

COPENHAGEN AND BEYOND WORKSHOP, 7 NOVEMBER.
Big Climate Event

TEXT OF TALK (EDITED).

John Gordon

**PROSPECTS FOR POLITICAL ACTION: INFLUENCING THE GENERAL
ELECTION?**

Summary.

The political system, and forthcoming election, will not deliver. Pressure from below will be essential to persuade politicians to be (much) braver. If we are to act to influence the outcome, it must be quickly. It will be essential to harness the passion of those demonstrating on 5 December and to create a non-partisan organisation strong enough to build a coalition of key stakeholders and groups across the country along the lines suggested below. Key questions are can we go it alone if there is no national grass roots movement, what role for SCC ?

Detail.

We live in extraordinary times. With under 8 years before climate change may well become irreversible and runaway. And yet, it is still only one issue among many struggling for priority on international and national agendas. And with the global economic system of perpetual growth and individual turbo-consumerism which have caused the problem still largely unchallenged we're still fighting a major uphill battle with far too few troops.

GLOBALLY – Copenhagen gives us many opportunities to up the pressure. But before we get carried away with the excitement of doing the Mexican wave we should remember that it's not quite unique – that in terms of “saving the world” international conferences we've been there before. At the 1992 Rio and 2002 Johannesburg Earth Summits. I was involved in both, encouraging individuals and organisations (civil society) to get involved. Lots did, particularly at Johannesburg, and great efforts were made to feed proposals from civil society into the intergovernmental negotiations. That was the easy bit. But the longer term outcome in terms of influencing the UK domestic scene were disappointing. The green movement was not organised to do this, and rapidly moved on elsewhere. Hence the tremendous importance this time round to do better. Fine, and important, for Stop Climate Chaos (SCC) to organise the Mass Wave on 5 December. But they also need, badly, a longer term follow up strategy in place to turn that energy and passion we'll see on the streets of London and Glasgow onto the political scene. Do they have this? With a claimed 11 million members they should be best placed of any existing organisation to give the lead.

DOMESTICALLY – all major parties now recognise the importance of action on climate change, yet have failed to articulate an adequate response. And as the election approaches we can be almost certain, as in all previous elections over the past 40

years, that “difficult” long term issues will be squeezed out and that we’ll be back to the usual dominating issues of the economy, education, health and crime (with bad tempered asides on Europe). As I speak they are now busy writing their manifestoes for next year’s elections. And it is of course these which will bind their candidates, and as the date draws nearer we shall see the usual depressing bidding war, fed by the mass media, for the self interest of voters. So if we want to influence the debate and outcome it’s useless to wait until the election starts. We need start now.

IF WE DID, WHAT MIGHT WE AIM FOR?

1. To remind the electorate that climate change threatens to overwhelm us all, must be the first priority of politicians and must be a major element in deciding how we should vote.
2. To persuade the candidates, and their political parties, that they need to votes of those who put action on climate change first in order to be elected. To encourage them to be (much) braver than they would otherwise be – including if possible to pledge to go beyond their party/manifesto line if elected.
3. (possibly) Special action in Witney, David Cameron’s constituency.

We would NOT aim to promote individual candidates or parties, even those which have the greenest policies. Rather we would be trying to shift the whole political spectrum onto our territory.

HOW?

Clearly much more difficult, perhaps impossible, if we’re the only part of the UK where this is happening. Much easier if we’re part of a national grass roots campaign. Hence the importance of what SCC does - or fails to do. And for that it will need to have made up its mind very soon and prepare leaflets for handing out on 5 December.

But for moment let’s assume that it’s just in Oxfordshire.

The essentials may be:

1. Complete political impartiality and integrity. It would have to be absolutely clear and transparent that we were not a front for, or operating on behalf of, any political party or interest group. Everyone directly involved would need for the period of engagement to renounce any party political involvement. The more effective we were the more our critics would try to discredit us. *This is in no way to disparage or discount the vital work of those who seek to influence climate change related policies through being active inside their own political parties. The two approaches are entirely complementary and reinforce each other. The point is that we can’t do both at once!*
2. An organisation strong and effective enough to set up and carry through an exercise which would have few if any parallels in British electoral history. Probably with branches in each of our 6 constituencies.
3. As key indicator of this effectiveness, an organisation which can build an everyday working alliance between different groups in civil society – churches, other faith groups, green groups, pro-third world development

groups, other cross party alliances (eg, local members of COMPASS), women's groups, university students, schools, etc. This will inevitably be extremely time consuming, particularly given the time constraints, and is one strong reason why paid staff may be essential.

4. Creation of "open spaces", fora to promote discussion, awareness and involvement. Not all of these need involve candidates; the early ones might well be focussed on broader awareness raising. But as the election drew near they would be increasingly used to put the spotlight on candidates.
5. A high media profile, including letter writing group(s), press spokesperson/people, strong website, etc.

These are just starter ideas. And it could well be that, if we are to engage politically, we should start somewhere else. Ian Curtis, in his very enlightening opening remarks, has reminded us how open the field is. In this sense I have offered just the beginnings of an outline case study. Much more debate is needed.

In subsequent discussion there was demand for a further break-out session. This was held in the course of the lunch break and attended by about 40 people.

POINTS THEN MADE INCLUDED

-any campaign should aim to influence local councillors, as the political representatives closest to the electorate, as well as parliamentary candidates. Which raised the question of targetting councils as a whole. One step some participants had already taken was to invite all their local councillors to the showing they had arranged of "The Age of Stupid".

- we should not campaign primarily on climate change as a "separate" issue, but rather seek to draw out the implications in what will be the key election issues – economy, education, health, crime.

-"holding politicians to account", "putting them on the spot", ensuring the debate happens are vitally important.

-some disagreement on whether this was enough, or should we "put the bar at a certain level" and if so how and at what level? The majority view appeared to be that this was essential, but recognised that there would be difficulties in so doing. A major area for further discussion.

- much enthusiasm for special action in Witney constituency, but also felt that we needed to be active in all six Oxfordshire constituencies.

-John Gordon's suggestion that if we were serious about creating an effective organisation we would probably need to raise funding (£30,000?) and employ full time staff howled down

-If people were to be enthused to volunteer then we should emphasize that this was a time limited one off commitment – not one more organisation which would drag on for ever...

WHERE NEXT?

Some 35 people expressed interest in taking a political initiative forward and gave their contact details. The intention is now to write a draft paper outlining where, and how, we might develop this (probably Ian and John with input from a few others) for discussion at one or more meetings in Oxford over the next 2-3 weeks to which those on the contact list would be invited.