

# The road well travelled



## THE HOT TOPIC: HOW TO TACKLE GLOBAL WARMING AND STILL KEEP THE LIGHTS ON

by Gabrielle Walker and Sir David King

Bloomsbury: 2008. 309pp. £9.99

By failing to question the conventional wisdom rigorously, we risk shutting the door to a radical rethink on how to move climate policy forward.

*The Hot Topic* opens with a bang: “We aim to tell you everything you wanted to know about global warming but were too depressed to ask.” This is a troubling book, but not for the reasons that the authors propose. *The Hot Topic* displays throughout an unquestioning acceptance of the received wisdom about climate change science and policy. In the section dealing with political “sticking points”, King and Walker have no scintilla of doubt that the Kyoto Protocol is the road to follow and that anyone who deserts it is wrong and possibly corrupt. So we have as heroes the EU, which doesn’t “duck” the problem, and as villains the US, languishing under the rule of “President Bush and his fiercely partisan advisers”. They lump all “sceptics” — anyone who disagrees with them — together like the damned in a Hieronymus Bosch painting of heaven and hell. This is done in much the same way by activists such as Al Gore and Tim Flannery, both of whom excitedly endorse this book on the cover. Presenting the issue of climate policy in such crude theatrical dichotomies of good and right versus evil and wrong is not merely unhelpful, it is unworthy. The book is relentlessly normative. It misses, but illustrates, the essential insight of Roger Pielke, Jr’s book on science, science advisers and policy, *The Honest Broker* (Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge, 2007). Pielke explains how science becomes hostage to polemic in battles over values and shows that climate policy is a classic case of such conflation. In that vein, *The Hot Topic* maps only one true route from damnation to salvation.

To maintain the credibility of ‘Kyoto’, the authors display disturbing forms of engagement with uncongenial information. (In this respect, the

book has an obvious analogue in the climate debate at the other end of the polemical spectrum: *The Skeptical Environmentalist* by Bjorn Lomborg.) For example — among others — they claim not only that the EU has committed itself to a Kyoto target of eight percent reduction on 1990 emission levels by 2012, but that this is “a target that looks very likely to be met”. The authors concede that this ‘success’ will in large part depend on buying dubious carbon credits through the Kyoto Protocol’s Clean Development Mechanism, but they neglect to point out that without the UK and Germany, the rest of the EU will log rises of at least five percent. In several European countries, rises will exceed those of the US. And the British and German reductions had nothing to do with climate policy. One was an unintentional by-product of former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s destruction of the National Union of Mineworkers, and the other resulted from the collapse of communism in East Germany. We are not told this.

On the face of the evidence, the Kyoto approach has failed in practice and conceptually, as Steve Rayner and I pointed out in *Nature* last October (*Nature* 449, 973–975; 2007). Along with colleagues such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s environment adviser Hans Joachim Schellnhuber (*Nature* 450, 346; 2007), Walker and King take the common position of seeming reasonableness: “Kyoto may have had its flaws, but it was still an important first step.” Then follows a chapter on how, with redoubled political will and once the Americans have been forced into line, more of the same will work where to date it has failed. From this we

may assume that the authors would be unwilling to accept that what actually happened during and after the UN Climate Change Conference in Bali is quite different from this story.

Their preferred ‘bigger and better Kyoto’ formula, promoted by the EU, the current British government, Gore and the climate activists, was defeated. Instead, the geopolitical centre of gravity moved from Europe into the Pacific, where four major powers will determine the future shape of global policy: China, India, Japan and the US, supported by Canada and also, one may hope, Australia, once it recovers from the excitement of the symbolic act of ‘signing Kyoto’. The leading international policy forum will more likely be the Major Economies Meetings, the US-led round-table involving the world’s top-emitting nations, than the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. (Walker and King do concede that the top 20 emitters should be the ones leading the way forward.)

With the recognition of Kyoto’s failure, the metric driving progress on climate policy will necessarily shift to supply-side measures and away from demand management via setting of binding emissions targets. New targets will be framed in terms of the reduction of energy intensity by sector across all economies, including the Chinese and Indian — whose exclusion from Kyoto is one of its many fatal flaws — focussing first upon those primary sectors with the heaviest energy use. The authors disapprove of this metric with a cursory dismissal couched in their strongest form of condemnation: “currently much favoured by President Bush”. But the reality is that even under this much

disfavoured current president, the US is not isolated internationally, nor has it been inactive. And, of course, the Americans will have a new president within a year.

The book ends with a self-improvement chapter on how the reader can help to save the world, and “our handy guide to common climate myths” with which to confound those sulphurous hordes of climate sceptics. The former is written in the tone of all such guides on subjects from slimming to salvation, full of prim instructions such as “it is definitely a good idea to try to fly less” and encouragement to “be receptive to imaginative new ideas” — the one in

question being the deeply problematic idea of personal carbon credits. The “guide to common climate myths” that follows is like the rebuttal sheet of a Jehovah’s Witness and is as dogmatic and as crude. The authors have already told us that “wedunnit” (sic); and anyone who doesn’t agree with them that “human activity is to blame for the rise in temperatures over recent decades ... either has a vested interest in ignoring the scientific arguments or they are fools.” So acceptance of the authors’ views of climate science defines truth, virtue and intelligence.

The reality is that we are at a tipping point for climate policy. Now is a moment when new ideas and options arising

from a radical rethink of the dismal policy record so far can have a dramatic positive effect. Instead of welcoming such a discussion, the authors seek to shut it down pre-emptively by continuing a tired political campaign for an approach that simply has not worked — and cannot work.

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