Changing Dynamics of Environmental Politics in Britain: a case study of the UK Climate Change Act

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Abstract

This article examines the political causes behind the Climate Change Act 2008. It recalls both major parties’ mixed environmental records while examining the political problems associated with climate change in addition to strategies for overcoming them. It then asks what provoked such a ground-breaking piece of legislation – noting the low saliency given to the environment by the public – and identifies the David Cameron’s rebranding of the Conservatives the defining factor by ensuring that his party positively competed over green issues for the first time. This resulted in both Labour and the Conservatives, despite internal opposition, breaking from their traditional strategy of preference-accommodation over the environment as such competition was not provoked by public pressure. It concludes that, while the Act is partly a product of Labour’s internationally pioneering efforts over climate change; intense party competition over the environment since 2006, as opposed to public pressure, formed the main driving force behind its adoption.

Introduction

The following section offers a brief overview of two theoretical concepts relevant to the study; the first is Downs’ spatial theory of voting (Downs, 1957) and its propensity to promote preference-accommodation strategies among competing political parties (Druckman & Lupia, 2000; Stubager, 2003; Hindmoor, 2008). The second is the more general concept of post-materialism and in particular its prevalence, or otherwise, among the contemporary voting public as well as its relevance to political parties when deliberating various policy paradigms (Giacolone et al, 2008). Protection of the environment is generally considered a post-modern concern due to its tendency to come at a cost to modern, material concerns such as the economy; hence its relevance to this study.

The third section looks at the environment as a political problem; it addresses the difficulties in engaging with a minority, predominantly post-material concern (Inglehart 1997;
Humphrey, 2009) and assesses the reasons as to why, up until the past five years, the environment remained a relatively uncontested area of policy. This includes briefly examining the neglect environmental policy experienced under both the Conservatives and Labour, with a focus on New Labour’s record since coming into office in 1997 (Carter, 1992; 2008). It will be argued that Labour’s record has been mixed; internationally New Labour has provided leadership at a number of key moments – at the Kyoto and Gleneagles summits for example – however domestically the party has a much less impressive record with successes tending to be limited to occasions where environmental and social goals have combined, such as through the Warm Front Scheme. It goes on to identify how the conditions for party competition over the environment have been apparent since 1997, however it is only since 2006 when intense party political competition has become a reality with the environment transforming into a headline issue within Parliament, the media and the public (Carter, 2006; Dorey, 2007; McLean, 2008). It will argue that this has primarily been caused by the strategies employed by David Cameron since becoming leader of the Conservative Party and the ensuing party competition over environmental policy (Carter, 2009, 2010).

The forth section examines climate change as a distinct area of environmental policy (Giddens, 2009; Giddens et al, 2009), the difficulties it presents to political parties as well as effective strategies likely to be undertaken by parties of government (Compston, 2009, 2010). It looks at Labour’s record on climate change issues (Darkin, 2006) and continues by critically examining the Climate Change Act 2008 as a case study (Pielke, Jr., 2009) for examining the party politicisation of the environment through an exploration of the relevant factors in its conception and implementation. The includes the political reaction the Act has garnered since its successful passage through Parliament, with particular attention paid to the criticism from the right-wing of the Conservative Party and associated commentators.

The conclusions drawn are wide ranging and address a number of issues. Primarily it is argued that Cameron’s leadership of the Conservatives has revitalised his party and transformed the political debate surrounding environmental issues. By provoking Labour into action, the environment is now subject to intense party competition, such that it would be
impossible to consign the policy area to the superficial position it formerly occupied, regardless of governmental changes and binding commitments, be they of a national or an international nature. It will argue that the Climate Change Act is also a result of such competition and not due to the force of public opinion or pro-environmental lobbying. This represents a break from the preference-accommodating strategy – given the low priority given to environmental issues by the general public – which had been previously employed by both main parties towards the environment. A secondary conclusion drawn, unrelated to party competition, is based upon Labour’s international focus towards environmental policy which has ensured that the UK is challenging to be a leader on climate change, arguably a strategic and an increasingly important position economically, and indeed one that ensures climate change remains near the top of the political agenda.

As a final note, it will conclude that the economic recession and a change in priorities for a Conservative government since 2007, has relegated the environment from the prominent position it held in the previous year. Despite this, it will argued that the exceptional level of politicisation of the environment since 2006, exemplified best through the Climate Change Act 2008, has had such a significant impact on government policy that future administrations will be unable to overlook the environment as has happened historically (Carter, 2010), despite the public continuing to prioritise other areas over environmental policy.

**Party Competition and Post-materialism**

*Party Competition*

Political parties compete based on the presumption that preferences exist within all of us – members of each party and the general public have the innate mental capacity to rate one policy over another based on which they perceive as being the best able to satisfy their demands. In this case a preference is an evaluative judgement made by someone which serves as a “cognitive marker” (Druckman & Lupia, 2000, p2-3) when approaching every aspect of political life; from grand meta-narratives right down to specific policy choices.

The concept of preference-accommodation is based on Downs’ (1957) spatial theory of voting; a notion whereby political parties are essentially forced to accommodate the
preferences of voters if they are to be elected into government rather attempting to influence voters and attract support for their own ideal polices. The is based on the premise that preferences are being fixed and therefore voters are unable to be convinced of the benefits of a policy if they do not inherently agree with it; hence policies must be adapted to match those already preferred by the general public. The median voter consequently becomes the target of all political activity.

Rejecting the concept of preference-accommodation is the theory of preference-shaping (Stubager, 2003) whereby parties can pioneer a particular policy which later becomes adopted by voters as their preferred policy option. This can occur over many years as the benefit of policies becomes apparent or by voters simply becoming accustomed to them. More concretely, it can be achieved through societal manipulation, whereby parties would systematically reward certain classes or groups that back them or by intentionally increasing the size of supportive classes or groups (ibid, p243). If this is possible then it stands to reason that parties would attempt a preference-shaping strategy in order to stay consistent with ideological goals whilst at the same time maximising their electoral prospects. Equally, accommodating strategies may be rejected by the party leadership, activists or influential backers, if it strays too far from their own policy objectives (Dunleavy and Ward, 1981, p377). This can work in both ways however as an accommodating strategy could be primarily supported by influential backers in spite of a perceived need for more unpopular policies. This applies to environmental policy in particular due to voters being primarily concerned with their immediate material needs and both Labour and the Conservatives are primarily supported by productivist backers in the form of trade unions and businesses respectively (Carter, 1992, p750). If policies are needed to temper consumer demand or raise environmental taxes in order to meet domestic or international environmental commitments, for example, then a preference-shaping strategy may be required which will serve to justify decisions made retrospectively.

