



The Day After Tomorrow: Public Opinion on Climate Change

by Andrew Norton and John Leaman
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MORI Social Research Institute

Introduction

This report presents the findings of recent research conducted by MORI Social Research Institute assessing public opinion on, and attitudes towards, climate change and global warming.

In recent months, there has been an upsurge of interest in global warming, as highlighted by the publication of satellite evidence confirming stratospheric warming,¹ debate about the impact of global warming on wildlife,² and dire predictions of the impacts of sea level rise.³

The film *The Day After Tomorrow* – released on 28 May – will only serve to increase media interest in this issue. This end-of-the-world disaster film provides an ecological horror story about climate change, where Los Angeles is destroyed by tornados, New York is drowned by a tidal wave and Europe freezes with the onset of a new ice age. The film will have a potential audience of 500 million people, and is set to put climate change on the “mainstream” agenda. Environmentalists hope that the Hollywood blockbuster will change people’s perceptions about climate change, while others have warned that the film is a manipulation of science to serve a political agenda.

In line with international efforts to gain agreement on curbing carbon emissions – the gases that contribute towards the global warming – the Government has long been committed to moving the UK to a ‘low carbon economy’.

This commitment can be traced to the climate change convention that was agreed at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.⁴ The ratification of the Kyoto Agreement in 2002 committed the UK to reducing carbon emissions by 12.5% below 1990 levels by 2008-2012. The Government has set a more ambitious domestic goal – a 20% reduction in carbon emissions by 2010. The Energy White Paper (2003) sets an aspiration of a 60% cut by 2050.

¹ Quang Fu *et al* ‘Contribution of stratospheric cooling to satellite-inferred tropospheric temperature trends’, in *Nature* 429, 55-58 (6 May 2004). See also, Taylor, M. ‘Scientists claim new evidence of warming,’ in *The Guardian*, 6 May; Henderson, M. ‘Global warming study chills hearts of critics,’ in *The Times*, 6 May 2004

² Day, E., ‘Charities ‘spread scare stories on climate change to boost public donations’, in *The Sunday Telegraph*, 2 May 2004. See also Elliot, V., ‘Gardeners told to go exotic as summers get warmer,’ in *The Times*, 21 May 2004

³ Leake, J., ‘London faces slow death in the high seas,’ in *The Sunday Times*, 16 May 2004. See also Lynas, M., *High Tide*, HarperCollins, 2004.

⁴ This provided a voluntary framework for industrialised countries to peg their greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2000.

Tony Blair has been a leading advocate for tackling climate change. Speaking in April at the launch of the Climate Group, an international campaign aiming to speed up greenhouse gas emission reductions, Tony Blair warned that “Climate change is the most important environmental issue facing the world today.”⁵ He argued that there is “no bigger long-term question facing the global community” than the threat of climate change.⁶

Tony Blair’s views on global warming largely reflect those of Sir David King, the Government’s chief scientist. In January, Sir David wrote an article for the American journal *Science* in which he criticised the US Government for failing to take global warming more seriously. In it he argued that climate change is “the most severe problem we are facing today, more serious even than the threat of terrorism.”⁷

This report summarises recent research by MORI assessing public opinion on climate change and global warming. It focuses on:

- public concern about global environmental issues and climate change;
- awareness and understanding of global warming;
- public concern about global warming;
- tackling global warming and willingness to take action.

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⁵ “PA” News, ‘Blair Backs New Climate Change Group’, 27 April 2004

