

Submission for the Stern Review

Public Perceptions of the Economics and Politics of Climate Change

by

Sacha Kumaria & Peter Nolan, The Stockholm Network

One area of debate surrounding climate change - and effective responses to it - that remains largely overlooked is the state of public opinion on the issue. This has presumably occurred for a combination of reasons;

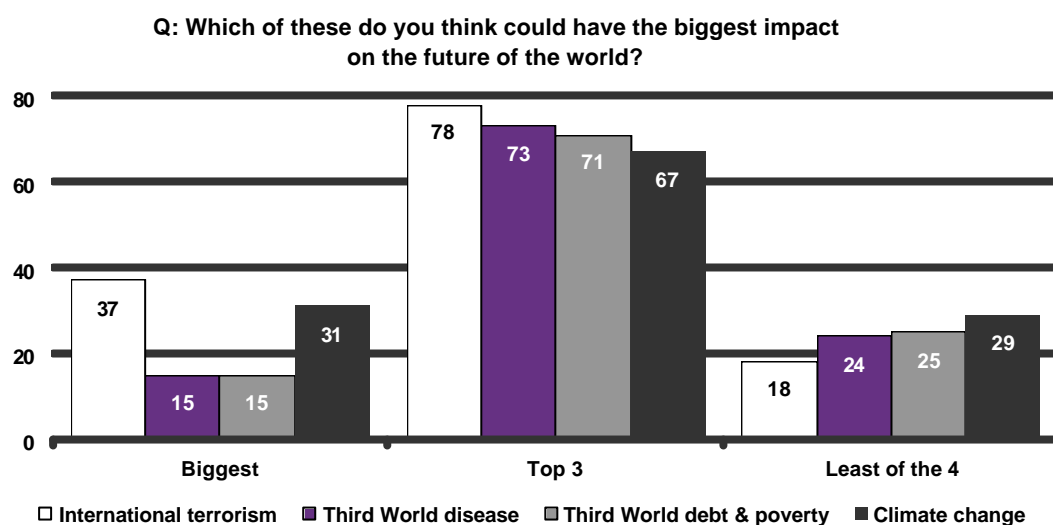
- The perception that the science of climate change is too complex for the public to understand, even in its conceptual form
- The global nature of climate change means treaties and international discussions take place one degree removed from national political debates, with the expected disengaging consequences
- Environmentalists, and 'climate change deniers' have long been considered to exist at their extreme respective ends of the political spectrum, far from the political consensus, and are thus relatively unattractive as a political constituency.

However, the constant media attention that climate change has received over the past few years has, contrary to the perception of the political class, allowed the public to gain a sophisticated understanding of the economics and politics of climate change, possible solutions to it, and more broadly, environmental issues in their broader political context.

In order to quantify this public understanding, the Stockholm Network commissioned Populus to undertake the most comprehensive environmental survey in Britain, to date last July. We have enclosed a summary of the results below, and attached the survey in full.

Putting the Environment in Perspective – Stockholm Network/Populus Poll

Presented with what might be called the four horsemen of the global apocalypse – international terrorism; climate change; poverty in developing countries; and Third World disease – 31% of Britons say that climate change is the worst of these, but when asked to name their top 3 threats it ranks fourth out of the four and is seen as the least potent threat by the greatest number of people (29%).

