

Beyond climate hubris

An open letter to Chris Huhne calls for a new pragmatic approach to rebuild public trust

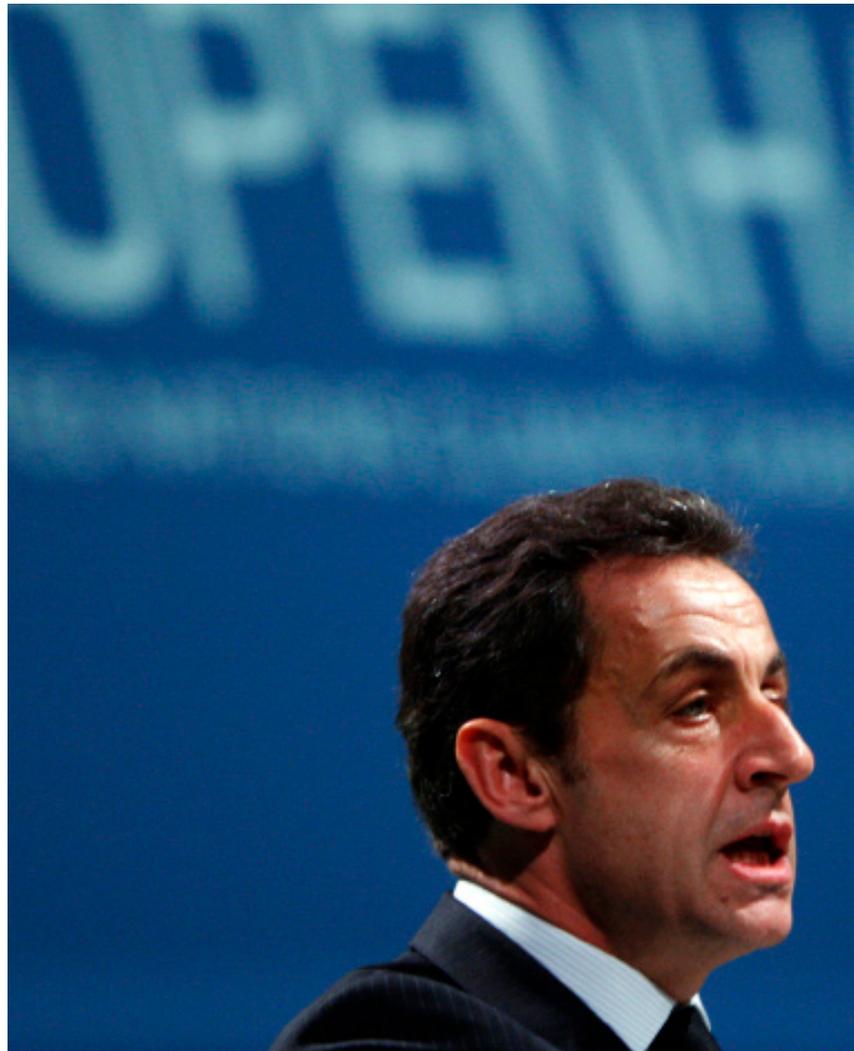
BY GWYN PRINS

Chris Huhne, isn't it? Congratulations on your appointment to the Department of Energy and Climate Change with its dramatically daunting agenda, starting with the overriding electoral imperative to keep the lights on in a country with an incoherent energy strategy. The figures which stick in my mind are that during January 4-7, with high pressure stable over the country and the highest peak electricity demand in the coldest winter for 30 years, wind power contributed 0.6 per cent to the Grid. The Grid issued only its second-ever Gas Balancing Alert to divert gas to power stations and the coal stations were ramped up to 43 per cent. I witnessed at first hand the South African electricity supply crisis escalate between 2006-08 and you will know soon, if your officials haven't already briefed you, how swiftly and decisively Pretoria batted aside its anti-nuclear and green opponents, advanced its nuclear construction with Chinese help and increased its coal stockpiles.

