

# **The Future of Green Politics**

A report for Tomorrow's England  
By Professor Andrew Dobson, Keele University, UK  
April 2007

Task: To ‘future gaze’ into green politics and make projections about how the parties might (or might not) work together on climate change (CC, hereafter) and what sort of political choices might be available to the voter by 2025 and 2050.

Environmental problems don’t respect borders and boundaries yet the guidelines for this report are full of them. ‘England’, ‘green politics’, ‘climate change’ and ‘political parties’ all suggest geographical, issue and political/social/economic contexts that will shape the development of the commission’s main terms of reference. The variables are complex and their interrelationship could take many forms and point in different directions.

The focus on ‘England’, in particular, feels awkward when we are so used to speak of the United Kingdom in these contexts, but in keeping with the project’s guidelines I shall refer to England throughout the report.

One of the most important variables is the degree to which climate change itself will take hold. The Intergovernmental Committee for Climate Change (IPCC) offers us a range of possibilities, and future developments regarding climate change in English politics will probably be affected by where on this range of possibilities we find ourselves in 2025 and 2050.

In keeping with the idea of calibrating change by degrees, this report looks at three possible scenarios, relating to one-, two- and three-degree change.

### **One-degree change**

If the increase in temperature between now and 2050 is kept to within one degree or so, the changes visited upon England will likely be relatively small and may even be beneficial to key sectors of the population.

At one degree, for example, summer temperatures in today’s classic mass holiday destinations around the Mediterranean will be uncomfortably high for increasing numbers of holidaymakers. Holidaymaking is likely to migrate north, both within countries such as France and Spain, and to countries like England.

The English tourist industry could therefore benefit from global warming at the lower end of the scale of possibilities outlined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The same could be true for parts of the farming industry, as growing periods extend or even repeat themselves, and as it becomes possible to widen the range of crops grown.

At this level of climate change, then, winters might be a little wetter than they are now, summers might be a little warmer, and we might experience relatively extreme weather events such as tornadoes a little more frequently. Overall, though, the changes in England will probably be too small to be the cause of big changes in the political parties’ approach to dealing with climate change.

So at low levels of climate change we can expect similar approaches to it from the political parties in the early years between now and 2025 as we see at the moment. The main parties will agree that it's a problem, and they will only disagree about how to deal with it.

In truth these disagreements are not so great now, and are unlikely to be any greater in the future, at this level of climate change. No party at the moment is willing to take drastic measures involving curtailments on personal freedoms, such as freedom to travel, to deal with climate change. The major parties are broadly happy with companies regulating themselves as far as their climate change impacts are concerned, so we can expect more and more emphasis on the corporate social responsibility (CSR) approach to private sector regulation than on legislation itself.

There are signs, though, of government being stirred into legislative action, and this may be a trend for the future. Of course 'government' has meant, for the past ten years, New Labour, and it is difficult to predict the likely Conservative reaction to the relative galvanising of government in years to come. On the one hand, there is a return to voluntarism in the Conservative Party – the claim that government can't do everything on its own, and the related call for more individual responsibility. On the other hand, New Labour's recent Climate Change Bill received cross-party support, indicating that the Conservatives are not totally reluctant to support government legislation in the climate change area. So policies such as the Climate Change Levy might begin to command broader cross-party consensus than they do at the moment.

Fault lines between the parties in terms of favoured policy levers are likely, therefore to remain the same. There will probably be a tendency towards voluntarism, punctuated by occasional pieces of legislation which themselves maybe hedged to contain sufficient wriggle room to allow for missed targets and so on (for example, the 5-year rather than annual targets in the Climate Change Bill).

In the period up to 2025 in the one-degree world there is likely to be a continued focus on mitigation as opposed to adaptation as successive governments seek to make good the mitigative policies being drawn up for the near- to mid-future. That's to say that the focus is likely to continue to be on reducing climate change emissions rather than adapting to their effects.

This focus on mitigation could be replaced by policies for adaptation in the 2025-2050 period, particularly if mitigative policies turn out to be unsuccessful and temperatures continue to rise.

Might the Liberal Democrats (LD) push the other two parties in the direction of more drastic action to mitigate climate change? The LDs present themselves as a radical alternative in this regard, but the current evidence suggests that when one of the two major parties takes a more radical stance this is not so

much due to pressure from the LDs as to the need to respond to what is regarded as incontrovertible scientific evidence.