Post-Materialism

Inglehart (1997) identifies someone as having post-materialist values if they stress the importance of self-expression, belongingness, sense of community and are comparatively less driven by achievement motivation as opposed to materialist values which prioritise economic security and prosperity. For someone to prioritise post-materialist concerns above material
ones, a profound shift in their attitude will have occurred, influencing both their personal and voting behaviour. The trend within the UK appears to point towards an ascendency of post-materialist values amongst the public, for example a study carried out over several decades by Inglehart showed so-called ‘materialists’ outnumbered ‘post-materialists’ four to one in 1970 compared with just four to three in 1990 (Giacalone et al, 2008, p484). The impact of this trend will be discussed in the next section, particularly in regard to Cameron’s policy priorities when assuming leadership of the Conservatives and then in section four regarding public support for action on climate change. Those who list protecting the environment as one of their priorities would be prioritising a post-material concern over other material concerns, as they refute the value of economic growth when it comes at a cost to their own value system; one that prioritises aesthetics, quality of life and our relationship to nature over other concerns such as increases in material wealth.

**Party Politicisation of the Environment**

This section will begin by identifying some of the main characteristics of the environment as an area of policy-making before applying these observations to the Conservative Party since David Cameron became leader. It continues by examining how the new green agenda of the Conservatives has served to intensify party competition on the environment, particularly during 2006, before addressing Labour’s response and their environmental record since 1997. It will go on to explore the reasons why the environment remained an uncontested party political issue for so long and explain why, in the space of a few years since 2006, it has become a highly contested area of policy as each of the main parties seek to be identified as the most green in the eyes of the public (Carter, 2008, p204). It will argue that previously the parties had pursued a strategy of preference-accommodation given the public’s expressed disinterest in the environment (McLean, 2008, p189). According to Downs’ (1957) theory of party competition, competing political parties will adopt policy that puts them in a vote-maximising position. This position will inevitably be to satisfy the median voter and they will therefore converge on similar, if not identical, policies (Hindmoor, 2008, p495). The lack of attention paid to the environment prior to 2006 (Carter, 2008, p197) clearly shows as the parties had few policies over which to compete, however this has changed dramatically since 2006 whereupon the environment became a focal point of party competition despite the issue remaining as a priority for the public.
The raison d'être of any political party is to be elected into government and retain power in order to make legislative changes according to their ideology and values. Parties will campaign and make policy on issues of public concern and hope to benefit at the polls by satisfying public wants; issues not considered important by the electorate therefore are unlikely to be taken too seriously by major political parties. The environment, as a party political issue, satisfied this criterion and has traditionally only been championed by the Liberal Democrats; indeed the party consistently gave more mentions to the environment in each of their manifestos since 1979 (Carter, 1992, p755; Carter, 2008, p197) and reliably topped surveys asking people to identify which party they believe to be ‘best on the environment’. This is with the exception of 2007 when the Liberal Democrats were briefly overtaken by Labour (Carter, 2010, p5). However, despite this perceived lead in environmental issues the Liberal Democrats have failed to shape the wider policy agenda, primarily due to them being third party in an electoral system that favours the two largest parties (Carter, 2008, p197).

**The Environment**

Looking more closely at the environment as a policy area, a unique characteristic that serves to benefit politicians can be identified. Humphrey terms this ‘rational irrationality’ (Humphrey, 2009); essentially a concept suggesting that the public will, in general, ask politicians to act on environmental issues without truly wanting any action to be taken. Based on a number of surveys (ibid, p148), Humphrey found that electoral success can be had by the party with the best rhetoric, provided that it leads to no practical negative individual impact regarding behavioural change or punitive fiscal measures. In other words, his findings mean that people may state they are willing to pay to mitigate the damaging effects of climate change but in reality are not willing to pay for any specific policy that would have such an effect.

This scenario presents quite the opportunity for any political party, a virtual win-win situation, especially in a climate where the public have yet to confer concrete green credentials on any one party (Carter, 1992, p760). This explains why so-called ‘greenwash’ –
the disingenuous use of environmental language to mask contradictory policies – would be an effective tool, especially regarding more superficial aspects such as the general image and public perception of a party or candidate. More generally though it provides an opportunity for politicians to promise what they cannot deliver without fear of electoral repercussions. For example, in 1997 then-transport secretary John Prescott pledged that he would “have failed if, in five years time, there are not many more people using public transport and far fewer journeys by car” (ibid, p154). As it transpired this change in transportation behaviour did not occur and therefore by his own standard, his time at the Department of Transport would have to be considered a failure; however by the public’s own supposedly irrational standard he succeeded by saying exactly what was needed and then proceeded to act correctly by not achieving it. If this is true more generally then it means engagement with a voter's green aspirations is hugely beneficial as it requires very little concrete policy action.

The Greening of the Conservatives

One way of applying this interpretation of environmental politics is to look at the ‘greening’ of the Conservative Party under David Cameron. For the first two years of his leadership, a “brand decontamination” (Carter, 2009, p234) strategy was launched, involving a range of issues with the environment at the forefront, in an attempt to shred publicly held ‘misconceptions’ about the party and make a Conservative government an electable reality. Cameron was not the first leader to try and bring the green and blue banners under one party, William Hague made such a speech in 1998 (Hague, 2009) and even further back in 1988 Thatcher delivered her now famous speech to the Royal Society (Thatcher, 1988); however it is with Cameron’s rebranding attempts that such a green identity appears to have become more ingrained, lasting beyond the occasional speech or press conference. Indeed since becoming leader of the Conservative Party in December 2005, the environment has transformed into a field of intense party competition despite no detailed policies being announced in his first two years in office¹.

¹ It should be added that this is not particularly unusual. As Dorey (2007, p142) identifies, the premature announcement of policy proposals can result in them being ‘costed’ and rebuked or, on the other hand, being adopted by the government as their own policy.
Cameron’s repeated use of the phrase “there is such a thing as society” is the most obvious example of his attempts to signal a clear divergence from Thatcherism and recast the Conservatives as a more inclusive and pluralistic body (Dorey, 2007, p143). Two facts however betray the sincerity of this strategy: firstly that Cameron’s voting record does not reflect the image of the compassionate conservative that he has sought to promote once leader, and secondly the fact that he was a key author of the party’s 2005 manifesto, a Eurosceptic document that prioritised a tough stance against asylum and immigration (ibid, p139). However, as discussed above, the sincerity of his approach is possibly irrelevant as voters in general appear to not expect or truly want green policies to be carried out in full.

Cameron also acknowledged the post-materialist trend of post-industrial British society by declaring the need to address the ‘work-life balance’ and urging greater appreciation of the cultural and social aspects of life including recognising of the intrinsic value of non-material concerns such as the environment (Dorey, 2007, p145). This fits with the logic of his rebranding strategy and particularly so with his focus on the environment as an area of policy which, as discussed in the previous section, forms an archetypal post-materialist concern; something Cameron recognised when he stated that he wanted “this generation to be the one that...finds a way to combine economic, social and environmental progress” (Prince, 2008).

One of the most immediate and more superficial attempts to project the new green image of the Conservatives occurred in 2006 almost as soon as Cameron came to power: the change from the old 'torch' to the new 'tree' logo. Whilst shallow in many respects, the change represented a deeper attempt to strengthen Cameron's authority and ideology on the new Conservatives. Indeed Tim Montgomerie, founder of the Conservative Home website, was quoted as saying the logo “reinforces what David Cameron is trying to communicate in terms of a more environmentally-friendly party” (BBC, 2006b) and the choice of a tree could hardly be clearer in its message.