I don't suppose that on the morning of May 11 you expected to be where you are sitting as you read this? Frankly, my 13 co-authors around the world and I were also taken by surprise. We had not intended either to launch our collective analysis of what to do about the other side of your portfolio on what, thanks to the creation of the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition, became for other stories (like ours) the worst news day in Britain in decades. (You can find a condensation of our case, by Professors Mike Hulme of the University of East Anglia and Steve Rayner of Oxford, and me, on the *Standpoint* website.)

That said, *The Hartwell Paper* in multiple translated editions, has been making good headway. It led the news in Finland on publication day. In The Netherlands, it was described as a fundamental paradigm shift. There has been good coverage in German-speaking countries, despite the denouement of the euro crisis. This month, in Rome, there will be a seminar with your Italian counterpart to consider its proposals, and briefings will occur also in New York and on Capitol Hill. More briefings in Tokyo, Geneva and elsewhere, including in your shiny old haunt on Rue Wiertz at the European Parliament, will take place as the early summer rolls on.

In Britain, despite media preoccupation with the novel experience of coalition-making, we much appreciated the thoughtful online review by the *Economist* on May 11. It grasped the essence of our message to you and to others charged with responsibility for this puzzling and troubled thing called "climate change" policy. The BBC Radio 4 *Costing the Earth* programme on May 12 also devoted itself to our arguments on how not to waste this good crisis.



We recognise that it is always easier to admit to error once a realistic alternative is in view. Now that we Hartwellites (as the *Economist* calls our new tribe) have brought together for the first time in one place, to our knowledge, a scientifically literate, politically attractive and economically pragmatic outline of what a department like yours could start to do differently tomorrow morning that *might actually work*, we also invite calm acceptance that the conventional wisdom and strategies that you have inherited are conceptually broken, have never worked and never will. There is also a bad psychological defect. It is not clever politics to frame policy around not only a catastrophising narrative but also atonement for human sinfulness. Hectoring people irritates them. The Hartwellites seek to raise human dignity. We wish to animate virtues in the human spirit as well as to ride the politically indispensable locomotive of enlightened self-interest.

In Oliver Cromwell's famous words, we plead that your officials consider, in the bowels of Christ, that they may be mistaken. No doubt in good faith, Britain led the world into legislating on the narrative of catastrophic climate emergency during its apogee years of 2005-09 and on the flawed principles of top-down timetables, targets and trading that crashed at Copenhagen last December. If you haven't, you should listen to *Der Spiegel's* secret tape of the heads of state failing. (It was Nicolas Sarkozy calling the Chinese hypocrites that really did it.) So would it not be a splendid early tonic for the Con-Lib coalition if Britain could find the courage to admit error, correct that error and become one of those countries that lead the way out of the wreckage, rather than go on head-banging?

That is why, having described the Crash of 2009 in bare detail, *The Hartwell Paper* does not dwell on the errors of the past about which I and many of my colleagues warned before and while they were being committed. Humbly but firmly, we stand on our track record of successful analysis and hope that you find that reassuring as we invite you now to accept other startling propositions which



Peking ducked: Nicolas Sarkozy blamed the Chinese for the failure of last year's Copenhagen conference; others blamed him

run counter to the conventional wisdom. Our main business is with the opportunities of the future.

Our case is that it is now plain on the face of the facts that it is not possible to have a “climate policy” that has emissions reductions as the all-encompassing goal. However, there are many other reasons why the decarbonisation of the global economy is highly desirable. Therefore, the paper advocates a radical reframing—an inverting—of approach: accepting that decarbonisation will only be achieved successfully as a benefit contingent upon other goals which are politically attractive and relentlessly pragmatic. The paper explains how the global economy can be moved away from its dependence on fossil fuels in harmony with economic recovery and with public approval, whereas the conventional wisdom bangs its head against both. The paper sets out access, sustainability and resilience goals. It also makes the case for vigorous and early action on non-CO₂ climate-forcing agents such as black carbon and tropospheric ozone. Why direct policy to the hardest 45 per cent of human forcing agents when we could start with the easier 55 per cent? It then argues for rebuilding of public trust via successful improvements in energy efficiency and new energy technology innovation in decarbonised energy supply funded by a low hypothecated (dedicated) carbon tax. We know that Treasuries hate hypothecation because it affronts their powers. That’s why we like it. In its February Budget, the Indian government blazed a trail which you too could follow. By the way, for the avoidance of misunderstanding, we have found it necessary to emphasise that ours is a tax explicitly *not* intended to alter behaviour: just to raise money without consumers feeling it.

