TWO INTRIGUING RESULTS

Peter Harper 2012

*The first ‘result’ is contained in a short report of a conference held at CAT in 2012.*

POST-CARBON WORLDS AND TRANSITIONS

**Physics versus Politics: Can we close the gap?**

An international conference at CAT, 19-20 July 2012.

Naturally, we like to see how our Zero Carbon Britain scenario compares with others. Earlier this year, an Australian academic, John Wiseman, produced a report comparing 18 different decarbonisation scenarios from around the world, including *ZCB2030*. Because he was visiting the UK in July we took the opportunity to organise a small two-day conference specifically with the aim of analysing and comparing different scenarios.

The main theme of the conference is expressed in the subtitle. Decarbonisation scenarios tend to fall into two classes. One side asks: “what would it physically take to get emissions down to a sustainable level consistent with the climate science?” The other side asks: “what is politically feasible now that will allow us to make a start?” Sadly, it turns out that what is physically required stretches contemporary politics to breaking point, while ‘political realism’ gets nowhere near the physical requirement. There is a ‘yawning chasm’ between the two approaches that we hoped the conference would be able to tackle.

Did it? The invitations went out to researchers on both sides of the divide, and the pattern of acceptances was in some sense the first ‘result’. Somewhat to our surprise, *nobody* from the ‘political realist’ camp attended, so it was difficult to have the constructive dialogue we had hoped for. The most likely explanation for this is that any public suggestion of major political or social change (implied by the ‘physically realist’ models) could have uncomfortable repercussions for many mainstream academics, civil servants and politicians. It is disappointing to think that, given a matter as important as this, the two sides cannot have frank discussions in public, but this is likely to be an enduring problem we need to take into account.

So the conference was left to the ‘physical realists’, but in some ways this was refreshing, because one could call a spade a spade, and nobody was trying to speak with elaborate ambiguities to avoid saying things that might be embarrassing later.

Did anything new come up? A particularly telling contribution came from Kevin Anderson of the Tyndall Centre in Manchester. Professor Anderson presented evidence that the standard target of ‘avoiding 2°C of global warming’ was extremely difficult, and could only be avoided by measures as strong as those proposed in *ZeroCarbonBritain2030*—considered an ‘extreme’ scenario in official quarters. The implication for us at CAT was that our next research phase would have to include measures to deal with the effects of such a temperature rise, that we had previously assumed would be *prevented*. Or else we would need an even more ‘extreme’ approach.

One proposed innovation to compare scenarios was to calculate the implied ‘carbon budgets per head’ against a global benchmark figure based on the 2°C ‘guardrail’. Provisional estimates of the benchmark suggest around 110-140 tonnes. ‘Political realist’ scenarios tend to come out above 300, far too high. ZCB2030 is much better, at around 130 tonnes, but if Kevin Anderson is right, again we might need a more ‘extreme’ approach, and what could that be?

The first result then, is that ‘political realists’ are reluctant to engage in frank debate, even in a remote location under Chatham House rules. In some ways this is not surprising, but it was remarkable to get such a complete black and white outcome in spite of considerable efforts to seek the opposite.

The second result is that the consensus at CAT was that *we should not say this in print*. Although we are implicitly critical of mere ‘political realism’ there is considerable sympathy with the predicament that mainstream politicians, academics and businesspeople find themselves in. They have made the choice to try to move policy inch by inch in the right direction, and endure the brickbats. They should not be sneered at.

The result was that this short report, commissioned by CAT’s house journal *Clean Slate*, after bitter argument, was spiked.