



A swing to the right may not bring changes in energy policy

David Cameron may not need convincing on climate change, but just how many of the new generation of Conservative MPs will share his concerns?

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I can read opinion polls. Over the past year, every single one has pointed to the likelihood that, after May's General Election, there will be more Conservative MPs than from any other political party.

I can also read the science. This shows, beyond reasonable doubt, that the threat of accelerating climate change is very real. And that it is necessary to make significant alterations to the way we do things to minimise the likely deleterious effects.

The leaders of the three main political parties, and their energy and environment spokesmen, are at one in stressing the seriousness and the urgency of adopting policies to address this threat. During the forthcoming election campaign, I can confidently predict that the only dissension between the relevant senior party figures will be regarding who would adopt the most effective policies to minimise the impact of changing our climate.

So there is no significant dispute about the importance of this matter?

bottom, trailing all the others.

With an average score of just 2.8, 'reducing Britain's carbon footprint' was deemed to be way less important than any other issue. Law and order, the economy and European Union-bashing ranked very high in the respondents' priorities. So for that matter did "more help for marriage". Or "protecting the English (sic) countryside". All had significantly more support as a priority for Conservative legislators.

In the end just eight out of 141 prospective Conservative MPs (5 per cent) appear to regard climate change as a five-star, top-ranking issue. This is a very sobering statistic.

During this parliament, party leader David Cameron has been at pains to emphasise his personal concerns about the threat of climate change. This is a very different stance to the one he took in 2005, when he was given the job by his predecessor, Michael Howard, of editing the Conservative manifesto. Then he carefully excised all the radical ideas

Conservative supporting think tank, Policy Exchange. Last autumn they were due to launch a pre-Copenhagen climate summit report with policy recommendations. It never appeared then. At the time of writing, it still hasn't.

However sincere may now be the convictions of party leader David Cameron and his energy and climate change spokesman, Greg Clark, they may well be leaders without too many followers. As the editor of the Conservativehome website Timothy Montgomerie is quoted in the *Financial Times* as warning: "I am confident the climate change sceptics are going to win. It is for Cameron to decide how he is going to get out of this. But he has lost the battle already."

Is Montgomerie's view a triumph of hope over expectation? Certainly another survey, on this website of party members, found three-quarters believing that energy prices are likely to be a far bigger political issue than climate change during the next Parliament.

Meanwhile, two senior Conservative MPs with strong environmental and energy efficiency credentials are stepping down, former environment secretary John Gummer and former shadow secretary Peter Ainsworth. Their wise counsel will be lost.

Among the intake of new Conservative MPs since 1997, few have evinced much interest in ecological issues, let alone sought to address the magnitude of the impact upon our daily lives that dealing effectively with climate change will need to have. Or even more serious detrimental effects that will occur if no serious attempts are made to ameliorate it.

The greatest of leaders are prepared to lead, in trust that their supporters will follow in their wake. At present, those who do regard 'reducing Britain's carbon footprint' as a five-star issue may be trusting too much in the leadership qualities on offer to the British people this May. ●

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Is this purely a managerial issue now? My concern is not with the party leaders. It is with the followers. More precisely, it is the lack of traction the climate change issue now has among those likely to be taking their seats as Conservative MPs after May.

Conservativehome is a very influential right-wing website. It just polled 250 Tory candidates in the party's most winnable seats: 144 responded. Each was given a list of 19 different public policy priorities. The candidates were asked to rank each from 1 to 5 in levels of importance. There was no limit to the number of issues which could receive five points. Nonetheless there was one issue which came far and away

for combating climate change put forward by the party's then environment spokesman, Tim Yeo.

But undoubtedly over the past five years, the scientific consensus regarding the dangers posed by accelerating climate change has become even stronger – even while the noise promoted by scientific illiterates has increased in volume.

During that period a myriad number of publications have been issued on the topic. Strangely mute on the entire subject have been all the various think-tanks positioned to the right of centre of UK politics – in strict contrast to the numbers emanating from Labour and LibDem-oriented organisations. An exception is the most respected