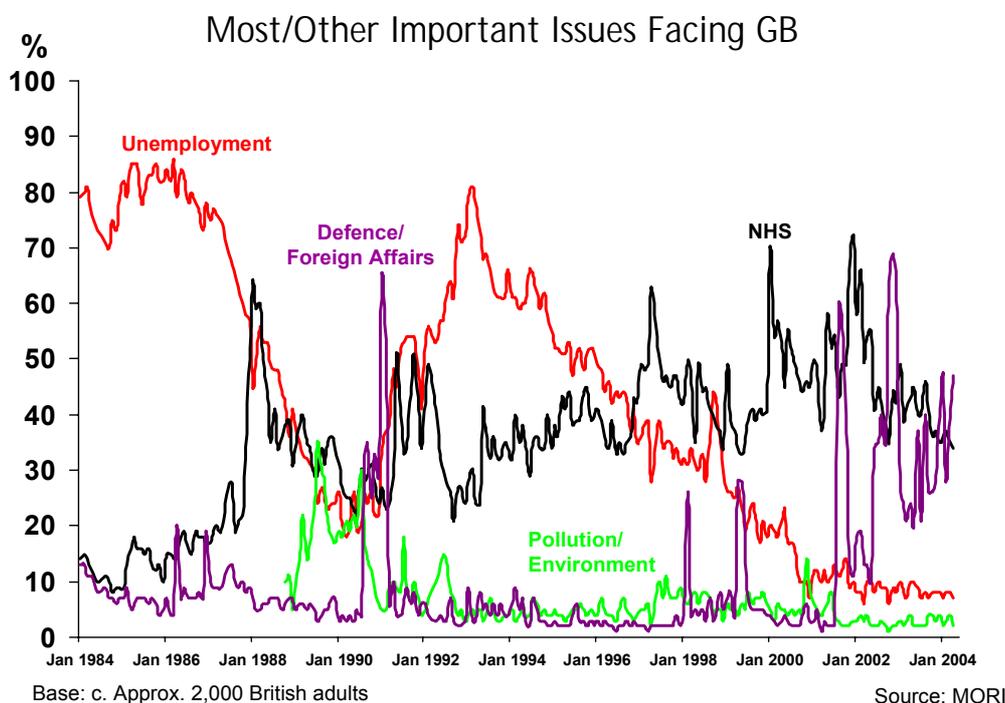
⁶ BBC News ‘Climate Change ‘critical’ to Blair’, 27 April, 2004,
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3662303.stm>;

⁷ King, D., ‘Climate Change Science: Adapt, Mitigate, or Ignore?’, in *Science* 303, pp176-177, 9 January 2004; See also BBC News ‘Global warming ‘biggest threat’,’ 9 January 2004

Key Findings

The Environment – A Global Issue?

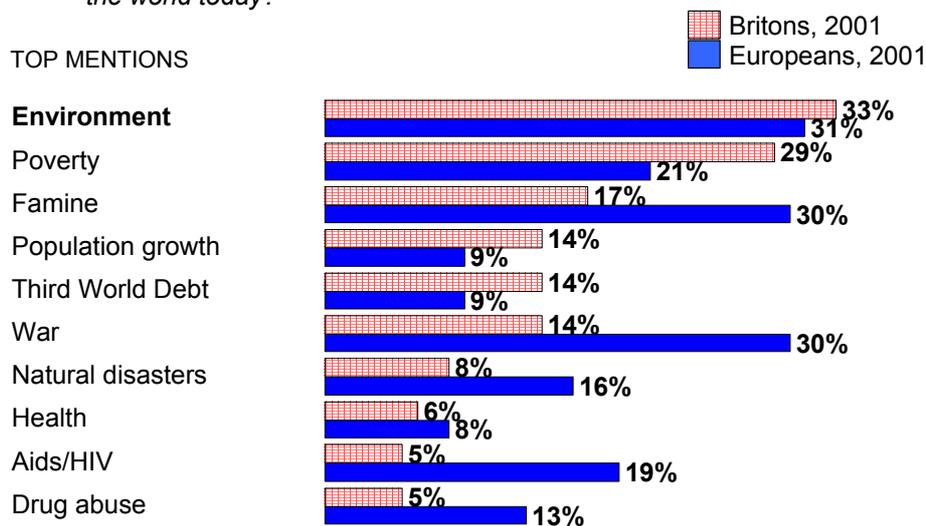
Whilst MORI surveys have consistently recorded high levels of public concern for global environmental issues, their importance has been reduced somewhat by the war in against terrorism, which has come to dominate public concern in Britain. Currently, the “environment” is not as salient a national issue as it was in the late 1980s/early 1990s, when it briefly became seen as one of the most important issues facing Britain. Since then, concerns about defence/foreign affairs and the delivery of public services – the NHS and schools/education – have become more important.