Another major step taken was the establishment of the Quality of Life Group (2007) led by John Gummer MP and the editor of The Ecologist, Zac Goldsmith, which aimed to make
holistic policy recommendations centred on built environment; rural life; food, farming, fishing and the marine environment; transport; energy; waste; and water. The creation of the policy group, especially with such a wide remit, would appear to be a source of optimism although, as will be discussed below, this turned out not to be the case with many of the group’s findings being dismissed out of hand.

This brand decontamination strategy has been extremely successful (Carter, 2010, p5-6, Dorey, 2007, p162-163). The main changes implemented by Cameron were embodied in the Built to Last (Tory Diary, 2006) document of Conservative values which was voted on by party members. The vote has been compared to Blair’s removal of Labour’s Clause IV (BBC, 2006a) – arguably the watershed moment in his leadership of Labour – and was similarly successful. In the public arena, the Conservatives have led in the polls ever since spring 2006 apart from the first three months of Brown’s premiership. Not only this, but they have achieved parity in the polls with Labour over the environment and global warming throughout Cameron’s leadership (Carter, 2010, p5). The local council elections of 2006 marked the first real test of Cameron’s new green Conservatives; the official election slogan ‘Vote Blue, Go Green’ could not be clearer in its message. This successful campaign saw the Conservatives gain 316 councillors in England with 39 per cent of the vote. Such an impressive result has seen the new slogan being used at every local election since, including this year’s General Election.

Moving forward, the recession beginning in late 2008 has had a profound impact on the environmental agenda and, although a more comprehensive judgement will be able to be formed in years to come as the full extent of the recession becomes clear, what is obvious is that policy choices become more difficult in such times of austerity.

Cameron’s strategy has come at a price however, with mounting internal opposition from the general membership not only to the eager embrace of environmentalism, but also to the wider modernising programme, with just 26.7 per cent of party members coming out in support of the Built to Last statement of aims and values, albeit partly due to a low turnout (Dorey,
2007, p152). High profile figures have also come out in opposition, such as Lord Saatchi (Carlin, 2006) who decried, in his eyes, the loss of a strong ideological foundation through the rush to the centre ground of politics in service of the perceived electoral gains that were to be made from such a change in direction. As Dorey (2007, p151-152) notes, Cameron’s commitment to public services – despite promising spending cuts – and his refusal to prioritise tax cuts can be seen as a betrayal of Thatcherism, especially from those in the right-wing of the party. This stand is comparable in fact to Blair’s stand against Labour’s left-wing in his campaign to abolish Clause IV of their old constitution.

The first period in which the environment came to prominence and was seriously addressed by the major political parties was in the late 1980s and early 1990s under Margaret Thatcher. Indeed it was Thatcher’s speech to the Royal Society (Thatcher, 1988), making her the first British prime minister to mention global warming, and the publication of the Brundtland Report, Our Common Future, in 1987 that put environmental issues at the forefront of party politics for the first time, resulting in a record nearly six per cent of the Conservative and Labour manifestos in 1992 taken up with environmental issues (Carter, 2008, p197). Although it was the Green Party who reaped the rewards of this heightened public interest, by securing their most successful European election results, 1992 turned out to be a watershed year for the environment as it became a determining factor for an important minority at the polls and one that the major political parties could no longer ignore.

There have been other incidents of the Conservatives being environmental innovators, the creation of the Energy Savings Trust being an example still relevant today and the creation of the 1956 Clean Air Act being another. More relevant to this study though is the Conservative call for a climate change bill before Labour, despite it being known that Labour would be presenting one to Parliament (Friends of the Earth, 2006b), however this will be looked at in more detail in the next section.

Prior to Cameron’s leadership and with the exception of the few examples listed above, the environment has not been a priority for the Conservatives, particularly under his three
predecessors. William Hague in particular was arguably hostile to the environment and promised to cut six pence per litre from fuel duty and his shadow chancellor Michael Portillo promised to abolish the newly-created Climate Change Levy (Carter, 2010, p4). However, considering Labour’s arguably mixed domestic record toward the environment at this point – which will be examined in more detail below – turning the environment into a competitive party political issue by approaching the policy area from a pro-environmental stance, was certainly a viable strategy given enough political will, as exemplified by Cameron’s efforts.

The reason for the Conservatives new found attention to the green issues appears to be essentially tactical, indeed Carter describes Cameron’s focus on environment as simply being for the “primary instrumental purpose of rebranding the party” (Carter, 2010, p11). However, aside from efforts to rebrand the party, Cameron saw the environment as an issue that had yet to be claimed by a particular party, identifying it as crossing the traditional left/right spectrum and therefore very much there to be championed by whichever party became the first-mover. Despite the Liberal Democrats having been widely perceived as having the best record on the issue, they had yet to turn this perception into any tangible electoral success (Carter, 2006, p757). The Greens had however already shown in the European elections of 1989 by securing fifteen per cent of the vote that, despite the overall low saliency of the environment amongst voters (ibid, pp759-760), the green issue was of high importance to a certain group of voters, albeit a relatively small one.

The opposition within Cameron’s own party and the possibly tactical and superficial attention given to the environment begs the question of what environmental policy would look like under a Conservative government. Although the internal opposition was perhaps not unanticipated, considering Cameron did not secure a majority in the first round of voting in the leadership election, there has been vocal criticism of his modernising agenda, including Lord Tebbit’s amusing comparison of Cameron to Chairman Mao or Pol Pot in regard to him “purging...the memory and name of Thatcherism” (Dorey, p151) from the party. Should the Conservatives be elected into government therefore, Cameron’s personal interest and willingness to make potentially radical legislation may well be tempered by the need to satisfy his backbenchers’ demands to, among other things, reduce costs on business and
domestic energy bills. Not only this, but he would also have to contend with the healthy dose of climate change scepticism within the wider membership of the party – something which will be discussed in the next section. The disappearance of the environment from headline Conservative policy priorities\(^2\) may be a sign of Cameron’s future inability to marshal his party in government over the issue. A successful election for the Conservatives would however inexorably bolster his authority, likely enabling him to pass legislation that would otherwise be too confrontational to consider, especially if he were to do in the first few months of office.

Another reason for the new Conservative emphasis on ‘green’ issues is that Cameron will have seen from three successive Labour governments that the environment was a tricky issue to navigate publicly; the only time that the Conservatives had led in the polls between 1997 and 2001, Labour's first term, was for two months during the fuel price protests of September 2000. The increases in fuel duty caused mass protest and blockades of refineries ensured that the fuel duty escalator – ironically a Conservative policy introduced by Major in 1993 – was promptly frozen. Fuel duty was part of a range of policies to combat global warming and climate change but despite public support for these aims, there was a failure in public opinion to connect them with rises in fuel duty (McLean, 2008, p188). Other ways of tackling the problem had to be sought but through the use of more popular measures, or in other words, measures where the cost would fall on someone else.

