we had better find a way in which they can do that without frying the planet.

If the science of climate changes suggested that life on earth was under immediate threat we would have to take extreme measures in all areas of life which would potentially involve a rapid and disastrous return to a pre-industrial society. The science does not suggest that. It suggests we have an urgent and serious problem but one that can be resolved by using economic tools, such as carbon trading, pursuing scientific research, and encouraging people to adapt their behaviour through tools such as financial inducements.

Behavioural change works best with encouragement not with punishment or lectures from well-meaning (and often well off middle class) people. Tesco's example of encouraging people to return plastic bags with a small financial inducement is a simple example.⁶ The UK government's car scrappage scheme is another useful example.⁷ Grants for people to insulate their houses are particularly important as heat loss from our elderly housing stock is a major factor in wasting energy.

A progressive policy should continue to use the price mechanism of carbon trading to increase the pressure on industry to develop the new technologies necessary to defeat climate change. It incentivises companies to look for alternative ways of delivering goods and services, and ensures that rail, road and air can compete in the normal way. Any new technological breakthroughs then become part of the equation and governments will not have to second guess what is going to be the most environmentally efficient form of transport twenty years from now.

The intelligent policy for progressives in this area is to come up with more ideas that encourage energy saving by financial and other rewards, and to combine these with investment and encouragement for scientific and technological research. This provides people with a positive message. If you are campaigning in an election does it not make more sense to tell people what they can do (with government support) to save energy, such as insulating their homes, than to campaign on a negative platform which instructs them not to fly, or worse still, not to travel so much?

In the UK, the Conservatives are already campaigning on a "broken Britain" image which emphasises failure and a sad society. It is not true but it enables them to say "time for a change". We can play into that argument by telling people what they can't do. Or we can reverse it and say Britain along with other countries is quite capable of solving these problems but we need positive attitudes and positive messages on what individuals can do and what we as a society can do.

Positive messages can win elections. Negative ones can lose them.

Progressives should be winners not losers!

Clive Soley is a member of the House of Lords. He is also the campaign director for Future Heathrow – a coalition of trade unions, business, airlines and professional associations campaigning for a modernised Heathrow with a third runway operating within the strict environmental restrictions laid down by the government and the EU.