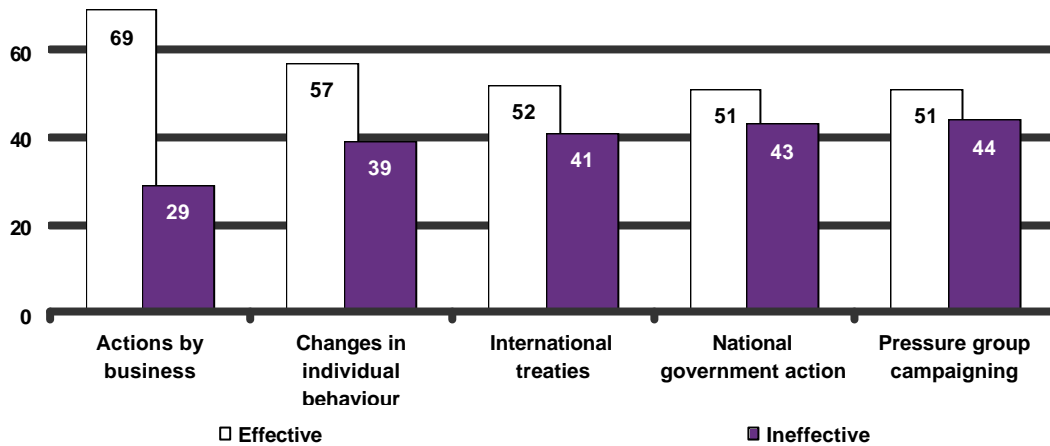


Availability Heuristics – Competing Priorities for Government

The fact that we live in a world of competing priorities is driven home by the results of an experiment in which Populus gave respondents a notional £100 to divide up between different global causes. International medical charities receive nearly £30 in this experiment and humanitarian or disaster relief nearly £28. By contrast, environmental pressure groups receive less than £18. Nor does spending other people’s money improve things very much. Repeating the experiment by asking respondents to divide up a £100 billion of public spending on global causes – the size of next year’s NHS budget – people would give more than £27 billion to improve access to medicines for the world’s poor and nearly £23 billion to reduce trade barriers against developing countries and to cancel third world debt ahead of spending £21 billion to help developing countries protect their environment.

But while climate change is only one competing global priority among many - and not the most important one at that – the public still believes that businesses are paying the issue insufficient attention. 75% believe that climate change is being ignored by business and this isn’t because it is a threat to be taken lightly - only 35% agree with the notion that pressure groups exaggerate the issue of climate change. Instead they are looking for business to take the lead, because they see them as the most effective agents in combating threats to the environment. More than two-thirds (69%) think this, ahead of the 57% who believe changes in individual behaviour are effective and around half of people who think the same of international treaties, national government action and pressure group campaigning.

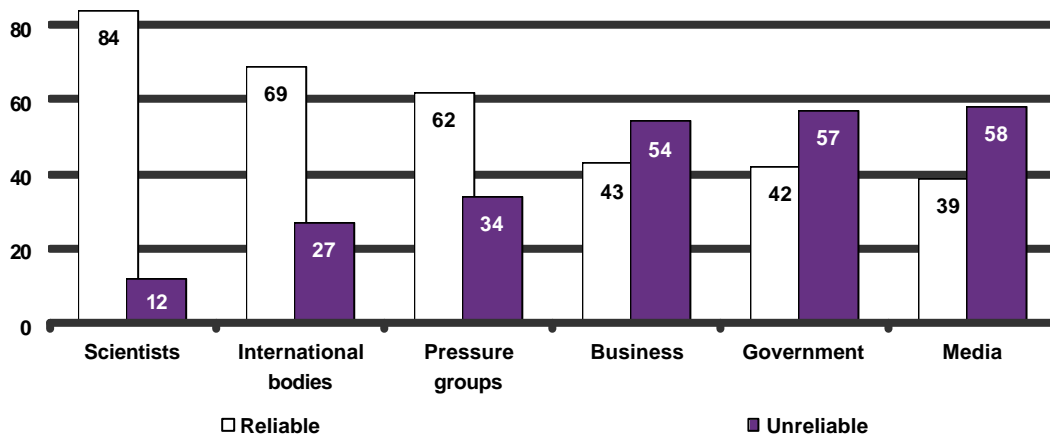
Q: How effective or ineffective are each of the following at combating threats to the environment?



Information, Action and Trust

As far as the public is concerned, then, business clearly has a leadership role to play but it also has a trust issue to address. Though more than two-fifths of people (43%) believe what enterprise has to say about the state of the environment, more than half (54%) do not. It is not alone in suffering from a trust deficit, so does the media and the Government. By contrast, while pressure groups and international bodies are seen as ineffective they are also viewed as relatively trustworthy, though scientists are trusted by more than anyone else.

Q: How reliable are the following sources of information concerning the state of the environment?



As a result, the public has an ambiguous attitude to the degree of encouragement that businesses require to innovate in this direction. Nearly three-quarters (73%) say that they should be forced to tackle climate change and yet three-fifths (62%) say that environmental protection shouldn't come at the expense of the UK economy.

