



A Green Election – If Not Now, When?

Paul Rogers

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Summary

Across the UK political spectrum, there is a surprising consensus that serious action is needed to address the risk of climate breakdown. Ahead of the upcoming UK General Election in December, this briefing examines the approaches taken by each of the main political parties to tackling climate change and asks whether election campaigns can really achieve long-term policy changes on key issues.

Introduction

Protests against environmental inaction have spread across the world in the wake of forceful warnings from the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC\)](#) that action for radical decarbonisation is urgent. This week, in the middle of the UK General Election campaign, the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) has published the [latest data](#) on atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations illustrating that the levels show no sign of stabilising, let alone of reducing. This briefing follows some [earlier monthly briefings](#) on aspects of climate breakdown, themselves reflecting ORG's [long-term work](#) on this issue. It asks whether election campaigns can really change government policy on key issues like this and, if so, whether they might have greater longer-term significance than incremental change.

Climate Breakdown

The direct experience of 2018 has already involved numerous extreme weather events, whether wildfires in North America and Australia, storms leaving a trail of “biblical destruction” in Southern Europe or the devastation of Caribbean

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islands. Although on a much smaller scale, flooding in Britain in the early days of the current General Election campaign was readily linked to climate change and followed flood experiences in many parts of the country in recent years.

The intensity and frequency of extreme events has long been predicted by climate models and has contributed to the [very sudden rise](#) in environmental concern, especially by younger people, but comes in the context of both negative and positive changes on the wider issue of the needed response.

On the negative side, the [WMO report](#) for 2018 and [supplementary work](#) by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) both point to the critical need for urgent action to decarbonise economies. According to the latter, carbon emissions have risen by an average of 1.5% a year for the past decade. Most of that has been in the past fifty years and carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere are now 50% higher than 1750, before the start of the industrial revolution. They need to fall by 7.6% every year until 2030 even to stay within the 1.5°C ceiling needed to avoid disastrous consequences. This would be unprecedented whereas [according to](#) the WMO Secretary-General, Petteri Taalas:

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“ There is no sign of a slowdown, let alone a decline, despite all the commitments under the Paris agreement on climate change. We need to increase the level of ambition for the sake of the future welfare of mankind. It is worth recalling that the last time the Earth experienced a comparable concentration of carbon dioxide was 3-5m years ago. Back then, the temperature was 2-3 ° C warmer and sea level was 10-20 metres higher than now. ”

Against this very gloomy prognosis, on the positive side there have been remarkable developments in the development and exploitation of renewable sources of energy, especially for electricity generation. Far more efficient photovoltaic systems are being developed and production methods for existing technologies have radically reduced unit costs. Wind turbines have also improved in efficiency while the size and reliability of turbines have frequently brought electricity generation costs down to, or below, grid parity compared with carbon-based sources. The potential for large-scale “smart” grids has increased, the replacement of fossil carbon-dependent road transport systems is beginning and there is renewed interest in radical improvements in space-heating requirements.

Put simply, there is huge potential for radical decarbonisation but the scale of what is required is immense and there is not, so far, the political will to make the change. Indeed, key carbon emitters that include Trump's United States, Putin's Russia and Bolsonaro's Brazil are all moving in the opposite direction, even if others, especially in western Europe, are beginning to embrace the need for change.

It is in this context that it is relevant to examine the potential for rapid changes in political direction and whether specific elections can effect such change.

The increased support for the Green Party in Germany is one indication of potential, the late entry of billionaire former mayor of New York, Michael Bloomberg, into the 2020 US Presidential Election citing Trump's policy on climate change as a factor is another. The UK general election has not yet involved the climate crisis as a key issue but that may change. What is already significant, though, is the manner and extent to which it has been embraced by most of the parties involved.

The Climate Issue and the General Election

At the time of writing, the Conservative Party is enjoying a [substantial lead](#) in the opinion polls that point to it gaining an overall House of Commons majority on polling day, 12 December. There are concerns within the party, however, over whether this will be the case as there is considerable variation in the polling, deep divisions across the country on the Brexit issue and an uncomfortable memory of the late surge in Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party in the 2017 election that deprived the Conservatives of an overall majority.

Analysts are pointing to the substantial popular support that Corbyn seems to tap into, with crowded events wherever he speaks and people queuing in the

rain to hear him, even when the venues are already full. He also heads the largest political party in Western Europe, in terms of membership, and has far more active supporters than the Conservatives. Furthermore, the Conservatives face opposition from all the larger opposition parties which would make it difficult to form a coalition if they fail to gain an overall majority.

Perhaps most interesting of all in the current context is that there is a surprising consistency across almost all these opposition parties on the issue of climate breakdown, with all of them embracing the need for radical change.

