

The folly of carbon swipe cards

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David Miliband is right: his plan for all citizens to carry around a card that measures their use of carbon will be seen as 'burden' by most of us.

David Miliband, secretary of state for the environment, food and rural affairs (DEFRA), is said to be a clever man; some believe he will even be Britain's next prime minister. But his latest plan for carbon emission cards – launched in a speech on 19 July, given, significantly, as the annual lecture at the Audit Commission – does more than raise doubts about his intelligence.

This is what he said: 'Imagine a country where carbon becomes a new currency. We carry bank cards that store both pounds and carbon points. When we buy electricity, gas and fuel, we use our carbon points, as well as pounds. To help reduce carbon emissions, the government would set limits on the amount of carbon that could be used.

'Imagine your neighbourhood. Each neighbour receives the same free entitlement to a certain number of carbon points. The family next door has an SUV and realise they are going to have to buy more carbon points. So instead they decide to trade in the SUV for a hybrid car. They save 2.2 tonnes of carbon each year. They then sell their carbon points back to the bank and share the dividends of environmental growth.

'The granny next door doesn't drive and doesn't do much air travel. So she has spare carbon points that she can sell. But she doesn't want to be handling two currencies so she cashes in all her carbon permits as soon as she receives them. When she pays her electricity bill, her energy company builds in the price of carbon to her total bill. She simply pays carbon as she uses it. At the end of the year she finds herself better off.' (1)

I trust you got all that. As Miliband himself rightly admits, 'It is easy to dismiss the idea as too complex administratively, too utopian' (2). Yes, the government makes an IT mess everywhere it goes – identity cards, Child Support Agency, NHS, the courts. Yes, carbon emissions cards would lend themselves to fraud, black markets and geographical anomalies (think about tourists coming into Britain). Yes, in the EU, trading by businesses in carbon through the EU Emissions Trading Scheme has been marked by chaos.

Yet Miliband raises a more interesting possible objection to this plan when he adds that it is easy to dismiss his scheme as 'too much of a burden' for citizens (3). It seems that in New Labour's imagination, Britain's citizens are made vulnerable by burdens – whenever they are not themselves a burden on the environment. But let's not be cynical. The real point about carbon emissions cards is that they combine two of the historic stupidities of past British governments with two characteristically New Labour devices:

Historic stupidity no.1: The ration book, 1940-54. From Neville Chamberlain through to Clement Attlee's oh-so-radical postwar government, British governments have loved to police the consumption of the masses, adding lots of egalitarian rhetoric to cheer us up. In the Second World War, sharing out the misery was the rule in food, fashion and furniture. The carbon emissions card applies the same tactic, but in energy.

Historic stupidity no.2: Margaret Thatcher's doctrine that the way forward for UK plc is to exchange each other's washing. It was Thatcher who, in a speech to the Royal Society in 1988, cited the increase in greenhouse gases in her seminal declaration that 'the government espouses the concept of

sustainable economic development' (4). Miliband reveals her continuing idiotic influence. His idea that the holy non-users of energy among us can claim monetary 'points' for our good behaviour – a kind of loyalty card for the planet, or at least for DEFRA – is very much in the spirit of entrepreneurial services invoked by Thatcher, whose vision of the future was about consumers 'taking in one another's laundry' (5). So too is New Labour's commitment to the microgeneration of energy in the home, and its hope that individuals will be able to sell windmill power back to the National Grid (6).

New Labour device no.1: a reduction of energy strategy to lifestyle measurement that would make Joe Stalin blush. It was the late Peter Drucker, the guru among American management gurus, who famously proclaimed: 'What gets measured, gets done.' But as Joe Stalin's chaotic Soviet Union had shown long before, people who call themselves planners may want to measure everything, but may be managing nothing in the process (for contemporary proof, look at the distortions introduced by the application of government targets in the NHS). Miliband's attempt to get people to compute every aspect of their conduct with energy may make ministers and top civil servants feel good. In every day life, too, it may make practitioners of the swipe approach to carbon emissions feel suitably sanctimonious. But as we shall see in a moment, it does not amount to a coherent strategy.

New Labour device no.2: stigmatise all aspects of consumer behaviour, and in particular cultivate minute-to-minute mass popular 'awareness' of one's personal responsibility for devastating the planet. Consumers are already problem eaters, drinkers and gamblers, as well as problem parents, too. Now we learn that pretty much their very existence is a problem. Energy lifestyles – or what we shall here christen as e-styles – are something that New Labour feels we all need to feel guilty about, all the time. Because the fate of the Earth lies in every light bulb or car journey, we can all rally round something we can believe in. Meanwhile, and in particular, ministers conspire with greens further to stigmatise any dissent from New Labour device no.2 as a contemptible pathological state they describe as denial.

Why is it important for us to uphold dissent from carbon emissions cards and the new, rationed, individualised, bean-counting religion of ecologically correct e-styles, complete with the Coming of a Second Flood and all that? We need to dissent because the problem of greenhouse gas emissions begins not with personal morality, but in the physics of fuel extraction and fuel refinement.