Carter (2010) notes that the Conservative focus on the environment and climate change in particular has dramatically fallen since the middle of 2007, indeed Cameron delivered just two speeches on the environment in 2008 and one in 2009 and no mention of eco-taxes has been made despite promises from the shadow chancellor to the contrary (ibid, p3). This is no doubt in part due to the increasingly vocal opposition to green taxes from within the party, but it remains to be seen how an ambitious climate change agenda will be funded without

\(^2\) The environment is the penultimate policy area addressed in the Conservative 2010 manifesto (Conservatives, 2010), just above promoting the national interest. The environment section features just seven pages dedicated to policy discussion, three times less than the section entitled *Change Society* and four times less than the section dealing with the economy.
such tax rises. Their manifesto (Conservatives, 2010a) for this year’s election makes one mention of green taxes, stating that the proportion of tax revenue provided by green taxes will increase but no examples are given.

**Party Competition on the Environment**

In general, for productivist parties, committed to economic growth such as Labour and the Conservatives (Carter, 1992, p750), the environment as a policy area can be problematic. No matter how convincingly green the party rhetoric is, or successful a certain policy may be, it is always likely to be undermined by materialist goals. These goals, sustained economic growth and increasing consumption, are higher up the agenda and tend to run directly against environmental aims (Carter, 2008, pp197, 201). Post-materialist issues such as the environment can prove problematic to their traditional policy paradigm as they question some of their basic assumptions such as the quest for constant economic growth.

For these reasons amongst many others, it is only in recent years that Labour and the Conservatives have really begun to compete on the environment. As alluded to above, the environment did not feature prominently on any of the main parties’ manifestos until the publication Liberal Democrat manifesto of 1979 (Carter, 2008, p197). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the environment began to receive more attention following a number of key international events including the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, the rise of the Sustainable Development agenda stemming from the Brundtland Report in 1987 and the related Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. This lead to unprecedented coverage of the environment in party manifestos for 1987 and 1992 (ibid). Before and after these spikes of activity, the main parties’ approach had been through a strategy of preference-accommodation (Carter, 2008, p197), meaning that, due to the low priority given to the environment by the public, the median voter was satisfied by not competing. Incidentally this scenario is mutually beneficial for both the main parties due to the associated saving of policy resources. According to

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3 It should be noted that a Quality of Life Manifesto (Conservatives, 2010b) was launched alongside the main Conservative election manifesto which outlines proposals focusing on the creation of a low-carbon economy and a green transport system. However the relegation of such policies to a sub-manifesto is in itself evidence of the level of attention that such matters are deemed to warrant.
Ipsos-MORI (2009) surveys, the environment has never polled above nine per cent when asking people to identify the most important issues facing the country. Indeed McLean (2008, p189) remarks that the environment has never topped any survey asking people what they thought was the main issue facing Britain, however he also notes that its perceived importance has doubled since the publication of the Stern Review and the start of Cameron’s term as leader of the Conservatives.

The environment has traditionally come to prominence at the mid-term of the electoral cycle due to public concern for the issue being at its greatest and politicians being more receptive to outside pressure from environmental groups (Carter, 1992); closer to the election more traditional areas of policy such as the economy and law and order tend to resume their place as the key areas of debate. This current term has been no different; Conservative speeches since mid-2007 have been limited in number and in response Labour have also returned their focus back towards the economy with a few obvious exceptions such as the Climate Change Act in 2008. The Conservative pioneering Quality of Life Group, founded mid-term, published a report containing some far-reaching proposals but was quietly ignored (Carter, 2010, p3) as the term went on due to worrying signs that Labour may call a snap election. Although Cameron had revitalised the Conservatives, his popularity had taken a significant dip by late 2007 – indeed YouGov, Ipsos-Mori and ICM all recorded a negative trend in his popularity between April and October 2007 (UK Polling Report, 2009) – with the environment being one of the first issues to be removed from the top of the agenda and replaced by more traditional Conservative priorities such as law and order. Additionally, the defection of Toby Horton, Mark Hudson and Kevin Davidson to UKIP (Browne, 2006), and the expulsion of Stuart Wheeler for his financial contributions to the UKIP European election campaign (Montgomerie, 2009), provide acute examples of a possible reaction to Cameron’s drift to the centre: a mass defection to a party further to the right.

Cameron’s environmental emphasis in his first two years as Conservative Party leader did not go unforeseen by Brown who recognised the need to bolster his reputation on the environment and prove he had the credentials to be an able steward when in office. Consequently, 2006 proved to be one of the brighter years in Labour’s environmental record,
with a string of measures announced by the government including the doubling of Air Passenger Duty, the restoration of the fuel duty escalator and a commitment that all new homes built after 2016 would be carbon neutral (Carter, 2008, p196). This new found eagerness for environmental legislation continued as Labour and the Conservatives, buoyed by post-Stern business support for environmental initiatives, sought to fully compete on the issue for the first time.

Indeed along with the publication of the Stern Review, 2006 proved to be a decisive year the environment, with important initiatives from the G8 and EU and the appointment of David Miliband as Minister for the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (Carter, 2008, p204). The publication of the Forth Assessment Report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) a year later only served to increase the gravitas attached to the environment, especially surrounding climate change, by stating that “there is very high confidence that the net effect of human activities since 1750 has been one of warming” (IPCC, 2007, p5). Although these outside influences clearly gave credence to the environmental cause, the net effect of Cameron’s environmental charge and Miliband’s appointment to DEFRA served to intensify domestic party competition; the former by putting it at the forefront of the reimagining of the Tories and the latter through his domestic leadership shown by securing government support for the Climate Change Bill (Carter, 2008, p203).

As discussed, the failure of the fuel duty escalator, or more accurately the fierce public backlash in response to it, meant that Labour was forced to use other policy instruments in its efforts to change individual behaviour. Environmental taxes on the public are now seen as virtually impossible to sell – ‘bad politics’ – indeed the proportion of tax revenue raised from taxing environmentally damaging activities fell from 3.4 per cent of GDP in 1997 to 2.9 per cent in 2005 (Carter, 2008, p202). The Labour government was compelled to change tactics and adopt what Compston terms a ‘damage limitation’ strategy for climate change (Compston, 2010, pp110-111). This includes the lowering of emissions through duties on airlines and businesses, the imposition of compulsory renewable technology investment levels by energy companies and through domestic efficiency gains. The Climate Change Act
is in line with this thinking by having legally binding targets and therefore giving long-term security for businesses without the punitive measures on the public.

