

REMARKS BY MR TOM BURKE TO THE BMA
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Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today.

And also for taking the initiative to organise this conference.

Like many others professionally involved in climate policy I spend a lot of time at conferences with familiar faces saying familiar things.

This can be very reassuring, but I am not sure it gets us very far. As I will go on to argue, finding the necessary political will to act is the biggest challenge facing climate policy.

If we are to meet that challenge successfully the climate conversation must involve everyone, from all the professions and all walks of life.

Political will is built in the base of society. It is not something that you can manufacture in the headlines or leave to the politicians who we increasingly distrust.

Our analysis of the climate issue is unusually clear.

We know exactly what we need to do – construct a carbon neutral global energy system by the middle of the century.

We know how to do it – all the technologies and engineering knowledge we need to get there in time are already available.

We know we can afford to do it – the International Energy Agency estimates that the nett cost of doing so might add only a couple of trillion dollars to what we will be investing in energy anyway over the next twenty five years.

That is a few tens of billions of dollars a year – I used to think that was a lot of money until the bankers taught me otherwise.

What we do not know is how to put the technology and capital together in time. Doing that will require political will.

Political will is built by making clear the connection between what is happening to the climate and all of the other interests and preoccupations that concern us all in our daily lives. Health and security are two of the most important of those preoccupations.

One of the bigger barriers to building the necessary political will is tendency of the climate conversation to fall much too quickly into the elephant trap of mind numbing technical detail and impenetrable acronyms.

Far too often the climate narrative is framed in a way that excludes rather than includes most people.

Unless we correct this fault we will not build the necessary political will to adopt the already available solutions however good our analysis and however hard we try.

So I want to steer clear of the detail and begin by looking at the very big picture of the politics of climate change. It is different in at least three ways from any other that humanity has ever faced.

First, it is a problem that is more truly global than any other. The livelihood of literally every single person in every single nation will be affected by a changing climate.

Far too many people lead lives constrained by poverty, violence, ignorance and ill-health. But they share the planet with others who lead lives that are affluent, peaceful, educated and healthy. Everyone, for better or for worse, will live with the consequences of climate change.

This characteristic creates an entanglement of interests unprecedented in history. And, while there might be hard power consequences to a failure of climate policy, there are no hard power solutions to the problem.

It cannot be solved by one nation imposing its will on another. Therefore, solving the problem requires an intensity and persistence of cooperation between nations not yet seen.

Since cooperation between governments is never one dimensional this means climate policy success is ultimately predicated on the continuance of a global system where cooperation takes precedence over competition.

Second, policy failure is not an option. The development of public policy is typically empirical. Human beings learn by doing. Policy measures are adopted, monitored for effectiveness, reviewed to take account of changing circumstances and revised as necessary.

Economic, social or political goals not achieved today can be pursued again tomorrow. This is not true for climate change.

The long lifetime of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere - many centuries - means that we are committed irrevocably and, in policy terms, indefinitely, to whatever climate is generated by the carbon burden in the atmosphere at the point of stabilisation.

If we fail to stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations at a level compatible with staying below 2°C we cannot try again later to achieve this goal.

Third, there is a specific timeframe within which action must be taken.

The build up of carbon in the atmosphere is cumulative and effectively irreversible. Most governments now accept that a 2°C rise in global

average temperatures marks the boundary between manageable and unmanageable climate change.

To remain within this boundary condition, global carbon emissions must peak within the period 2015-2020 and decline rapidly thereafter.

Climate change will lead to a complete transformation of the human prospect. This is true whether climate policy succeeds or fails.

If it succeeds the transformation will take place over the next thirty years. If it fails, the transformation that is already underway will accelerate gradually and become dramatic in the thirty years after that.

The choice is whether events or people drive that transformation.

If people make the choice, then over the next thirty years the way energy is used will be transformed.

This will bring with it a wide range of co-benefits in terms both of economic efficiency and human well being. Food and water security will be maintained.

However, the pattern of economic winners and losers will also be disrupted.

If events drive the transformation then the global average temperature will rise inexorably and for all practical purposes, irreversibly.

Food and water security will be undermined and ever larger numbers of people will be displaced, exposed to conflict and disease and subject to deeper climate induced poverty.

In those circumstances preserving political support for the international institutions that have sustained the prosperity and security of billions of people over half a century will become progressively more difficult.

The international negotiations on climate change did not fail in Copenhagen through faults in the process – though faults there are. They failed because the political will was lacking among the world's leaders.

As we saw ourselves last year in the formation of the Coalition – when the political will is there processes can be adapted, worked around or simply ignored.

Building that political will is about the conversation that occurs in the capitals of the key countries – not the conversation that goes on in the negotiating rooms.

International treaties are the output of political agreements, not the input to them.

The mismatch between the intensity and urgency of the effort required and the perceived remoteness of the threat to every day life is the major obstacle to success.

Governments everywhere are both distracted and constrained by the current fiscal crisis. They are faced with large and deeply entrenched economic interests, some of which are openly antagonistic to the measures needed to prevent dangerous climate change.

The additional costs of making the transition to a carbon constrained economy are inevitably resisted by both businesses and consumers.

But more importantly, the scale, urgency and nature of the policy measures required are a poor fit with the core projects of both the left and the right in politics.

For the right, the prospect of higher taxes, more regulation, constraints on personal choice and more interventionist government is hard to swallow.

For the left the need to take risks with growth and shift public expenditure from entitlements to investment in low carbon infrastructure is equally difficult.

This means that we cannot rely on our existing political parties to offer voters a clear sight of the choices we must make to preserve our nation's prosperity and security.

There will need to be a much wider and more engaged public debate on the implications of climate change for everyone and everything.

More importantly, there will need to be a much deeper political analysis of the implications of tackling climate change.

What does it mean for the tension between markets and planning? Markets innovate but have no purposes. Planning is good at purposes but not at innovation.

How will we have to adjust the balance in public spending between entitlements and investments in low carbon infrastructure? We currently count on the future to pay for today. But climate change requires that we pay today to have a future worth having.

My own view is that we will not solve this problem without an insurgency of the under forties against the over forties. We need to shift the axis of choice in politics from an antiquated debate between left and right to that of choosing between the future and the past.