

# Can we go on building roads and runways *and* save the planet?

Concern about climate change is dominating the discussion of transport policy. But what course is policy now likely to take? Social anthropologist **Benny Peiser** says politicians will find it impossible to deliver policies that match the threat that they say climate change presents. **Andrew Forster** went to meet him

**T**he Government is faced with a conundrum," says Benny Peiser, a social anthropologist at Liverpool John Moores University. "If we really are facing the kind of climate disaster scenarios that ministers talk about then the Government should not expand any more airports. You can't say, 'We're facing the biggest threat to mankind but we're going to open this airport.' You can't have it both ways. But that's what this Government and any government will have to try and do. So far they have got away with it."

Concern about global warming has reached the very heart of the transport policy debate following the publication of the Stern Review on the economics of climate change (LTT 16 Nov). Yet conflicting messages are being given about what the review means for transport policy. According to Sir Nicholas Stern himself, the quick and deep cuts to carbon emissions that are necessary to avoid the worst of climate change can actually be secured without dramatic cuts from the transport sector, at least in the short-term. Nevertheless, his proposal to put a price on carbon emissions would push up the cost of transport, particularly flying and motoring. Many environmentalists, however, say the Government must scrap plans for airport expansions and major road construction. And those such as Mayer Hillman and George Monbiot say citizens must also accept policy measures such as personal carbon rations.

But it's not just in transport that concern about anthropogenic climate change is posing awkward challenges for policy-makers and citizens, says Peiser. "This is a difficult topic for every individual and for every institution; no one knows how to handle it," he says. "Governments will lose elections over this issue," he predicts. "No one really knows what the best approach is. Everyone is shouting, that's for sure. Everyone is saying, 'This is the right approach'"

A social anthropologist might seem an odd choice of expert to turn to for insights about how the climate change policy agenda could influence transport decision-making. Peiser, however, has a deep interest in environmental issues. Growing up in Germany, he was one of the founders of that country's Green Party in the 1970s. The German Greens acted as a trailblazer for green politics globally. Peiser no longer calls himself 'green' but describes him-

self as a "free market environmentalist", albeit one who takes a "more pragmatic and less ideological perspective".

On the academic front, he has been researching for more than 20 years how societies through the centuries have responded to real and imaginary natural disasters. Climate change came to his attention as a modern-day threat about ten years ago. "As the tone of the discussion became shriller and the claims became louder and the predicted disasters became bigger I became more interested in assessing these claims," he explains.

He is also editor of CCNet (Cambridge Conference Net), a web-based daily briefing on climate change and other "neo-catastrophism" topics that is sent to about 3,500 subscribers around the world. "Basically every science writer in the western world is subscribed to that and a lot of decision-makers as well," he says. CCNet is, he says, one of the few places where debate is still allowed on the science of climate change. "It's one of the very, very few outlets that still allows sceptics to voice their questions," he explains. "I try to provide a forum for debate because in most other outlets this debate no longer occurs; according to the consensus view of climate change the debate is closed."

This approach has made Peiser a controversial figure to some within the highly charged fields of climate change science and policy. So, before discussing the policy implications of climate change, it seems important to understand where he stands on the scientific questions. "There is a consensus about the contribution of anthropogenic emissions to the warming of the climate over the last 150 years," he says. "I'm not saying that everyone is agreed on that but the vast majority of climate scientists are." Does he subscribe to the consensus view? "Well, I'm not a climatologist but my position is I agree that anthropogenic emissions have an effect on warming. I don't know how to quantify that. So I don't take a position on whether it is 60%, or is it 50%, or is it 40%? I'm agnostic on the question of whether warming is mainly driven by man." That view isn't that different to the third assessment report of the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published in 2001. It concluded that a proportion of the 0.6°C rise in the Earth's average surface temperature in the 20th Century was due to natural factors, though most of the warming in the second half of the century was attributable to human



activities.

Where Peiser sees much less scientific consensus is on the question of what will happen next. "The picture that is often painted by politicians and the media is that this consensus that 0.3°C or 0.4°C warming is due to man-made emissions will lead to global disaster," he says. "That's where the real controversy resides. That's where my, let's say scepticism, is perhaps a little bit stronger – on the predictions rather than the science. As far as I am concerned, particularly regarding the disastrous apocalyptic aspect of climate change discourse, there is a strong debate still going on."

## An inconvenient truth?

Peiser says the main issue for policy-makers is no longer actually the science. "Let's face it, the science isn't the big issue. The big issue is the economic and political approach to climate change." It is here that his views depart from those of the Government.

