

How do we get people to buy into a rapidly contracting cap?

If there is to be any worthwhile response to the threat of climate change, people whose lifestyles are currently causing a lot of emissions are either going to have to decrease their direct and indirect use of fossil fuels by 90% over the next 40 years, or obtain the right to emit more from other people. The question is – how do they obtain that right? Do they use economic and military force to keep other people in poverty who then are unable to afford any significant fossil energy use at all, or do they pay others a fair price for their extra emissions?

It's not as though a low carbon world need be cold and bleak. As many researchers have shown, renewable energy used with greater efficiency can meet people's needs. Europe could phase out fossil fuels entirely by 2050 and still live at current German standards given significant changes in technology and priorities.

According to the UK Met Office, the 10 warmest years on record have all occurred in the last 12 years. Relentless media coverage of the climate threat has increased the public's awareness, but not yet affected its behaviour. The British opinion polls are strangely schizophrenic. A YouGov poll in early 2007 found that 74% of those interviewed were concerned about climate change but 63% opposed higher petrol taxes and 60% higher flight taxes.

So what will it take to get a majority of the higher energy using population to support the imposition of a declining cap on emissions for the next 40 years and more?

What has been missing from the climate debate so far is a comprehensive and equitable mechanism for sharing out the Earth's capacity to use fossil fuels, that ordinary people can understand and which also allows them the freedom to make decisions. That's what Cap and Share is, and does. It gives people control over their share of the limited CO₂ absorption resource. They can decide whether they want to be paid for their yearly share and sell their entitlement (in the form of "Production Authorisation Permits" (PAPs) required by the fossil fuel companies) or whether they will prevent their tonnage being emitted by tearing their certificates up. They can also decide how much fossil energy to use because C&S allows them to burn as much as they like provided they can afford it. And yet, remember,

there will still be an overall cap on emissions in place.

Another important factor in getting people to rally behind a proposal is the knowledge that it deals with most of the problem and will stand the test of time. Involvement matters too and, as the proposal is being implemented, people will want to hear about tangible results and to experience the personal and social benefits the new situation makes possible.

Here's how it might look with Cap and Share. Once a year there could be a big event, a kind of climate "Children in Need", timed to coincide with the arrival of everyone's PAP certificates. The media would carry programmes and articles explaining why the cap is needed and how it is being shared out for a better and fairer world. There would be information about the rising costs of carbon-intensive goods and advice on how to make your household more carbon efficient. And people would hold in their hands a tangible symbol of the mutual solution to the world's most pressing problem, their PAPs, theirs by right, to sell or to destroy.