Yet, in 2001 - before 9/11 - the environment was seen (both by citizens in Britain and across Europe) as the single most important *global* problem. MORI research for the UNFPA found that a third (33%) of Britons and 31% of Europeans cited the environment as one of the two or three most important problems facing the world today.

Issues of Concern – Britain & Europe

Q7 What would you say were the two or three most important problems facing the world today?



Base: 1,086 GB adults, 13,350 European adults, June 2001

Source: MORI

'Global warming' – Awareness High, Understanding Low

Whilst 'global warming' has become a household term, public awareness of the international framework for tackling climate change is low. Almost all Britons have heard about global warming – and two-thirds (67%) say they know 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' about it. Likewise, most people have heard about 'climate change', although the proportion claiming a more detailed awareness drops to 59%. To put this in context, almost half (45%) say they have never heard of 'biodiversity', and only 17% know 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' about it.⁸

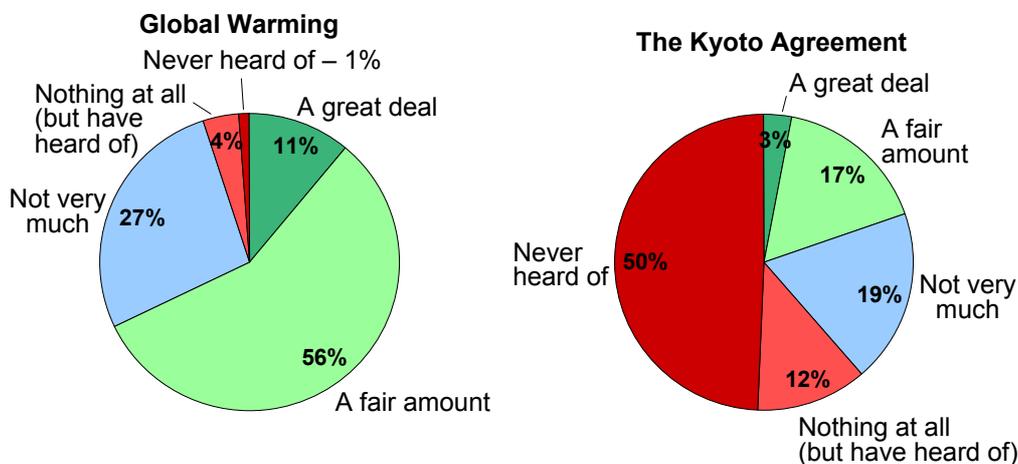
Yet awareness of the international framework for tackling global warming is low. Half of Britons have never heard of the Kyoto Agreement – the international agreement on tackling climate change ratified by Europe, Japan and the developing nations. Similarly, MORI research commissioned by Avis and Future Forests found that eight in ten (78%) of the British public had not heard of, or knew nothing about, the Global Earth Summit in Johannesburg in 2002 - despite more than 170 governments being represented.⁹

⁸ Based on a nationally representative sample of 1,004 adults aged 16+, interviewed by telephone between 7-9 May 2004.

⁹ Based on a nationally representative sample of 989 adults aged 15+ in 196 sampling points across Britain. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, in-home between 8-13 August 2002.

Familiarity With Global Warming & The Kyoto Agreement

Q How much, if anything, do you know about...



Base: 1,004 British adults, May 2004

Source: MORI

Public *understanding* of global warming also appears to be low. Research by MORI for the Scientific Alliance in 2002 showed 70% are unable to name the gas that most contributes to global warming. Whilst Carbon Dioxide is the most commonly mentioned top-of-mind – by three in ten – around two in ten incorrectly cite CFCs.¹⁰

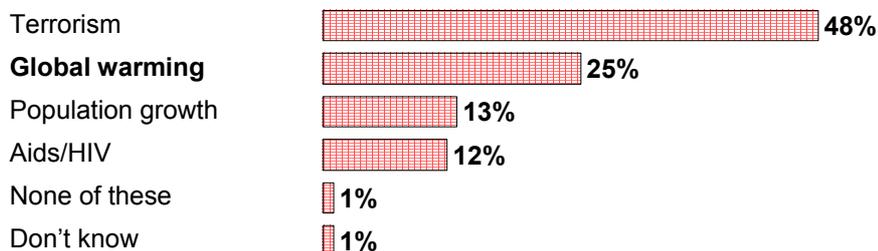
Global Warming – Do We Care in Britain?