"Tony Blair essentially says we have to solve this problem in the next ten years or otherwise it's too late," says Peiser. "I personally think that's completely unrealistic. Everyone is shouting 'The end is nigh' but the reality is that there is no short-term solution to this issue. That is the sober reality."

He points out that, despite Labour's pledge to tackle climate change, the UK's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in 2005 were actually 2% higher than when Labour came to power in 1997. Meanwhile, the Government will not hit its target to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 20% between 1990 and 2010: in 2005 emission

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levels were just 5% lower than the baseline. Peiser notes that most of the reduction since 1990 was actually the result of the one-off switch from coal-fired to gas-fired power generation in the early 1990s.

Peiser says that, for the foreseeable future, economies are going to continue burning fossil fuels because they're reasonably cheap and because alternative energy sources aren't available in sufficient quantities or at a competitive cost. "Unless you actually dampen economies, you can't from one day to the next really bring down carbon dioxide emissions," he says. "CO<sub>2</sub> is a proxy for economic growth. Reduce growth and you can bring down CO<sub>2</sub> emissions but as long as the economy grows CO<sub>2</sub> emissions will go up."

Peiser says he cannot see governments asking their populations to make economic sacrifices "for a hypothetical scenario" of damaging climate change. He also believes that the economic self-interest of countries such as China, India, the United States and Australia means they are unlikely to join a global carbon trading market of the sort championed by British ministers and the European Commission, building on the existing European Emissions Trading System. "The British and Europeans realise that they currently essentially have a unilateral climate policy – that's why they are trying hard to bring in the rest of the world," says Peiser. "But how realistic is that? I doubt it is very realistic, at least in the foreseeable future."

All of which means that Peiser thinks there is little chance that any global agreement can be reached to stabilise atmospheric concentrations at, say 550ppm CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent, as suggested by Stern and ministers. And even if such a target were agreed, he is sceptical that the follow-up measures needed to deliver the target would be forthcoming.

Peiser backs efforts to cut carbon emissions but, in his view, the only feasible way to achieve dramatic reductions is with a technological approach, embracing energy sources such as clean coal, nuclear, solar (but "forget wind"), and, in the longer term, hydrogen and perhaps fusion. This, he says, will take time. "You can't do it in ten years. It will take at least two generations to switch our whole economy to a low carbon energy economy."

Listening to Peiser, the obvious question lurking in the back of the mind is what happens if the more alarming predictions associated with climate change do start to come true? Isn't his longer term technological approach dangerously complacent?

"If we really see signs that we are heading in a disastrous direction, obviously you would increase the money and also deepen the policies," he says. "But for the time being I don't see any disaster on the horizon – I don't see the evidence. That's why I am sceptical about saying now is the time to spend, you know, £200bn a year on the issue as Stern does." If the worst predictions really do look like coming true then Peiser says the field of geo-engineering techniques could provide an insurance policy, a view that illustrates a general enthusiasm for technological fixes. "It's not cheap, it is very expensive, but it's much cheaper than all the proposals on the table

## Predicting disaster in amongst the travel ads



Perhaps nowhere are the tensions between the climate change and economic agendas more apparent than in the media. The *Guardian* and *Independent* newspapers have been among the most prominent in reporting and commenting on the threats that climate change could present, with both giving extensive coverage to the more alarming predictions. Yet, at the same time, both papers carry reader travel offers to far-away destinations and advertises for cars, cheap flights and energy-intensive consumer products.

"The problem with the *Guardian* and

the *Independent* is that if they took the climate change threat seriously, they would stop advertising all the trappings of the 'good life'," says Peiser. "They would stop all ads for cars and all ads for holidays. If we really are facing disaster and collapse, why are they then profiting from all the companies and all the industries they blame for this?"

"In reality, the newspapers contribute to the problem perhaps just as much as the car industry, oil industry or any other, because they are promoting the lifestyles. They are the ones who are promoting and encouraging people to go on

holiday and to fly and to use flashy cars – that's the ads they place for their readers."

"They're claiming the 'End is nigh' but 'Look at this flashy car', 'Look at this cheap flight to Spain'. What signals are they sending out?"

Peiser says the contradictions simply illustrate our reliance on fossil fuels.

"Without advertising the *Guardian* and *Independent* wouldn't survive. The problem for any person and any institution is that you can't actually drop out [of the carbon economy]."

like the 1% of GDP that Stern thinks needs to be spent now."