The example of the home

Take the example of energy in the home. Last week, in a striking U-turn, housing minister Yvette Cooper abandoned most of the measures in New Labour's Home Improvement Packs, which were intended to regulate the sale of homes. Pretty much the only one she retained was energy performance information, enabling buyers and sellers to get A-G ratings on their homes (7). Similarly, the government's Energy Review, published two weeks ago, requires utilities specialised in supplying homes with gas and electricity to redouble their efforts, under the Energy Efficiency Commitment, to supply loft and cavity wall insulation (8). And back on 3 July, the government-backed Energy Saving Trust protested that the spread of set-top boxes on to home TVs, along with that of other electronic devices, is likely to worsen climate change (9).

Yet these different efforts to lay the blame for carbon emissions on draughts and multichannel TVs in the home miss the point. If we want homes that are efficient in terms of energy use, then Britain and the world need millions of new homes that are manufactured, complete with a factory-installed level of insulation akin to that found in fridges. If we want a more efficient set-top box, let's ignore 10 out of the 11 'policy actions' recommended by the Energy Saving Trust, for all relate to the regulation and labelling of consumer goods (10). Instead, let's hear it for the one Trust policy that does make sense – product innovation:

'Greater Research, Development and Demonstration (R, D&D) and accelerated technology deployment for energy efficient products. For example, the technology of vacuum packs to enhance the insulation performance of cold appliances has been in existence for many years but they have hardly been used at all in domestic appliances. Greater priority should be given to R, D&D activity in this.' (11)

Product innovation benefits everyone – and not just in energy. But why not rack up carbon emissions card points by abjuring the use of domestic products altogether? Well, Energy Saving Trust figures themselves demonstrate that, in the UK, even universal and drastic consumer energy conservation with consumer goods makes very little difference. The Trust writes:

'A significant proportion of the population leave their [sic] mobile phone charger plugged in and wasting energy all of the time whilst believing it to be inactive. Although the stand-by power consumption of a single mobile phone charger only averages 1 watt, the combined stand-by usage of approximately 25 million of these items adds up very quickly to 25 megawatts (MW). This adds up to 219 Gwh consumed per annum, enough energy to power the electricity needs of 66,000 homes for one year.' (12)

So: if every one of the 26million householders in the UK spent an extra, say, 10 seconds a day switching of his or her charger, every day, that would absorb at least 26 million man-hours a year. And that huge conservation effort would power 66,000 homes, or a quarter of one per cent of UK households.

This is an energy tactic, not an energy strategy. Of course, the Energy Saving Trust worries about what it calls an 'exponential' rise in the popularity of consumer electronics: in 2004, it murmurs, the average UK household owned 2.4 televisions, 1.9 video recorders, and 5.2 external power supply units (13). But if each and all of us spent 10 seconds turning off just these seven items in the home, we would absorb nearly 200million hours of society's time, and still power just 1.75 per cent of Britain's homes.

The way to power Britain's homes is to build new, carbon-efficient power stations, not to hope that we all run around our houses all day fiddling with switches. People won't do that. That indeed would be what Miliband calls a 'burden'.

The new Groupthink

In May, BBC1 broadcast a blockbuster two-part series on climate change, *Are We Changing Planet Earth?* At its conclusion, the illustrious zoologist, David Attenborough, a recent convert to the conventional wisdom on climate change, had to grimace after tasting tea from a teapot that a young, supercilious environmentalist minder had deliberately avoided warming first. George Orwell, who gave a loving description of how to make a cup of tea, would be appalled; but he would be still more appalled about how Britons' minds have been colonised by the idea that they should feel guilty about the humble kettle.

Taking a leaf from Orwell, the great US sociologist William H Whyte first coined the phrase 'Groupthink' when writing for *Fortune* magazine in 1952. His 'working definition' was doubly pessimistic, but made a useful distinction all the same:

'We are not talking about mere instinctive conformity — it is, after all, a perennial failing of mankind. What we are talking about is a rationalised conformity — an open, articulate philosophy which holds that group values are not only expedient but right and good as well.'

Today's government search for consensus, social inclusion and state legitimation has led politicians to alight on personal responsibility for energy as a highly effective Groupthink for our times. On 2 June that 'rationalised conformity' led BBC2's *The Money Programme* to use computer animation to show, in a thoroughly dishonest fashion, massive cubes of carbon hovering above house upon house (14). In fact, nearly all the carbon emissions that are initiated by consumers in their homes are in fact generated outside the home, in power stations (15). Nor is it just tea-making and homes that are indicted. When the mother of the Hutchinson family of four filmed by the BBC had to drive to a local hospital in Teesdale, County Durham, because of a broken ankle, BBC auditors fearlessly computed and lamented the petrol she had used.

'In the long term', said David Miliband of his carbon emissions cards, 'there may be potential to make a system work effectively and in a way that is arguably more equitable, more empowering and more effective than the traditional tools of information, tax and regulation.' (16) Well, government mind and

body control through a terribly 'smart' card for wastrel consumers is indeed not a traditional tool. But maybe Miliband would do well not to forget a tool that is altogether missing from his list: technological innovation in the supply of energy.

References

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