Responses on Individual Responsibility

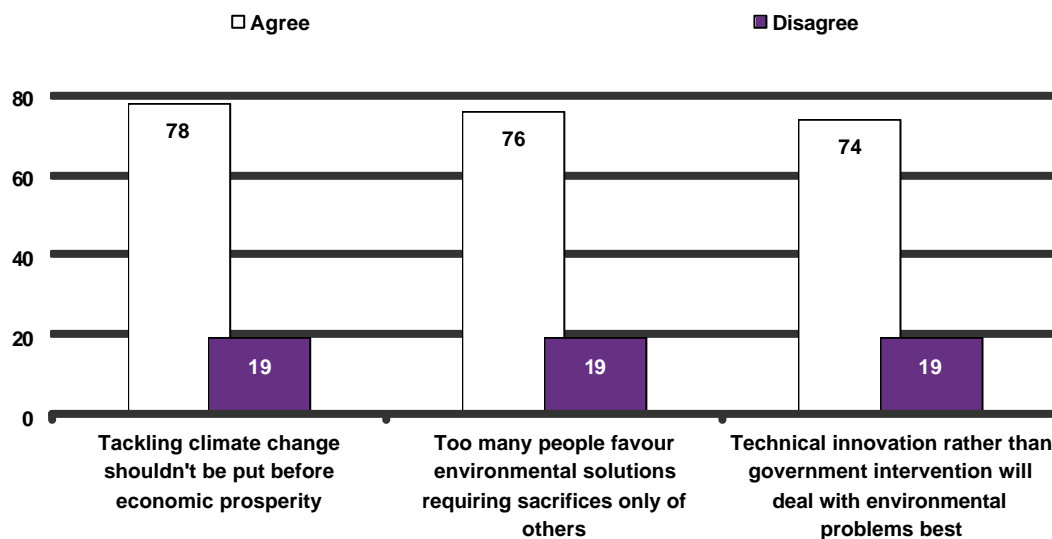
Instead they seem happier to take the initiative themselves in promoting a more environmentally-conscious outlook. 80% of people claim to have undertaken some sort of energy-saving measure in the last year. Chief among these is choosing brands and products which they perceive to be more environmentally-friendly, and which 60% claim to have done. Compared with the 10% who say they have attended meetings or demonstrations on issues related to the environment and the 8% who say they have written to their MP on the subject, most people clearly prefer the democracy of the marketplace to more traditional political forms.

The Nuclear Option

Perhaps this is because it seems like less of a sacrifice. Take the looming debate over whether to replace Britain's ageing fleet of nuclear power stations with a new generation of nuclear plants to help the country meet its target for reducing carbon emissions and to tackle our growing reliance on imported energy. The public is divided. Just under half (46%) are prepared to concede that new-build nuclear facilities may be necessary, but nearly as many (42%) would rather we missed our carbon targets than build more nuclear power stations.

Conclusions

In this there is a glimmer of self-recognition, reflected more widely when people are asked whether they agree or disagree that too many people favour environmental solutions that require sacrifices of others but not of themselves. Three quarters (78%) say this is true and similar numbers agree that, while important, tackling climate change shouldn't be put ahead of economic prosperity (76%) and that technological innovation rather than government intervention is the best way of dealing with future environmental challenges.



What emerges from this study overall is a fairly pragmatic approach from the British population at large. They take the challenge of protecting the environment seriously but when set alongside other domestic priorities like decent public services, a stable economy and personal safety it has to take its place behind them in the queue. Similarly on a global scale, tackling climate change must fall in behind the war on terror and compete for public attention with combating disease and poverty in developing nations.

People are suspicious about the effectiveness of governmental and even inter-governmental action on the environment but they are also sceptical of the degree to which businesses in general are prepared to face up to potential environment threats. Those companies that are willing to take the lead in addressing legitimate environmental concerns using market-based solutions that make business sense are likely to be rewarded by their customers.

Another wider message is that worrying for a liberal democracy is that, more so than any other area of public policy, the environment has become quite far removed from public opinion. For too long, environmental policy-making has been an ineffective reaction to lobbyists of all persuasions rather than being responsive to or unaligned with the public at large. And while this has had an undoubted input into government policy, it has not been persuasive to the public mind.

So what needs to be done to re-engage the public? In short, Britain's environmental policy needs re-balancing. It's time to re-engineer environmental policy on a pro-business, pro-technology and above all, a pro-environmental outcome line. In other words, wherever possible, we need to find environmental solutions that have the dual purpose of benefiting the economy and not harming the environment at the same time.

- Populus interviewed a random sample of 1,003 adults aged 18+ by telephone between July 25th & 26th 2005. Interviews were conducted across the country and the results have been weighted to be representative of all adults. Populus is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. For more details go to www.populuslimited.com

- The Stockholm Network is the leading pan-European think tank and market oriented network. It is a one-stop shop for organisations seeking to work with Europe's brightest policymakers and thinkers.