

Climate change: Our choice



Nick Hilton

The King's School Canterbury, E-mail: hiltonanything@yahoo.co.uk

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The answer to climate change does not lie in any one solution. Clearly, the answer is to find a source of energy that does not contribute to emissions, but this is unrealistic, especially in the short term. The effects on the UK will not be overly severe, which leaves the danger that developed countries could become negligent of their responsibility to the rest of the world which will bear the brunt of global climate change. Asking people to individually change their consumer habits is idealism rather than a reality; people are inherently attached to the familiar. Therefore, the only effective way of approaching the problem is to go directly to the perpetrators and cut off the problem at its source.

The first issue to address is the consequence of a dramatic shift in global temperatures. The UK consensus seems to support the idea that global warming will add to the amount of river flooding in the north and rising tides along the southern coastline. Flash floods in England are infrequent but cause major disruption to public services, mainly because as a country with a temperate climate we are not familiar with the occurrence. Currently, pragmatism would dictate that the financial burden of building river supports does not outweigh the potential benefits of the system. Therefore, under the current conditions, it is not worthwhile building specific defenses to combat these effects, which is the reason why the floods have been so severe in the past. An increase in the amount of river flooding would be dangerous for the affected regions, but it would also prompt swift government expenditure to stem the problem. Therefore, looking at the issue from a UK perspective is not an immediate cause for concern. The global cause for concern is mainly for developing countries

that are unable to fund aid programs following climatic disaster. For society to continue to exist on Earth, it must accept that measures need to be taken globally, especially for the less economically developed countries. The effects of climatic disaster in Africa, for example, would have negative effects on trade, industry and immigration on a worldwide scale.

The issue that is most important to address when combating climate change is very broad and could be applied to numerous examples that have major effects on the environment.

In order to make a clear demonstration of the effect, I have chosen cars to express my ideas. Cars have a large impact on the environment and yet could easily be made more efficient and therefore less damaging. My argument is not that changing the way cars run would help tackle climate change, but that these issues must be addressed universally.

The issue with combating climate change is the human psyche. A human object relationship has developed through the course of technological progress so much that the supposed "luxuries" (such as internet, telephones, cars, ...) have come to be perceived as necessities. It is extremely unrealistic to ask people to cut down on their use of electricity or their consumption of fossil fuels. Little can be achieved by people turning out lights in their houses; this practice was developed so that people would be more eco-friendly on a general scale. However, these pioneering initiatives are counteracted by basic consumerism. In October 2009, the Ford Company sold 23,454 new cars in the UK alone, a 13.88% market share.^[1] The Ford Focus is the UK's most popular

car with 101,593 units sold in 2008,^[2] [Figure 1] and yet its fuel efficiency cannot stand up to the competition. In a list of the Top 10 most fuel-efficient cars in the UK today, there is not a single entry for Ford, let alone its Focus range. The list is dominated by Citroen, Renault, Toyota and Honda; all of these cars are, somewhat unsurprisingly, diesel or petrol hybrids. However, in hard economic times when the cost of petrol is increasing, there is still a consumer preference to cars that run on unleaded petrol. The effects of this attachment reverberate around the globe in the form of climate change; if everyone drove the "Honda Insight", then the emissions from cars around the globe would be drastically slashed. This sounds almost as altruistic as expecting everyone to turn off their lights, but the reality is quite different. The technology for fuel-efficient cars has been around for years, as has the technology that would make fossil fuel consumption everywhere more efficient. However, these efforts are being stifled once again by mankind itself.

The petrol versus diesel debate has been an ongoing saga, but recent sales have reverted since 2002 to dominance for petrol; this is unsurprising given the knowledge of human fuel consumption. However, it is not just the consumers who will not give up their inefficient cars. Global oil corporations like Exxon Mobil have continued to report record profits in recent years, with sales in 2007 recording \$ 404 billion.^[3] This is fairly astonishing given the diminishing reserves of their precious commodity, but it relies on an almost symbiotic relationship with car manufacturers like Ford, who put a great deal of money into making extremely inefficient cars based on the knowledge that the human attachment theory makes it unlikely that their customers will change their habits. The first



Figure 1: A Ford Focus - the car in the number one sales spot in many countries

Honda hybrid was shown at the Tokyo Motor Show in 1997 and the Insight was introduced in 1999; yet, even a decade later, this technology has not replaced the outdated unleaded petrol engine. April 2009 marked the first time that a hybrid car, the Honda Insight, reached the number one sales spot for a car in Japan and this has not been repeated outside of its country of origin. Instead, this spot goes to cars like the Ford Focus which are bought for esthetic and status value, rather than in an attempt to curb CO₂ emissions.

Cars are only an indicator of the consumerist problem. The same process goes through for any item that runs on the burning of fossil fuels which, in a technology-based society, is almost everything. The worst offending country in terms of emissions per capita is Qatar, a country that has developed at a rate that is unsupportable. Even though the country has ingrained natural resources, countries like Qatar show the danger of progressive consumerism, especially when corporations are eager to repeat the tactics that they have used to ensnare customers in developed countries. The answer to this problem is for the national governments to place caps on product efficiency; clear ultimatums for companies would make it impossible for them to exploit their markets. For example, all car manufacturers could be made to meet a level of fuel efficiency in the family cars group. In this group, the most fuel efficient car is the Volkswagen Passat Saloon which emits 114 g of CO₂/km.^[4] Governments should therefore insist that all family cars meet the 114 g/km mark, or they will not be allowed to trade in that country. Whilst it is difficult to persuade car companies to join with the scientific consensus on the subject, strict government legislation could rule out any attempts to subvert fuel efficiency regulations. If this trend was adopted by the G20 countries, then countries with high CO₂ emissions, like Qatar, would have little choice other than to follow the Western regulation on the subject. If the efficiency gain can outweigh the greenhouse gas emissions of electricity more effectively, then tighter regulations can be introduced over the next 20 years, cutting down the CO₂ g/km figure repeatedly. The technology that has been around for a decade needs to be used immediately and effectively if cars are to lessen their effect on the environment. This theory can apply to all fossil fuels, particularly coal which still accounts for 50% of the US electricity grid and this could easily be cut down if companies were willing to make responsible investments in other technologies that could have a massive impact on global emissions.

Energy is available as it stands, and until another source presents itself, it is important that the world acts as a unit in establishing the most effective way of powering itself. There is a responsibility for countries to look after themselves and one another. Climate change will have an enormous effect on low-lying regions, coastal countries and dry climates particularly, which means that some of the poorest people in the world will face even greater destitution. Combating this requires more than general agreements such as Kyoto about slashing CO₂ emissions; it needs specific trade sanctions on companies which will not make more efficient products of their own volition. In the end, the effects of climate change will be felt whether we act or not

because the wheel is already in motion for another cycle of climate change, but the case for damage limitation is strong and is the only thing that can sustain an already fragile planet.

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About the Author

Nick Hilton was at The King's School Canterbury and left in 2010. He is currently taking a year out of studies before applying to University.