As stated, although it was with Cameron that the Conservatives really began to compete on the environment, the conditions for intense party competition had been apparent since New Labour’s election in 1997 when Tony Blair promised to put the environment at the heart of all New Labour policy (Darkin, 2006, p258). This was framed within the context of sustainable development and so conveniently tied in the environment with Labour’s usual focus areas of social welfare and the economy. For the first time, the inclusion of the business community was seen as vital to any coherent environmental policy and sound environmental management was to be an essential component of modern business practise in the UK, a trend that continues to be at the heart of almost all of Labour's environmental policies (ibid, pp261-264). Importantly, all government departments were given an environmental remit as an extension of the 'joined-up' government approach that was being promoted at the time. Together with the creation of a larger environment department and the Environmental Audit Committee, Labour sought to bring the environment to the fore in every area of policy. The Energy Saving Trust – a Conservative creation from 1992 – was given a new lease of life and the Carbon Trust was created; both act as agents of these policies and would interact with the domestic and the business community respectively (ibid, pp266-268).

Many of the schemes which Labour has introduced to promote energy efficiency, cut greenhouse gas emissions and so forth have not only been in keeping with their sustainable development agenda, but have been overtly political in nature, especially in the domestic sector. For example, the Energy Efficiency Commitment (IDEA, 2010), now replaced by the Carbon Emissions Reduction Target, required utility suppliers to reduce inefficiencies in the domestic sector through the installation of condensation boilers or energy-efficient light bulbs; however half of all the savings were required to be by households on low income-related benefits of tax credits. Similarly, the much hailed Warm Front Scheme (Direct.gov.uk, 2010) specifically targets low income households and pensioners in a bid to tackle fuel poverty, defined as being when energy bills total at least ten per cent of household income.
By combining social and environmental goals, Labour has put an ideological spin on the more general aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This obviously has to be matched by the Conservatives, through criticism and the promotion of alternatives, if they are to have a complete environmental portfolio. However the redistributive aspect of many of these policies forced the Conservatives to compete, not on an environmental basis, but on a financial one. The Conservative responses to the fuel duty protests and the Climate Change Levy are obvious examples where, instead of urging for greater environmental protect as they later did with the debates regarding the Climate Change Bill, they lobbied against increase costs to households and business and thereby attempted to weaken regulation. Such a ‘negative’ approach undoubtedly increases party competition but shifts the debate away from the environment to other areas of policy which is in stark contrast to the ‘positive’ approach espoused under Cameron.

It could be argued that through their domestic response to the environment, Labour have attempted to heighten the post-material senses of the electorate in order for them to be more receptive to other, more costly policies aimed at combating climate change and other environmental problems. Bodies such as the Energy Saving Trust, policies such as the Warm Front Scheme and publications such as *Warm Homes, Greener Homes: a Strategy for Household Energy Management* (DECC, 2010a) purposely link individual domestic energy efficiency with global climate change. Although it is likely that the financial aspect of such schemes forms the prime motivation behind them, and it is certainly true that the monetary savings would be a draw for many people, it is not impossible that a deeper psychological change could be in the progress amongst the public in the face of such a sustained political effort. Whether this amounts to an intentional preference-shaping strategy is debatable; certainly there have been no statements made by senior party members indicating such an approach.

Another strand to Labour’s environmental policy has been a focus on international objectives. The UK is often quoted as wanting to be a world leader on climate change (Politics.co.uk, 2007), a position that is regarded as being strategically important – economically if for no
altruistic reason - and one that will likely become more important as efforts to stem the
damaging effects of climate change become increasingly urgent. It was during the Kyoto
Treaty negotiations in 1997 that the UK first assumed this role when Tony Blair and John
Prescott played decisive roles in the formation of the world's first legally binding treaty on
reducing greenhouse gas emissions (Darkin, 2006, p258). Labour also used the UK’s
presidency of the EU and the G8 to boost multilateral efforts. Indeed, Margaret Beckett
successfully led the EU delegation at the 2005 Montreal summit and secured an agreement on
the successor to the Kyoto Protocol, as well as hosting side events aimed at increasing
cooperation with China and India on climate change, centring on the disseminating of clean
technologies (Commission, 2005). The two areas of focus for the 2005 Gleneagles G8
summit, as set by the president Tony Blair, were international cooperation on climate change
and development issues in Africa. Although an effective agreement on climate change,
particularly on clean technology transfer to developing countries, was scuppered by US
opposition (Friends of the Earth, 2005), the Labour Party demonstrated its continued efforts
to keep climate change at the top of the international agenda. Domestically, sentences on
providing international leadership on climate change have featured in every New Labour
manifesto since their election into office in 1997 (Darkin, 2006, p258-259).

It is not unexpected therefore that the same government wanted to be the first to produce a
law with mandatory emission reductions on a national scale and become a pioneer in climate
change legislation more generally. Shortly after the Kyoto negotiations, a domestic goal of a
20 per cent reduction in carbon dioxide emissions based on 1990 levels was announced. The
Renewables Obligation came into force in 2002, requiring energy suppliers to source at least
three per cent of their energy from renewable sources^4. Later in the 2003 Energy White
Paper, Labour made a further commitment to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 60 per cent
based on contemporary levels to be achieved by 2050. In the 2000 Climate Change
Programme, introduction of a greenhouse gas emissions trading scheme, based on a report by
former President of the CBI Lord Marshall, was announced which was the first of its kind in
the world. The Climate Change Levy was also launched adding a small charge to a

^4 The figure for 2010/2011 now stands at 10.4 per cent and will rise to 15.4 per cent by 2015/2016 where it will
remain stable until 2026/2027 at which point the obligation will come to an end (Ofgem, 2007).
company's energy bills which signalled to businesses the need to cut energy use and to promote greener forms of energy (Carbon Trust, 2009).

If it is true that such a leadership position is highly valued then opposition parties must appear able to carry on such a role should they be elected into government, especially if the current trends continue and the task of mitigating the effects of climate change becomes an ever more pressing task. This may have influenced Cameron's decision to put his environmental credentials in the spotlight once assuming leadership of the Conservatives in an effort to restore the image of the Conservatives being the traditional party of government.

Cameron’s green emphasis has evidently affected Labour and environmental politics more generally. Neil Carter (2010, p5) recently interviewed sixteen senior figures in the environmental policy network and every one spoke of the ‘Cameron effect’ contributing to a “step change in environmental politics” since spring 2006. He continues by arguing that despite the environment being sidelined more recently, as opposed to the priority it was in 2006, the changes Cameron has made to the Conservatives and the unprecedented level of competition he has ensured between the parties on the issue has meant the environment will be unable to fall too far down the political agenda in years to come.

To conclude, with party manifestos crowded by traditional areas of concern such as taxation and welfare, newer issues such as green concerns will only begin to be taken seriously by the political elites if they are compelled to compete with the opposition. In other words, until partisan rivalry forces their hand due to an electoral window of opportunity or in order to meet the challenge of the opposition, parties are happy to act in a purely reactive way, especially given the low priority given to environmental issues by the general public.