Whilst the majority (63%) of Britons agree with Tony Blair that climate change is the most important *environmental* issue facing the world today, most see global warming as less serious than other issues. When asked which global issue – terrorism, global warming, population growth or HIV/Aids – poses the most serious threat, terrorism comes top by some margin. By a factor of almost 2:1, the public see terrorism as more important than global warming (48% vs 25%).

¹⁰ Based on a nationally representative sample of 1,002 adults aged 16+, interviewed by telephone between 24 – 26 May 2002.

Global Issues of Concern – Britain

Q Which, if any, of these is the most serious threat to the future wellbeing of the world?



Base: 1,004 GB adults, May 2004

Source: MORI

The level of public concern in Britain about the risks of climate change reflects perceptions of its likely impacts. Research for the New Opportunities Fund found that few Britons – around 1 in 5 (18%) – see global warming as a serious threat to their local environment, in contrast to crime and vandalism, which came top at 68%.¹¹

The Day After Tomorrow – Who Cares Most?

Professional and managerial groups are *more* likely to see global warming as the most serious global threat, compared with other social classes (32% for ABs, compared with 25% overall). Lower paid manual workers and those reliant on state benefits/pensions (DEs) are the least likely to see this issue as the most serious (20%).

Younger men are *less* likely to see global warming as a serious global threat, compared with older men (21% for males aged 16-34, compared with 32% for males aged 35-54, and 26% for males aged 55+). By comparison, women's views show much more consistency between age groups.

Contrary to what we might expect, there is no significant difference between households with children under 16, compared with those without children in the proportions seeing global warming as the most serious global issue (25% for each group). Indeed, those *without* children are *more* likely to see climate change as the most important environmental issue facing the world today (66%, compared with 59% for those with children).

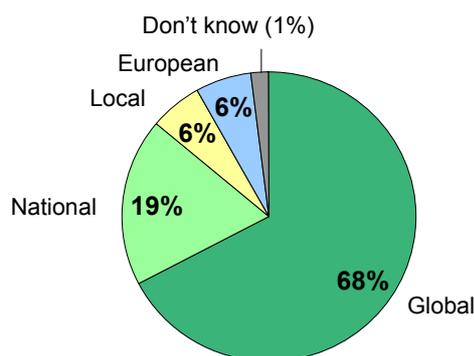
¹¹ Based on a nationally representative quota sample of 957 adults aged 15+ in 188 sampling points across Great Britain. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, in-home between 23–28 May 2002.

Global Warming – A Local or Global Issue?

Most people in Britain accept that it is at the *global* level that global warming is best tackled, rather than European, national and local levels. Furthermore, around half (52%) agree that it is a waste of time trying to tackle global warming in Britain without international agreement, whilst 41% disagree.

Taking Action Against Global Warming

Q At what government level do you think global warming should best be tackled?



Base: 488 GB adults, May 2004

Source: MORI

There is mixed recognition of the progress that has been made in Britain to tackle climate change, and of the UK's position as "a world leader in the fight against climate change," as Margaret Beckett has claimed.¹² Two in five (42%) recognise that Britain is among the leading countries in tackling global warming, whilst 32% disagree, and 25% do not know or are undecided.¹³

There appears to be a lack of engagement with the public on the issue of climate change. Research for The University of East Anglia's Centre for Environmental Risk found that few people (8%) feel the Government provides all relevant information about climate change to the public.¹⁴ Recent research has shown that four in five (79%) have never heard of *The Carbon Trust*, the organisation set up by the government in 2001 to help businesses and the public sector reduce carbon emissions.¹⁵ This reflects the targeting of The Trust's advertising and media campaigns at businesses and the public sector.

¹² Defra News Release, 'Beckett Delivers Kyoto Protocol to UK,' 7 March 2002.

¹³ Based on a nationally representative sample of 1,004 adults aged 16+, interviewed by telephone between 7-9 May 2004.

¹⁴ Based on a nationally representative quota sample of 321 adults aged 15+. Interviews were completed face-to-face, in-home between 6 July and 31 July 2002.