All this assumes, though, a similar level and trajectory of concern about climate change as we experience today. But what if, as was suggested above, the one degree change we are discussing here turns out to be beneficial for constituencies and sectors in England? In this case, concern about climate change could dissipate in the coming decades to the point where it would lose its salience and might even drop right off the political agenda.

This apparently counter-intuitive possibility should not be rejected too quickly, given the current levels of ignorance and lack of interest regarding climate change in the English population. This lack of interest is itself counter-intuitive, at least given the high position of climate change on the list of politicians' rhetorical commitments. It isn't too hard to see what would happen to citizens' already patchy concern about climate change if the phenomenon turned out to affect them less than they had been led to believe. And if, as we've suggested, climate change effects turn out to be beneficial for England in some broad sense, with only isolated constituencies worried about it, then political parties may well rationally respond by quietly sweeping their present rhetorical and legislative commitments under the carpet completely.

Are there any drivers for them to do otherwise, at these low levels of climate change and of concern about it?

One possibility relates to international commitments entered into, and which will bind governments of the future into taking action against climate change. It would be ironic, and even potentially damaging to the electoral interests of future governments, if this action were to take place against a backdrop of declining public concern about climate change from even the presently low levels. Future governments could find themselves in the uncomfortable position of spending money on climate change mitigation and adaptation at the point at which it becomes clear that the phenomenon is beneficial to lifestyles and economies in England.

Another possibility for continuing action against climate change even in the relatively benign one-degree world turns on the potential for the mobilisation of widespread concern at the effects of climate change on biodiversity in other parts of the world. The English countryside is unlikely to be changed markedly by a one-degree change. Trees may flower earlier in spring, leaves may fall earlier in autumn, and some animals and birds might change their migration patterns. There will be biodiversity casualties as there will be beneficiaries, but cataclysmic changes at this level that could engender a demand from English citizens to deal with climate change urgently are unlikely.

This contrasts with other parts of the world where even a one-degree rise in temperatures could bring about significant biodiversity change. Mount Kilimanjaro may lose its snow altogether, much of the Alps will be bare rock,

and most of the Great Barrier Reef will die. Will this worry English voters? Probably not in sufficiently large numbers to influence English political responses to climate change. But these examples are iconic in their own contexts, and we should not underestimate the effect that changes to iconic biodiversity or landscape in England could bring about. There is evidence, for example, that oak trees are suffering from parasites that thrive in the warmer springs we habitually enjoy nowadays. ‘Heart of oak are our ships ...’; might a demonstrable threat to this iconic English tree motivate the English voter to demand tougher action on climate change?

In sum, this sketch of one degree political and climate change suggests some counter-intuitive possibilities. At present climate change is regarded by the political class as a common enemy, and there is a broad consensus about the need to mitigate and adapt to it, and how to go about doing so. We should not assume that this will always be the case. A consensus could develop around the presently heretical suggestion that climate change is good for England, its economy and its inhabitants. If this happens, then the challenge for political parties may be manage down, rather than ratchet up, climate change concern.

### **Two-degree change**

The consensus seems to be that more dramatic change will be visited on both England and the rest of the world by two- or three-degree rises in global temperature. Most European summers will tend to be like that of 2003 which killed 30,000 people across the continent. Extreme summers in 2025 and 2050 will be even hotter than that.

By 2025, ice-melt from landmasses such as Greenland could be considerable, and by 2050 even more ice might have turned to water, potentially raising levels by tens of centimetres.

The challenge for governments in England in the three degree range could therefore be in the arena of adaptation rather than – or as well as – mitigation. In other words governments may well be spending more of their time dealing with the effects of climate change rather than trying to reduce it.

This could mean a number of things. Extreme summer heat could prompt calls for different kinds of building design in the medium- to longer-term, for example. There may also be more frequent calls on damage limitation policies and strategies, such as dealing with the effects of summer heat on vulnerable populations like the old and infirm.

Sea level rises would bring their own adaptive challenges, with the possible need to abandon some coastal communities and relocate populations, and to build flood defences.

Might a shift of emphasis from mitigation to adaptation affect the political parties’ responses to climate change around 2025 or 2050? There appears to be no ideological basis why this should be so, beyond the likely arguments

over the best agents for change. Thus on the right there is likely to be a greater emphasis on the private sector, voluntary organisations and self-help, while the instinct on the left may be to emphasise the role of government and the public sector. So there is likely to be clear and general recognition of the need to adopt adaptive policies, and arguments are likely to be over value for money and cost-effectiveness.