Competition between Labour and the Conservatives has been preference-accommodating until 2006 and Cameron’s leadership election victory. Environmental policy cuts across the traditional political spectrum and therefore makes it more difficult for productivist political
parties, who strive for permanent economic growth, to engage with it sincerely. Since 1997, under both Blair and Brown, New Labour has pursued a strategy to promote environmental concerns internationally, particularly involving climate change and the mission to install the UK as a supposed world leader on the issue. Domestically, the environment as a policy area has only become truly competitive since 2006 (Carter, 2008, p204) when all three major parties, provoked by Cameron’s environmental-led rebranding on the Conservative Party and increased public interest in climate change, challenged each other to be identified in the public’s eyes as the most trustworthy steward of the environment.

Previous to Cameron’s leadership, the Conservatives only negatively competed on the environment by lobbying for cuts in green taxes and against regulation aimed at protecting the environment. Under Cameron the party has had a complete turnaround and now competes positively, actively attempting to be seen as more green than Labour. Although this has caused a great deal of opposition from party members, both general and high profile, Cameron has not faced a sustained challenge to his leadership and no sign of mass defection to UKIP or the BNP (Dorey, 2007, p152). He has however waived from his modernising agenda since the recession and the environment did not form a priority in the Conservative manifesto for this year’s General Election.

**Climate Change and the Climate Change Act 2008**

This section will look at climate change as a distinct field of environmental policy while continuing to discuss the impact of party competition and the strategies employed by both main parties. It will then examine the party political and ideological forces that influenced Labour into introducing the Climate Change Bill and its impact on the politics of climate change as well as the environment more generally. The nature of internal Conservative opposition to the Act and the wider climate change agenda will then be analysed before conclusions are drawn.
The Politics of Climate Change

As discussed above, the environment as an issue has only recently become subject to party competition and one that presents unique policy dilemmas for politicians. The situation is similar with climate change, which, as a distinct area of environmental policy, has become the focal cause of environmentalists, the media and politicians, signified perhaps most obviously by the fact that the government created a new department to deal specifically with it, namely the Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC). The environment has proved to be a difficult policy area to navigate and climate change exaggerates these difficulties as it requires politicians and the general public to make behavioural and financial sacrifices when making policy choices as well as a need to take into account the wellbeing of future generations. Relatedly, it also presents a dilemma in that goals set for dealing with climate change are often made and demanded insincerely by both politicians and the public (Humphrey, 2009). This is due to the irrationality caused by the long-term nature of climate change policy and the juxtaposition of what the public demand their politicians to say and what they actually want implemented.

For example in a Populus (2009) poll taken in November 2009, 51 per cent of those questioned recognised that the world was warming and that climate change was a serious problem but felt that other problems were more serious. For political parties, a strategic response to this would be to make statements but take little concrete action and instead concentrate on areas of greater public concern.

The difficulties in making policy decisions are well-known and concerted efforts have been made to overcome the most common political obstacles. Compston (2009; 2010) has compiled a variety of climate policy strategies which have been employed by Labour at various points during their term in office. Firstly and for example, by creating DECC, the energy veto over climate policy was removed, altering the terms of exchange within the Cabinet (ibid, p112). Secondly the delegation of authority to ostensibly independent bodies such as the Committee on Climate Change makes it difficult for opposition parties to carrying out policy reversals once in power (ibid, p114).
These are bold changes to the apparatus of government in order to mitigate the effects of climate change. Labour has good reason to be optimistic in this particular area of environmental policy as the lowering of greenhouse gas emissions has been one of the few areas where self-imposed targets have been met (Carter 2008, p195). The success of the UK Emissions Trading Scheme also represents Labour’s continued willingness to be innovators in the field, especially as the EU Emissions Trading Scheme is arguably a scaled-up version of the same model and made use of the experience gained from the UK and Danish pilots (Defra, 2006).

According to Carter (2010, p10), Ed Miliband has presided over a “step-change in the Labour Government’s approach to climate change”. The introduction of feed-in tariffs, a marked expansion in the UK’s off-shore wind power capacity and the introduction of a ban on the construction of new coal-fired power stations without carbon capture and storage technology certainly support this claim. Indeed the creation of a green investment bank promised in Labour’s 2010 manifesto continues this trend. However Labour’s continued commitment to airport expansion certainly tempers any praise that could be given to their environmental record.

The criticism surrounding government plans to construct a third runway at Heathrow has been conducted firmly within the framework of the climate change debate. As recently as last month during the official election debate (Guardian, 2010) between the prospective energy and climate change ministers, Labour stated they support continued airport expansion but at the same time committed to a restriction of aviation emissions to their current levels by 2050. The inconsistency between Labour claiming leadership on climate change and backing airport expansion does not need elaboration here, however the debate surrounding expansion is highly relevant, as it has become one of intense party competition ever since the

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5 The world’s first multi-industry carbon trading system held successful permit auctions amongst its 34 participants. Financial incentives meant that the firms involved made “significant additional efforts to cut emissions” (National Audit Office, 20, p4) and indeed in its first year of operation the participants reported reductions of 4.64 million tonnes of CO2 compared to targets for that year totalling just 0.79 million tonnes (ibid, p3). The scheme gave UK firms experience of a cap and trade system prior to the formation of the EU scheme, essentially giving them a first-mover advantage over their European competitors.
Conservatives declared their opposition to such plans with a promise to reverse Labour’s policies should they be elected. Such a commitment would have been unthinkable before Cameron’s radical change of Conservative environmental values. However as such the debate between the major parties has been expanded to one that had hitherto always been preference-accommodating towards the need of the public and business for ever-increasing aviation capacity. With two diverging policy directions, at least towards one specific expansion proposal, both main parties cannot be engaging in a truly preference-accommodating strategy.

The Conservative opposition to expansion has been heavily criticised from within the party; prominent Cameron advisor, Lord Heseltine, backed a report by the Bow Group which stated that the creation of high speed rail links cannot be a substitute for airport expansion (BBC, 2010). In the energy and climate change ministers debate (Guardian, 2010), Greg Clark clearly stated that the Conservatives had no plans to expand any airports but was careful not to promise a moratorium on expansion under a Conservative government; a signal perhaps to the transport lobby and right-wing members of the party that airport expansion, apart from at Heathrow, was not completely off the agenda. An indication also of the pressure from an electorate who continue to broadly support airport expansion (YouGov, 2009) despite polling questions being framed within the context of climate change.

**The Climate Change Act 2008**

On 1 September 2006, Cameron took the greening process of his party to the next logical step by calling for the radical Climate Change Bill promoted by Friends of the Earth’s ‘Big Ask’ campaign to be included in the coming Queen’s Speech (Friends of the Earth, 2006a). The campaign identified carbon dioxide (CO2) as the main cause of global warming and pressed governments across the EU to introduce legislation detailing mandatory cuts in CO2 emissions. Labour announced a bill which pledged cuts of 60 per cent of CO2 emissions based on 1990 levels; however this was later increased to 80 per cent in the face of continued pressure from environmental pressure groups and revised scientific analysis.

