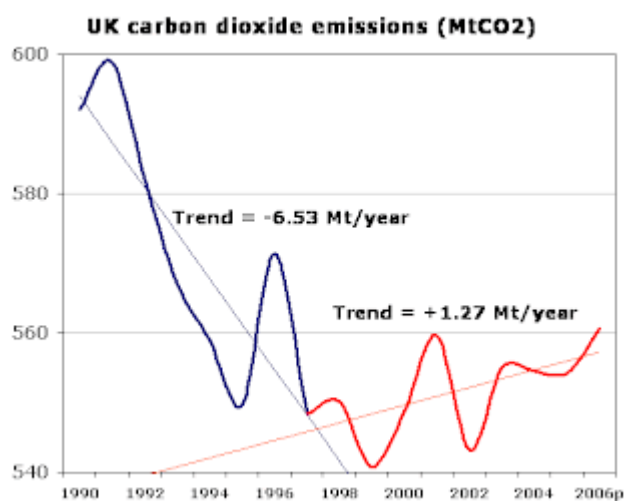


Rising emissions - words, deeds and the struggle to come



As one seasoned observer, who must remain anonymous, described Britain's approach to climate change, "*we have the best words in the world*". And, as an example, the Prime Minister's speeches on climate change really are quite brilliant [[example](#)]

So, what is the UK Government doing? We have led the world in setting a bold plan and targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Last week saw the release of provisional data for 2006. It shows a *rise* in UK carbon dioxide emissions [[announcement](#)] and ministers calling for more action on climate change [[release](#)]. What to make of this...?

Usually the data are plotted on charts with the y-axis from zero [[example](#)] thus obscuring the fine detail in the trends. It is interesting therefore to examine the data at a higher resolution, as in the chart above [[data from Defra](#)]. The chart plots CO₂ emissions and linear trend in two periods from 1990-1997 and from 1997-2006, reflecting recent political epochs.

In the earlier period, the trend (an annual decline of 6.5MtCO₂) is driven by the '[dash for gas](#)' dramatically reducing coal-burn in the power sector - a unit of electricity produced by a new gas turbine creates about 60% less CO₂ than the equivalent from the existing coal power stations.

The trend since 1997 has been rising (annually at 1.3 MtC). Coal use increased again as did the underlying drivers of CO₂ growth, with affluence driving consumption and mobility, which have overpowered technical efficiency, decarbonisation, offshoring of heavy industry and policy interventions. At first the resurgence of coal was deliberate policy: a 1997 moratorium on new gas-fired

stations was one of the first energy policies of the new Labour government in response to a 'crisis' in the coal industry [see [Trade and Industry Committee analysis](#)]. Now the trend to coal is driven by high gas prices and energy security concerns, with huge brand new coal stations now seeking licenses - see [RWE in Essex](#) and [E.ON in Kent](#).

Some stark observations about where we are and where we need to be:

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- If we were on a straight line from 1990 to the 2050 goal of a 60% cut in CO2 emissions, the 2006 figure should be 497 Mt, but we are at 560 Mt - *and therefore we are already 63Mt or 11 years adrift.*
- Even the straight line from 1990 would require an annual cut of 5.9 MtC, but from where we are now the straight line path would need an annual cut of 7.4 MtC to catch up and meet the target - this is more than was achieved in the dash for gas era, and this would need to be sustained for the next 44 years.
- Friends of the Earth and others are campaigning for an annual 3% cut in emissions [see [The Big Ask](#)]: that would mean a reduction of 16.8 MtC next year - almost 3 times the rate of reduction achieved during the dash for gas.
- In fact, 3% annual reduction in emissions from now would give emissions in 2050 that were 75% below 1990 levels - this is beyond the government's target but is likely to be the minimum needed to achieve a global reduction consistent with avoiding dangerous climate change with rich countries taking on greater 'burdens' in the cuts.
- To achieve a 60% cut using a geometric rather than straight-line path would require a 2% year on year cut, starting with a 10.9 MtC reduction for 2007.

Conclusion

We have great words on climate change, but emissions are still rising when they should be falling - *and falling at rates unprecedented in history*. New measures like the Climate Change Bill and emissions trading system can make a difference, but they are only as effective as the budget, caps and implementing measures. Despite all the words and policy, the market conditions for power-sector investors say "build coal", so it's not obvious how we will reach the new rapidly decreasing emissions trajectory without doing something dramatically different and

ambitious.