Problems of this sort could, though, be overwhelmed by the effects on England of climate change effects in the rest of the world. If in the one degree world people might want to visit England for recreation, in the two- to three-degree world they might seek to come to England out of necessity. This could put great strain on England's politics as well its infrastructure.

For as the world warms, the lives of millions of people around the world are likely to become ever more precarious. We are already familiar with the phenomenon of the environmental refugee. In the two-degree world they could well be millions of people trying to move around the globe in search of more habitable conditions. This could make England an even more attractive destination for would-be migrants than it is today.

There is enough evidence from what we know of the politics of immigration today to be fairly sure that waves of environmental refugees would raise the political temperature in England. The main parties currently manage a consensus around the politics of immigration – it should be controlled – and the arguments are more about the means to achieve such control rather than whether it is necessary or not.

In the absence of some countervailing driver such as a dramatic – and rather unlikely - increase in global responsibility on the part of voters (and, as a consequence, politicians) it is possible that this consensus would harden still further.

Given current evidence regarding the rise of nationalistic and xenophobic politics around the immigration into England of accession country citizens from the European Union, there is the possibility that mass migration of environmental refugees northwards could open up real political possibilities for the right-wing fringe of English politics. Absent any change to the first-past-the-post electoral system most of this impact is likely to be at the local level, centred on areas of already existing urban deprivation. This could be very destabilising, and might well lead to quite large-scale social unrest. Nor is it beyond the bounds of possibility that even under a non-proportional system of election to the House of Commons, the British National Party (or some homologue) could gain its first Members of Parliament. The impact of this on English political life should not be underestimated, with the potential for a 'race to the bottom' between the major parties, scrambling to regain ground lost to the BNP.

In sum, in the two degree world English politics could well be affected more by the effects of climate change on other parts of the world, than by the effects of climate change on England itself.

In the two degree world it could well be that arguments about what to do about climate change could become more polarised. This might put the party-political consensus on climate change described in the one-degree world under strain. As far as parliamentary politics is concerned, the consensus could be broken by a broadening of representation as a result, for example, of proportional representation (PR).

PR is a permanent possibility in the UK (and therefore English) political system (even it seems presently unlikely), and there is always the chance that by 2025 or 2050 the pressure for change would have grown to the point where a new electoral settlement was reached.

If this happens there is the chance of a greater set of options regarding climate change being presented to English voters. We might imagine that the presence of the Green Party, for instance, in Parliament would broaden the analysis of the causes and consequences of climate change, and what to do about it. Evidence from other European countries where Greens have a parliamentary presence and/or a share of power in government certainly bears this out.

In contemporary local English politics Greens have suggested and implemented measures that seem unpalatable to the main parties. Such measures often turn out to be popular, and Green councillors are constantly re-elected and the number of Green Party councillors continues to rise. Greens seem capable of creating new political realities by pushing through policies that seem unacceptable one day but become part of the political landscape the next. These new realities could be called 'tipping points' – and the congestion charge in London might be one example.

Might climate change itself be a catalyst for a new electoral settlement? At some point during the next 20-40 years, the potentially cataclysmic changes brought about by anything more than a one or two degree warming could bring about calls for a 'new politics'. The present political system might be regarded as too exclusive, and therefore too unresponsive to potential solutions to climate change being canvassed outside the main political parties. This could give rise to calls for the representation of these ideas in the House of Commons, and therefore for proportional representation.

In sum, two-degree change could well bring about a broadening of political possibilities in England. The change could be benign, but it could also be malign. From the benign point of view, the effects of climate change could lead to calls for broader political representation to include parties dedicated to environmental protection of all sorts, such as the Green Party. On the other hand the tensions that could be created by the knock-on effects of climate change reaching England via the migration of affected populations could lead to division and scapegoating – even to a political tipping point at which chauvinism becomes the defining feature of English party political culture.