By pre-empting the inclusion of a climate change bill in the Queen’s Speech, the Conservatives stole a march on Labour and were able to claim a pioneering role, along with
the Liberal Democrats, in the creation of the world’s first legally-binding national emission reduction targets. This was a clear victory for Cameron in particular who would have known that Labour had every intention of introducing a bill in the coming Parliament (Friends of the Earth, 2006b). Whether Labour would have introduced such legislation without the electoral pressure from a resurgent Conservative Party and the Big Ask campaign is very much open to debate however competition from an enthusiastically green Conservative leader certainly provoked Labour into environmental action throughout 2006 so it is not unreasonable to conceive they may have been similarly affected in this specific case. Support for the mandatory targets from within the Cabinet however is well documented, stemming in particular from David and Ed Miliband (Carter, 2010, p5-6), who occupied the environmental ministries responsible for the Bill during the initial discussions and the introduction to Parliament respectively.

A year earlier, an Early Day Motion (EDM) introduced by Michael Meacher MP (2005) calling for a climate change bill received 412 signatures from a cross-section of MPs. It was therefore apparent there was parliamentary support, sincere or otherwise, for such a bill. The EDM was coupled with a draft bill provided by Friends of the Earth and unveiled by Meacher alongside John Gummer and Norman Baker, completing the cross-party nature of the campaign. The Big Ask campaign was launched a month later and, according to Friends of the Earth (2008), nearly 200,000 constituents sent supportive letters to MPs and a total of 620 MPs were contacted in little over a month. Evidently there was both strong parliamentary and public support for radical action on climate change through mandatory cuts in CO2 emissions.

**Conservative Opposition**

As stated, the Conservatives called for the introduction of a climate change bill by backing the Big Ask campaign prior to Labour announcing such a bill. The Bill became a rare moment of cross-party consensus, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats pressed for annual carbon budgets as opposed to the five year budgets provided for in the Bill (Huhne, 2007) but this was the only major disagreement among the major parties. Nevertheless, five Conservative MPs voted against the Climate Change Bill (Carter, 2010, p7) – the only MPs
to vote against the Bill – and there was a great deal of opposition within the Conservative Party and from its supporters in the lead up to the Bill and since its accession. For example, Ruth Lea (2008), who described the Bill as futile and very costly, also claimed that according to “official figures climate change policies already account for 21% of the average business electricity bill” which would be set to rise under the Bill. Indeed Tim Montgomerie claimed in an article in the *Guardian* to have spoken to “six shadow cabinet ministers who are sceptical of the economic consequences of a low-carbon policy” (Asthana, 2010). It is unsurprising therefore that many of the latest environmental publications on climate change have very much followed the same path by stressing the cost savings and general economic case for legislation, similar in fact to more general environmental documents published by the Conservatives in recent years.

The Centre for Policies Studies has been a particularly vocal opponent of the climate change agenda with its founder and Conservative ex-chancellor Nigel Lawson, economist Ruth Lea and director of the sceptical Scientific Alliance, Martin Livermore, publishing a raft of anti-climate change letters and reports (CPS, 2010). Indeed, in a speech by Lawson he described the much-heralded Stern Report as a “battery of essentially spurious statistics based on theoretical models and conjectural worst cases” (Lawson, 2006, p1) and drew comparisons between environmentalists and Islamic fundamentalists (ibid, p16-17). Although the impact of such publications on official Conservative policy is difficult to discern, it does emphasise the presence of climate change cynicism among influential Conservatives.

More recently, a number of high profile Conservative members and blogs have voiced their scepticism of the climate change agenda and CO2 reduction targets in particular, no more so than in the run-up to the Copenhagen climate change summit. For example, David Davis wrote that the tough targets introduced by the Climate Change Act essentially had a price tag of £55 billion, despite the fact that, as he claimed, “half the [British] public no longer believe in global warming” (Davis, 2009). Others, such as Ann Widdecombe, Peter Lilley, John Maples and Philip Davies have all publically expressed misgivings over climate change (Carter, 2010, p7-8). In a bid to overcome such opposition, attempts have been made to frame the argument in a different manner by emphasising energy security and the economic
case for investing in renewable energy and energy efficiency. For example, see the green paper on energy policy announced by Greg Clark (2010) in March 2010 which stressed the connection between job creation, energy security and green investment initiatives. Another tactic has been to sell green policies based on their cost-cutting features, for example through domestic insulation and the installation of smart meters (Carter, 2010, p9). This tactic has been frequently used since the economy went into recession which has put the need to reduce public expenditure in stark focus with drastic cuts needed now or at some point in the future when the economy has recovered. A further alternative would be to frame green policies in terms of protecting habitats, increasing biodiversity, reducing waste and other such steward-like approaches which fit more comfortably with traditional party values of conservation.

Away from the Conservative opposition to the Act, some less polemic criticism has been voiced that suggests the Act will not provide enough cuts to ensure the UK meets its target of achieving 80 per cent cuts in CO2 emissions based on 1990 levels. With the UK population estimated to have increased to around 82 million by 2050, a study by Roger Pielke Jr. (2009) finds that the annual rates of decarbonisation required would be at least four to five per cent – the equivalent of displacing the carbon removed through the construction of 30 new nuclear plants – which has no precedent among developed countries (ibid, p3, 5).

The fear of placing ‘excessive’ costs on the public and business forms a theme throughout much of the right-wing criticism of the Climate Change Act, although there is also a more general question over whether climate change is as serious an issue as the government and the media suggest. The scepticism Montgomerie notes within the shadow cabinet is indicative of endemic disenchantment with the science of climate change amongst rank and file Conservative supporters (Populus, 2009) with as much as a 20 per cent – compared to just 12 per cent for Labour and the Liberal Democrats – stating they do not believe climate change is occurring, rising to almost 30 per cent with the inclusion of those who believe it is happening but that it is not man-made. As stated, such a view is even pervasive among high profile members; Lawson, Lea and Montgomerie’s unnamed members of the shadow cabinet being prime examples already given but they are unlikely to be alone. One of the most public acts of dissent was indeed by Lord Lawson when he recently asked for the Climate Change
Act to be scrapped in order to allow the third runway at Heathrow to be built (ePolitix.com, 2010). Similarly, in a question in the House of Lords to the transport secretary Lord Adonis, the Conservative peer claimed that the Act was redundant following the failed climate change negotiations in Copenhagen. Whilst an embarrassment for the Conservative leadership, such comments do not reflect the official policy line although it is undoubtedly damaging to Cameron’s green cause.

It is however not a matter of such scepticism ostensibly residing within a group of senior members, a vocal minority, and the broader membership but also within Conservative candidates and first-term Conservative MPs. For example, a Conservative Home poll of 141 Conservative candidates standing in realistically winnable constituencies identified ‘reducing Britain’s carbon footprint’ as the least important other 19 priorities for the next government (Carter, 2010, p9). A ComRes survey in July 2008 found that a third of Conservative MPs questioned the link between climate change and human activity (Carter, 2010, p7). Together with the low priority of the environment in the Conservative manifesto, it seems unlikely that environment will return to its position of prominence for some time, especially in the current economic climate.