### Cooling the debate

Peiser believes the lack of a practical short-term solution means that policy-makers should be trying to tone down the current climate change discourse and prepare citizens for the long haul. "You have to say, 'Okay, these are the challenges, these are the issues, we won't be able to do it in the short-term but in the long-term we might'."

Currently, however, the discourse in the UK is heading in precisely the opposite direction. Earlier this month Mike Hulme, director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, criticised politicians, environmental groups and the media for talking about the potential impacts of climate change in catastrophic terms (*LTT* 16 Nov). Peiser has been making this point for some time and sees a strong cultural dimension to the alarmist discourse. "The emergence of environmental apocalypticism is perhaps the most significant ideological development in the western world since the demise of Marxism," he says.

He acknowledges that his technological approach is at odds with the more alarmist predictions. "If I were to counsel people to take this more long-term perspective they would say 'You underestimate the severity of the problem and that we're facing Armageddon now,'" he says. "I personally think this kind of hype is unhelpful. This is not the first time in history that a population has been stirred up, become very emotional to the point of near hysteria over

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an issue. It's very, very poisonous for a rational policy-making process when emotions are so high and people stop pondering and weighing different options. Whenever the end is nigh, the solutions are worse than the malady."

### Trapped by rhetoric

Peiser says the catastrophic emphasis in climate change discourse has been stoked by all three of Britain's main political parties because each is desperate to capture the 'green' vote. "The Conservatives are now greener than the Greens," he laughs.

"From a policy perspective it is a situation where you can only lose because any government, whether it is Labour or the Conservatives, will be faced with the reality that their policies don't match the rhetoric," he says. "Tony Blair has made climate change top of the agenda but actually hasn't done anything to bring down emissions."

"Where does that leave policy-makers?" asks Peiser. "It leaves them looking very exposed. But that's the price you pay for exaggerating a risk that you actually cannot address."

Politicians, he says, "have cornered themselves". "They have dug themselves into such a hole that there is no way out. There is currently no way out of this hole for any British party."

Peiser says the tensions between the rhetoric and the reality are now becoming apparent. He cites the pressure that the Government is facing from over 400 MPs and

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## Carbon rationing would be 'political suicide'

Chancellor Gordon Brown is expected to announce tax increases on motoring and air travel in next week's pre-Budget statement and is likely to cite concern about climate change as a key justification for doing so. But Peiser believes that, though the public is undoubtedly concerned about climate change, many people will not be prepared to accept the pain associated with the measures to tackle the problem.

He points to the "field day" that the tabloid newspapers had with the leaked memo from environment secretary David Miliband urging the Chancellor to make motoring and air travel more expensive (*LTT* 2 Nov). "The *Daily Mirror* had a comment column saying: 'Thank God there are still scien-

tists who think this whole climate change thing is nonsense'," he says.

"So would you believe it, if policy goes against people's own interest then they start asking questions. As long as it's free everyone wants to be seen to be green and everyone is green. But once people start to feel the pain, they will start wondering, 'Hold on, is that actually right?'"

Similarly, Peiser believes the idea of personal carbon rationing (championed by commentators such as Mayer Hillman and George Monbiot, and even floated by Miliband) is politically impractical. "Let's go back to rationing and see how long the Government survives," says Peiser. "Good luck to them. It's political suicide even to attempt it unless

other countries are doing the same thing. People in Britain would realise that their living standards are going down while other countries' living standards are going up."

Rationing would only work if it were backed up by strict enforcement, he adds. "People like George Monbiot might say: 'Okay, if that's the attitude of the people, that they only think about themselves and they don't accept that we have to sacrifice our lifestyle to save the planet, then we might need to enforce rationing through a kind of police-state'," says Peiser. "I mean, I'm taking a dim-kind of view [of the concept of rationing] but if people are not willing to sacrifice their lifestyles in order to save the planet, what's the alternative?"

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Friends of the Earth to include annual carbon dioxide reduction targets in the Climate Change Bill. "If you want to sacrifice the British economy then please include annual targets in the legislation," he says. "But politicians should be very honest about that and say, 'You want to save the planet? Okay, but don't come and complain about unemployment, rising energy prices and industries simply relocating to other parts of the world where they are taking a different approach?'"

"[Chancellor] Gordon Brown knows that it is impossible to realise annual targets," says Peiser. "But once you actually hype up the problem of climate change and then say, 'Hold on, we cannot reduce CO<sub>2</sub> year-on-year,' you look very bad. You look like someone who doesn't take the problem seriously. So *that* is the problem for any policy-maker: you exaggerate the threat and then you don't follow it up because you can't. You will be found out as a hypocrite. And that's what this Government looks like."

