

The Big Ask Campaign

A brief history of the campaign for a new climate change law

The campaign for a Climate Change Bill was initiated by Friends of the Earth through The Big Ask campaign. The campaign was launched in 2005 to secure new legislation which would require successive Government's to cut the UK's total carbon dioxide emissions by at least three per cent every year (www.thebigask.com).

There is now a huge coalition of organisations, politicians and political parties calling for a new climate change law which will require the Government to make annual cuts in UK carbon dioxide emissions.

Friends of the Earth is delighted that the Government has agreed to introduce a climate change Bill. However it needs to be strengthened if it is to deliver the cuts in emissions which the science says is needed.

Here are some key events in the campaign for a new climate change law.

Early 2005

It was becoming increasingly apparent that Government efforts to tackle climate change were failing. Despite two (and eventually three) manifesto pledges to cut carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent (of 1990 levels) by 2010, and commitments for a 60% cut by 2050, since 2003 emissions have actually been higher than when Labour came to power in 1997.

Ongoing failure to cut emissions not only leaves less time to meet the targets set, it also means that even greater cuts are necessary. Carbon dioxide persists in the atmosphere for around 100 years, so the severity of climate change in 2050 will be determined by the total emissions by then, not just those in 2050. Thus there is a limit to the amount of carbon dioxide we can emit in the first half of this century if we are not to breach the two degrees Celsius limit that scientists warn could lead to even more dangerous climate changes taking place. Setting a target for just one or two years cannot ensure we keep the total emissions within this limit. Instead a plan or "carbon budget" is needed to determine how much carbon we should emit in each year – and if we breach this amount one year we will have to make it with a corresponding undershoot in another.

So with long-term targets neither meeting the scientific need, nor focussing the minds of politicians, Friends of the Earth decided to launch The Big Ask campaign for new legislation that would require the Government to cut emissions every year by three per cent, to ensure the UK lives within its share of the global limit. Such an approach also had the further benefit that it would give confidence to businesses and investors to back new, low-carbon technologies and solutions that will be required to tackle climate change – safe in the knowledge that governments would sustain the battle against climate change over the medium to long term.

7 April 2005

Following discussions between Friends of the Earth, former Conservative Environment Minister John Gummer, former Labour Environment Minister Michael Meacher and then Lib Dem Environment spokesman Norman Baker, a Presentation Bill is introduced to Parliament by the three MPs, setting out a Bill to combat climate

change by setting annual targets for the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions until 2050. There is no debate and no vote and Parliament is shortly dissolved ahead of the General Election.

25 May 2005

Friends of the Earth launched The Big Ask climate campaign (www.thebigask.com), with Radiohead front man Thom Yorke, calling for the introduction of a climate change law that commits the UK to cutting its emissions by 3 per cent year on year [2]. The campaign was launched with a new cinema ad and opinion poll which revealed that 73 per cent don't think that the Government is doing enough to tackle climate change.

At the same time a Parliamentary petition (Early Day Motion 178) [3] was put down calling for new legislation "so that annual cuts in carbon dioxide emissions of 3 per cent can be delivered in a framework that includes regular reporting and new scrutiny and corrective processes."

Friends of the Earths local groups swing into action organizing events and activities to raise awareness and support for The Big Ask amongst the general public and MPs.

13 July 2005

A coalition of groups and MPs, coordinated by Friends of the Earth, launch details of the proposed new law to MPs and journalists [4]. The coalition, which also includes Help the Aged, the Association for the Conservation of Energy, Christian Aid and WWF-UK argues that without a legal framework, the UK will fail to make the essential year-on-year cuts in emissions of greenhouse gases.

By now over 200 MPs have added their support to the campaign by signing EDM 178.

29 July 2005

A coalition of energy companies and environmental groups write to PM demanding action on climate change. Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace are joined by the UK Business Council for Sustainable Energy and eight energy companies including United Utilities and British Gas to demand the Government puts its words into action. The letter calls on Government to "...quote about annual targets" to give businesses the certainty they require to invest in low carbon technologies.

1 March 2006

The Stop Climate Chaos coalition, which includes Friends of the Earth, hosts a 'Carbon Speed Dating' event in Westminster where 70 MPs are lobbied by their constituents to back calls for Chancellor Gordon Brown to deliver a Carbon Budget to cut the UK's greenhouse gas emissions by 3 percent every year [5]. The event is attended by David Cameron, Margaret Beckett (then Environment Secretary) and Sir Menzies Campbell.

28 March 2006

The Government publishes a review of its failing climate change strategy. Even with its revised strategy, the Government admits that it will fail to keep its promise of

cutting carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent by 2010. It now suggests that it could cut emissions by 15-18 per cent [6].