Since the controversies surrounding the leaked emails from the University of East Anglia, public opinion appears to have picked up on this trend too. Two Populus polls, one taken in November 2009 (Populus, 2009) before the leak and one afterwards in February 2010 (Populus, 2010), note that respondents who believe climate change is occurring was down from 85 to 75 per cent. Of those questioned who stated they believed climate change was occurring, there was a significant increase in doubt over whether it was man-made, with those believing it was an established scientific fact dropping from 41 to 26 per cent and those who believe it is still to be proved increasing from 32 to 38 per cent. Unfortunately these polls do not ask identical questions so the results are not conclusive regarding the effect of the UAE leaks, however it is clear that the revelations stemming from the emails have been damaging to the credence of climate change science not just in this country but globally. Undoubtedly, a certain amount of hysteria has been attached to the leaks by the anti-climate change lobby but nonetheless public support for future legislation may not be so forthcoming.
Certainly there are other factors that could have led to the increase, ostensibly at least, in scepticism towards climate change amongst the public. With the rise in political attention given to the environment and climate change in recent years, especially since 2006, and the proliferation of reports in the media on the subject, there may be a certain amount of fatigue amongst the public with the concepts and related policy.

**Conclusion**

The Climate Change Act is broadly a product of two main factors. The first and most important is the provocation of a new, revitalised Conservative Party that used the environment as a headline policy area to distance itself from its Thatcherite past. Other post-material concerns featured heavily in this rebranding such as addressing the work-life balance and supporting the socially dispossessed (Dorey, 2007, p162) as well as more centrist material concerns such as support for public services and the national minimum wage (Dorey, 2007, p143-145) – however it was the environmental and climate change in particular that formed the priorities of this ‘decontamination’ strategy. Cameron’s own personal commitment to this strategy, starting as soon as he was successfully elected leader, continued in the face intense criticism from the right-wing of the party and a series of polls that indicated his faltering popularity with the electorate. Recovering from this however, the Conservatives have almost continuously polled higher than Labour since the spring of 2006, and the negative connotations associated with the ‘nasty’ party of old have perhaps been successfully shred.

Recognising this, Labour has been forced to act to meet the challenge of a resurgent, ‘green’ Conservative Party. Direct party competition on the issue has resulted in Labour being unable to continue to treat headline environmental issues as part of its social welfare programme or as essentially international concerns, to the point where it could almost be included as part of its foreign policy. The Climate Change Programme, feed-in tariffs and support for new ‘eco-towns’ are examples of the former and leadership in the Kyoto negotiations, the priorities of the Gleneagles G8 summit and the creation of the ETS being an example of the latter (Carter, 2008, p194-195; 2010, p6). Labour was obliged to act
decisively to head off this environmental challenge and hence 2006 became one of the most productive years for domestic environmental and climate change legislation.

The fight to be the perceived champion of the climate change agenda came to a head over the Climate Change Bill. Conservative support for the Friends of the Earth Big Ask campaign, prior to that of Labour, is the most obvious example as well as their lobbying for the inclusion of annual carbon budgets as opposed to Labour’s proposed five-yearly budgets. It is also a clear example of how party competition, rather than public preferences, can lead to convergence of policy despite the ideological differences of the parties involved. Only five MPs voted against the Climate Change Bill despite heavy criticism from the right about the costs on both business and households associated with ambitious mandatory emission reduction targets. To quote Carter (2008, p204), “politics matters”, particularly in non-traditional areas of policy such as the environment.

The second reason is due to Labour’s quest, initiated by Blair and continued by Brown, for the UK to be an international leader on climate change. This leadership was promised in 1997 (Labour, 2010; Darkin, 2006, p258) and delivered during the Kyoto negotiations of that the same year. Since then, Labour has sought to make the UK a pioneer in climate change policy through a variety of related policies, the most striking of which is the UK Emissions Trading Scheme, the first of its kind in the world, which was later adopted by the EU and may even be used globally in the coming years. Other examples include an effort to make the UK a leader of technologies such as carbon capture and storage for coal-fired power stations through mandatory retrofitting and two technology demonstration projects (DECC, 2010b). The Climate Change Act represents the first attempt at introducing mandatory national emission reduction targets and carbon budgets which clearly continues this ground-breaking trend in combating climate change.

However regarding public opinion, was the Act a product of a preference-accommodating or a preference-shaping strategy? With such active public support for the Bill, the parties have accommodated the expressed preference of an extremely vocal minority. No survey has been
conducted specifically asking questions regarding the Bill itself however many have been conducted asking the public to rank issues in order of importance which include the environment and climate change in some form or another. As stated in the previous section, the environment has never topped such a survey. The dissonance between these two facts presents a problem for any analyst attempting to make firm conclusions over the impact of public opinion. Given that surveys conducted failed to identify any one party with a clear leadership position on climate change (Carter, 2009, p237) and with no substantial difference between the parties’ perceived approaches a preference-accommodation strategy could be in use. However, considering the ground-breaking nature of the Climate Change Act, and the impact it will undoubtedly have on the economy in future years, support for environmental protection and wider attempts to mitigate the effects of climate change would seem to be a prerequisite for such a radical piece of legislation. Plainly an accommodation of the public’s preferences has therefore not occurred. Indeed, given the drop in public support for a progressive climate change programme since the Act came into being it would seem that competition will again prove to be the driving force behind future legislation.

In recent years however, Conservative attention to the environment has waned considerably. Despite no genuine challenge to his leadership, the Conservative rebound was not as dramatic as was perhaps expected and Cameron has since redirected his party’s focus away from post-material concerns such as the environment and on to more material ones such as the economy, immigration and law and order. Never has this been truer than since the beginning of the economic recession towards the end of 2008, although in Cameron’s defence, this has refocused every political party’s attention back to the economy. Nevertheless the environmental prospects for a Conservative government do not look as promising as they did four years ago at the height of Cameron’s green-blue revolution.

It will be some years before the true political effect of the Act will become apparent and to what extent it will impact future legislation on climate change; a precedent for ambitious environmental targets could become the norm. The extent to which the fierce party competition over the environment since Cameron’s election will have on future environmental policy debates and the long-term actions of any future Conservative
government, be it in 2010 or years to come, will form the legacy of Cameron’s greening project. What is clear however is that the environment, and specifically climate change, has captured the imagination of the media and the public alike, and given the personal commitment of Cameron and both David and Ed Miliband, it seems unlikely that it will return to the bottom of the agenda for the long-term despite the noted drop in public support for the climate change agenda since the Climate Change Act came into force.

Further Work
The political process and implications of the Climate Change Act, being so recent, have not been looked at in as great a detail as the Act warrants. Certainly further study into this would be enlightening in regard to the pressures on Labour to introduce such a radical piece of legislation and the political will present within the party from the outset. With many of the key figures involved still in office, firsthand accounts are limited. A contemporary survey asking members of the public questions specifically relating to the Climate Change Act would certainly have been useful for this study and indeed further studies in the future years could be used to determine whether the Act results in the actualisation of a preference-shaping strategy.
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