### Three-degree change

At three or four degrees a climate change tipping point could be reached. Hundreds of billions of tons of carbon locked up in the Arctic permafrost could be released. The effect of this is uncertain, but the North Pole could become free of ice for the first time for 3 million years by 2050. Parts of southern Europe are already becoming desertified – Almeria in Spain, for example – and while the temperatures there now enable exotic foods to be grown for year-round delivery to English dinner tables, three- to four-degree global could render these parts of Europe virtually uninhabitable. The ‘great trek north’ possibility outlined in the two-degree world might well become more likely under these conditions.

Indeed, with summer temperatures in southern England in the mid- to high-40s, and wetter and more violent winters, by 2050 England could be approaching the kind of conditions that provide the backdrop for apocalyptic novels.

What effect could this have on English politics?

One possible scenario is ‘survivalism’, and the challenge could be to maintain the principles and practices of liberal democracy under these conditions. Pressures could come from two directions. First, the relatively benign conditions of the one-degree world that could make England a pleasant place to live in look likely to be replaced by conditions that make life increasingly harder and cruder. Evidence drawn from experience of living in marginal and difficult environments in the contemporary world suggests disparities in the capacity to cope with extreme conditions. This capacity directly correlates with relative wealth.

At this point the underlying political culture of societies can turn out to be of crucial importance. Societies with a history of wealth disparity and inequality are likely to have these disparities and inequalities exacerbated by the stresses imposed by marginal living. England, as part of the UK, has experienced increasing inequality in recent years and appears to have made a firm decision in favour of liberal capitalism rather than social democracy. Given current configurations, social democracy is not an option for voters. Might it become one in the three degree world?

Probably not. Social democracy is a delicate plant, threatened rather than encouraged by a scramble for survival. An entrenchment of a kind of rugged individualism is more likely, with those in privileged positions of resource acquisition seeking to maintain their advantage, locking out the more disadvantaged and vulnerable. Some form of social formation aimed at defending the vulnerable could develop, and society could polarise along lines of privilege and deprivation.

In this context distinct types of political leadership could emerge, neither of which would be especially conducive to a democratic political culture. On the one hand, quite aggressive leadership – and its associated qualities – could

emerge in favour of the well off, characterised by exclusivity and a determination to maintain the status quo.

On the other hand, the possibilities for populist styles of leadership are exacerbated by conditions of polarisation, instability and threat. Populist leaders claim to be able to speak directly to their constituencies without the need for the intermediate political institutions of mature liberal democracies. Apparently permanently disenfranchised groups can see populist leaders as the solution to inequity and disadvantage, and may well be prepared to trade the institutions of liberal democracy against the promise of influence through a populist champion.

Thus political options could indeed widen for English citizens in a three-degree world, but not in the ways imagined in secure liberal democracies. In liberal democracies 'widening political options' is taken to mean broader representation and the policy package options that go with it. In the insecure three degree world, and especially in a political culture historically defined by individualism, inequality, competition and labour flexibility, the options are perhaps more likely to be between North and South American models, rather than between the Anglo and Continental models as we currently understand them.

Societies in the three-degree world are perhaps likely to have to adopt quite defensive, reactive policies in the face of climate change. Success may well be measured by the degree of resilience societies can achieve – how robust they are in the face of the extremes brought about by climate change.

To a degree, resilience will very likely be determined by relative wealth and access to appropriate technologies – we already have evidence for this in contemporary societies.

But there are also 'softer' indicators of resilience. A history of shared sacrifice might be one indicator of the capacity to cope with large-scale change. There is also some evidence to suggest that more equal societies are better prepared to deal with the sorts of changes that the three degree world will bring us, perhaps because of the sense and practice of sharing suggested by equality as a social objective.

So once again, England's historic choice of liberal capitalism over social democracy made in the mid-1970s and entrenched by successive governments, could be an obstacle to success in the three-degree world. This could be because while competitive individualism, a culture of individualised self-help and an emphasis on personal responsibility might be a recipe for individual success for some under 'normal' conditions, it is less clear that this type of political culture produces the shared experience of working towards collective goals – the development of the 'ties that bind' – that success in the three degree world might demand.

In sum, the political predictability of the three- or four-degree world is as insecure as predictions regarding the effects on the planet of climate change

itself. It is possible, though, that the liberal capitalist, individualist, inward-looking political culture to which the English seem wedded at present is not well adapted to dealing with the types of changes and challenges that three-degree climate change could bring with it. If this culture fragments under the strain, the outcome could well be a range of political options that are more conducive to the politics of privilege and its nemesis, populism, than to mature liberal democracy.