Labour is calling for “a net-zero-carbon energy system within the 2030s – and go faster if credible pathways can be found. We will deliver nearly 90% of electricity and 50% of heat from renewable and low-carbon source by 2030”.

The Green Party will go further, aiming to reduce climate emissions to net zero by 2030 and introducing a radical Green New deal, while the Liberal Democrats are advocating changes that are only a little less radical than Labour. In addition to committing to achieve net-zero emissions by 2045 and generating 80% of UK electricity from renewables by 2030, the Liberal Democrats have pledged to open a new Department Against the Climate Crisis. Both major British regional parties, the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru (Welsh Nationalists), have prominent radical environment policies, with the former pointing to Scotland’s current high levels of renewable energy generation and Plaid Cymru putting particular emphasis on much improved low carbon public transport.

The two parties that might support the Conservatives are more modest in their aims. The Democratic Unionist Party in Northern Ireland does not even include “the environment” as one of its five key priorities and the Brexit Party, which hopes to gain seats but did not have any in the last parliament, says little

beyond planting millions of trees to capture carbon dioxide while promoting a global initiative in the UN.

The Conservatives, as the party of recent government, do intend to increase reliance on renewable energy and move towards a lower-carbon emissions economy, but they do set the target date for net zero greenhouse gases at 2050. While this may be in line with current official targets by the UK Climate Change Committee, it is now far below what the global climate science community says is essential to avoid climate breakdown.

Because the UK political system remains immersed in the Brexit controversy, the sea change in attitudes to climate breakdown among all the larger opposition political parties and the public at large indicates that something else is happening behind the scenes. If these views were to take centre stage and to be implemented in a future government, whether majority or minority, then this would represent the most radical change of political generation for some decades.

Elections and Radical Change

This is not to say that it has not happened before. Staying with the UK example, there have been two notable election campaigns in the post war period that have resulted in radical policy change, in 1945 and 1979. In the first, Clement Atlee's Labour Party won a landslide victory that ushered in substantial social and economic changes in policy. Chief among these was the setting up of the National Health Service to provide free health care dependent on need not wealth, but this was also part of a wider welfare state extending to social security and education. This, in turn, was part of a major increase in the

role of government that extended to the nationalisation of some key utilities and services, including the coal and rail industries.

This was a radically new change of direction but followed many pressures that had built up in the late 1930s for a fairer society, detailed planning for this during the Second World War and the determination of people in the armed forces and on the home front to see the rewards for their work and courage rewarded with the prospect of a decent future. While the success of the Atlee election campaign now tends to be represented as a shock to the powers that be, it was not that unexpected. The limited [opinion polling conducted](#) at that time was already pointing in Labour's direction during the election campaign and the desire for a better world stretched well beyond traditional Labour voters.

In 1979, the election of the Conservative Government led by Margaret Thatcher also resulted in a remarkable change of direction, this time [towards a](#) neoliberal economic model that reversed many of the elements of post-1945 governance. It was rooted in the firm belief that the state had grown too powerful and it therefore included privatisation of many state assets, severe limitations on trade union power, deregulation of financial markets, cuts in the funding of social and community services and tax cuts for the wealthy. All this was in the belief that competition within a shareholder economy was by far the best way forward and that sufficient wealth would trickle down to poorer communities.

Both Labour victory in 1945 and that of the Conservatives in 1979 followed radical policy developments in opposition and in both cases their majorities were sufficiently substantial to ensure stability. On the issue of climate breakdown only the former is true at the present time and the prospect of a

sudden change leading to a stable majority government prepared for radical action is low. Even so, it would be wrong to underestimate what is happening in this specific context. At the core of this is a growing acceptance that a truly radical move towards an ultra-low carbon economy is now essential, despite the many vested interests acting against it, and this is reflected across much of the political spectrum.

Conclusion

There is a surprising consistency across much of the UK political spectrum that seriously radical action is essential in responding to the risk of climate breakdown. It is a view long held by the Green Party and by individuals and groups within other parties. What has really changed, and in a very short space of time, is the substantial mainstreaming of these views by the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish and Welsh nationalist parties and especially the largest opposition party, Labour. Given that all the indications are that the need for radical action will become more obvious in the coming months and years because of further warnings by climate scientists and the impact of extreme weather events, this has considerable significance for UK politics. In the coming years it may even be seen that relative to this issue, Brexit should have been seen as an issue of secondary concern and a dangerous diversion from far more serious issues. The 2019 General Election may not turn out to be a “Green Election” but the very speed with which large parts of the political mainstream have embraced the issue is a singularly welcome development.

Image credit: Wikimedia Commons.

About the Author

Paul Rogers is Oxford Research Group's Senior Fellow in international security and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His **'Monthly Global Security Briefings'** are available from our website. His latest book *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins* was published by I B Tauris in June 2016.

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