1 May 2006

Radiohead's Thom Yorke and Jonny Greenwood play The Big Ask concert in London in support of the Climate Change Bill campaign. The gig is attended by Conservative leader David Cameron, and soon-to-be Environment Secretary David Miliband (7). By now 100,000 people have asked their MP to support a strong Climate Change Bill through The Big Ask Campaign. 300 MPs said yes and signed EDM 178.

1 September 2006

Conservative leader David Cameron shares a platform with Friends of the Earth director Tony Juniper and calls for a climate change law to be included in the next Queen's Speech [8].

380 MPs have now backed The Big Ask and signed EDM 178.

Mid September 2006

Friends of the Earth launches a big push on the climate change bill to target as many MPs as possible to get them to sign EDM 178 and to write to the Prime Minister calling for new legislation on climate change. Over the coming weeks almost every single MP (620 out of a total of 646 MPs) are lobbied personally by constituents who back the Climate Change Bill campaign.

15 September 2006

New research by the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research at the University of Manchester, commissioned by Friends of the Earth and the Co-operative Bank warns that the Government has only four years to implement a major new programme of action to cut carbon emissions if the UK is to play its part in keeping global temperatures below danger levels. The research also set out solutions – what needs to be done and when to keep temperatures below danger levels [9].

12 October 2006

David Miliband, Environment Secretary, signals that the Government will introduce legislation to tackle climate change [10].

23 October 2006

Friends of the Earth analysis of energy figures for the first six months of 2006 reveals that carbon dioxide emissions are still rising. Over 400 MPs have now backed The Big Ask by signing EDM 178 [11].

25 October

David Cameron steps up the pressure on the Prime Minister to introduce annual carbon emission reduction targets by publishing a model climate change bill for the government to adopt [13]. 99 MPs from all parties write to the Times calling for a Climate Bill.

30 October

The Stern review warns of the huge economic costs of failing to tackle climate change [14]. Soon after David Miliband says that climate change legislation will form a fundamental part of the UK's strategy to tackle climate change and address the issues raised by the Stern Review [15].

4 November

Over 25,000 people attend the Stop Climate Chaos event in Trafalgar Square to call for urgent action on climate change – including a new law requiring annual cuts in carbon dioxide. This is the biggest climate change event ever in the UK [16].

15 November 2006

The Government announces the introduction of a Climate Change Bill in the Queen's Speech.

By now 130,000 people have asked their MP have added their support to The Big Ask and 412 MPs have backed a strong Bill – 64 percent of MPs overall and a majority in every party sitting in Parliament.

13 March 2007

The Government publishes its draft climate change bill.

May 2007

Johnny Borrell, Razorlight front man Johnny Borrell records an exclusive new track - called Funeral Blues – in support of The Big Ask.

July 2007

Jude Law, Helen Blaxendale and others help launch The Big Ask Online March. The march allows people to send a video message about climate change direct to their MP.

More than 170,000 people have backed The Big Ask.

September 2007

Friends of the Earth launches 'The Big Ask - Big Push.' Groups and supporters organise events and activities across the country to highlight the need for a stronger Bill.

24 September 2007

Gordon Brown announces that he will ask the new independent climate change committee to report on whether the target for cutting the UK's emissions by 60 per cent by 2050 should be strengthened

Notes

[1] <http://www.defra.gov.uk/news/latest/2006/climate-1030.htm>

- [2] http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/press_releases/new_campaign_for_climate_c_24052005.htm
- [3] <http://edmi.parliament.uk/EDMi/EDMDetails.aspx?EDMID=28373>
- [4] http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/press_releases/uk_needs_new_climate_chang_12072005.html
- [5] http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/press_releases/mps_go_carbon_dating_to_st_01032006.html
- [6] <http://www.defra.gov.uk/news/2006/060328a.htm>
- [7] http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/press_releases/75_percent_back_new_climat_28042006.html
- [8] http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/press_releases/cameron_backs_new_climate_01092006.html
- [9] http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/press_releases/uks_first_climate_road_map_14092006.html
- [10] <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/green/story/0,,1921454,00.html>
- [11] http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/press_releases/uk_carbon_emissions_still_20102006.html
- [12] http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/press_releases/public_says_politicians_mu_24102006.html
- [13] http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/press_releases/conservative_announcement_25102006.html
- [14] http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/newsroom_and_speeches/press/2006/press_stern_06.cfm
- [15] <http://www.defra.gov.uk/news/latest/2006/climate-1030.htm>
- [16] http://www.icount.org.uk/news/i_count_media/news_releases_i_count/125.asp