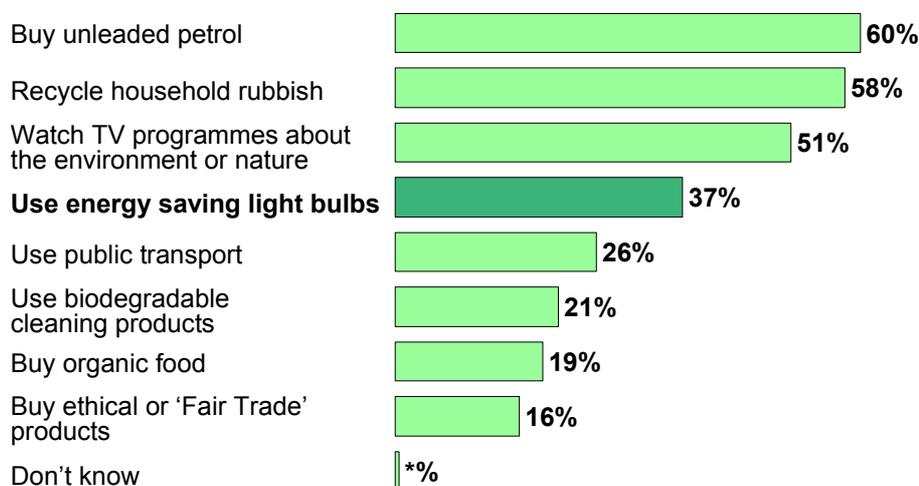
¹⁵ Based on a nationally representative sample of 1,004 adults aged 16+, interviewed by telephone between 7-9 May 2004.

Doing Something about Global Warming

Surveys have recorded an apparent willingness among the public – in very specific ways – to take action to reduce domestic energy use. In 2002, a MORI survey for the New Opportunities Fund found that 37% use energy saving light bulbs.¹⁶ This compares with 58% who recycle household rubbish and 19% who buy organic food. We need to be careful when interpreting these results, as there is the potential for overclaiming on these environmental activism measures. Nonetheless, the results indicate broad awareness of the need to save energy.

Environmental Activism

Q Which, if any, of the following do you do on a regular basis?



Base: 957 GB adults, May 2002

Source: MORI

However, the key to engaging people – as with businesses – is to ‘make it easy’ and to show ‘what’s in it for them’. Lines of argument that revolve around ‘being green’ certainly have a crucial longer-term role, but in the shorter-term are less effective.

For example, using low energy light bulbs is a painless – and incremental – process, but the challenge grows considerably in relation to reduced car usage. (On a global scale, those who have cars are dependent on them, and those without them nevertheless aspire to have them).

¹⁶ Based on a nationally representative quota sample of 957 adults aged 15+ in 188 sampling points across Great Britain. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, in-home between 23–28 May 2002

International research for the FIA Foundation on car dependency shows very large numbers of people determined to retain car usage in the face of virtually any barrier – excessive cost, tighter legislation, vehicles banned from urban centres etc. This is despite the expectation that such barriers *will* increase in coming years.

MORI's GB-wide research for the Department of Transport in 2003 shows the low salience of vehicle emissions as part of the new car buying process, and little overt desire among consumers to use labels for comparing cars' environmental performance (especially when the financial benefits of 'going green' offered through the current VED pricing structures are so insignificant a part of the overall cost).¹⁷

Conclusion

Recent research by MORI on the eve of the release of the disaster film *The Day After Tomorrow* shows that most people in Britain do not share Tony Blair's concern about the seriousness of global warming. This reflects the dominance of public concerns about international terrorism and other domestic issues, and a widespread feeling that trying to tackle global warming in Britain is a waste of time without international agreement (compounded by the US's very public rejection of the Kyoto Protocol). Whilst most people in Britain have heard of global warming – and most regard climate change as an important environmental issue – there is a need to raise public understanding of this issue and of the UK's role in tackling it.

¹⁷ The research programme – which ran from October 2002-July 2003 – comprised focus groups to assess reactions to the use of car labels, a quantitative survey among new car buyers, and piloting of the label in car showrooms.

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