### Runways and roads

Transport policy will give the Government particular problems, Peiser believes. "The Government will find itself in an increasingly difficult situation to legitimise spending money on any road improvements and any airport expansions," he says. "Unless you actually do what the green campaigners say and make flying a luxury for the rich you will have an increase in air flights. The same is true for traffic on the roads. So the Government is faced with a conundrum."

Surprisingly, Peiser actually praises environmental commentator George Monbiot who, following the Stern Review, called for the road and airport expansion programmes to be scrapped, and even out-of-town shopping centres to be closed in the longer term (*LTT* 2 Nov). "George Monbiot is spot on as far as I'm concerned," says Peiser. "He's the only person who is actually consistent. He says 'Listen to the science, we've got ten years to solve this problem, otherwise it's too late. That means the complete halt of road expansion, airport expansion, a reduction of road traffic – make it more expensive, tax left, right and centre.'" Peiser, of course, disputes the foundation of Monbiot's argument. "I question the disaster scenarios. That's why I say I have no problems with expanding a few airports because I don't think they're going to cause our civilisation to collapse."

### A violent reaction?

Recent months have seen an increasing number of direct action protests by environmentalists wanting to highlight the climate change threat. Power stations, airports and airline headquarters have all been targeted. Peiser says the list of potential targets is endless. "You pick your target because essentially everyone's emitting something."

Yet he believes that environmental groups are broadly satisfied that the Government is committed to reducing emissions. "The environmental groups still think... the Government is doing a good job in a way, because they buy the spin," he says. "Because ministers are putting climate change on top of the agenda. David Miliband and Tony Blair... are saying all these things and having these reports such as Stern."

But Peiser thinks that disillusionment is likely to grow and he worries about how some in the environmental movement will react. "Apocalyptic movements can become very radical because they believe their position is the only true one," he says. "Sometimes, for instance with the animal rights movement, that turns to violence. It can happen to the environmental movement – they could turn violent if they realise the Government is actually not following their policy statements through. That's the risk – that parts of the environmental movement might turn violent over this issue once they realise the Government is not actually doing enough or anything significant to bring down emissions and that there are still roads being built and airports being expanded."

### What happens next?

Peiser likens the current climate change debate in the UK to a runaway train. "I personally think there's very little you can do about this kind of anxiety," he says. "I don't think you can stop the train. You can't even slow it down." But, just like in the movies, he says the train will eventually crash into the buffers. "And then people will realise that perhaps we should go back to the drawing board and find a different approach," he says.

Domestically, he thinks the "crash" could come if the Government goes too far on tax increases or tries to introduce rationing (*see above*). But at the global scale he believes a rethink could come if the world's nations fail to secure a new global agreement to follow on from the Kyoto protocol. Industrialised nations who signed up to the Kyoto treaty are



**Members of the Plane Stupid campaign group conducted a sit-in on the runway at the Nottingham East Midlands Airport earlier this year.**

**"That's the risk – parts of the environmental movement might turn violent if there are still roads being built and airports expanded."**

legally bound to reduce worldwide emissions of greenhouse gases by an average of 5.2% below their 1990 levels by the period 2008–2012. The United States and Australia refused to sign the pact, with the US claiming it would harm its economy and that it is wrong that the pact excludes developing countries such as China and India. But many of the countries that are signatories to Kyoto look unlikely to hit their targets, partly because there is no financial penalty for non-compliance. The European Commission said last month that emissions in the EU 15 member states in 2004 were only 0.9% below 1990 levels, a long way off the 8% target for 2012.

"If you cannot get a post-Kyoto global agreement that would derail every climate policy in Europe," Peiser predicts. He says that Kyoto shows that 'command and control' strategies do not work and that governments should instead devote their energy to encouraging research and development in energy sources. "If you really want innovation, you have to put your money where your mouth is," he says. "Neither Britain nor Europe is actually spending the resources on science and technology that would then deliver the kind of technologies we're looking for."

Peiser disputes the Government's view that the way to bring new technologies on stream is to put a price on carbon, thereby making fossil fuels more expensive. "If you make energy more expensive, all the producers will do is put up the price," he says. "Instead of making life more expensive and dampening our economies, you should actually generate more wealth in order to put a lot more money into R&D," he says. "Only if your economy is doing well will you have the material resources to look after your environment."