Unless fractured public trust is rebuilt after “Climategate” and Copenhagen, nothing can be done. Current policies fail because they are back to front, politically and technologically. They also misinterpret the core message that scientific research on climate

issues gives to policymakers, which is part of the message of “Climategate” and to which I’ll return below.

How to achieve all this? That is where Capability Brown is our guide and here is how *The Economist* describes the strategy: “Brown eschewed long straight drives that took the visitor directly from the edge of a property to the house...He preferred people to travel along winding ‘lines of grace’ and ‘lines of beauty’...‘Lose the object and draw nigh obliquely,’ he is said to have said.”

And the Hartwellites’ pragmatic policy point from this? *The Economist* explains: “Taking the climate itself as the object of policy, and making a beeline for a climate endpoint that you have been told is desirable...is an approach which has failed to have much practical impact to date...To make progress one needs to follow a more roundabout route.” Our solutions are no Grand Bargain, no Great Design. They are clumsy solutions that make people cheerful; and that is a key virtue in them.

Personally, I believe that you can no more have a department of “climate change” than King Canute could have one of tidal reversal. It betrays an astonishingly hubristic overestimate of what governments can do, more common on the Left than the Right, of course. So it is greatly to be welcomed that a more modest assessment of what government can and should do is a general maxim of the Con-Lib coalition and is also a view that you have espoused in the past. For it is especially vital for everyone in your department to understand this. When confronting open, complex adaptive Earth systems of which humankind can only—and does only—possess incomplete understanding, we ignore the Iron Law of Unintended Consequence at our peril. Doing so during the last decade is an underlying reason why Britain now has no coherent energy strategy. So it is gratifying that the section of *The Hartwell Paper* which explains what science is most reliably able to contribute to the debate about anthropogenic global warming has been particularly welcomed by several science journalists.

The point has general purchase across Whitehall which has become addicted in recent times to regarding reified “science” as a normative “driver” of policy when in truth it can be no such thing. When I hear pretensions of “horizon scanning”, I reach for my revolver—and coming shortly, some intellectual Semtex. In fields like Earth systems, the most precious contribution of science recently has been to *increase* uncertainty, not to erase it. You need officials to tell you what they know that they don’t know more than what they speculate that they do. Knowledge of ignorance, Socrates observed, is the beginning of wisdom; and the urgency of that insight is now acute.

The Hartwell Paper has not been universally welcomed. An academic colleague who is a Greenpeace adviser (although not identified as such in the article) was quoted prominently in some BBC coverage darkly criticising the fact that we received some of our funding for the exercise from Japanese industry. Indeed we did. And one of the co-authors is the climate policy expert for the Japanese steel industry whose world-leading data we employed in the paper. We also received support from a prominent left-wing American charitable foundation, by the way, which wasn’t mentioned. I am tired of this lazy innuendo and as a group we rebut it directly. I would suggest that any policy analysis of this sort which does *not* engage directly with industry is thereby diminished. Industry was not present at the making of the Kyoto methodology and that is maybe one reason why it was flawed from birth. It was not party to the concept and, despite gallons of greenwash, has been mostly in reactive, tax-avoidance mode when not looking for dodgy profits to be made from creative emissions-trading scams. This is neither productive nor necessary.

We have never met, but I first encountered you 25 years ago as author with Harold Lever of a short and astringent Penguin book called *Debt and Danger*, on an earlier financial crisis. I used it when supervising undergraduates in Cambridge and can tell you that they too appreciated its clarity. So I know that you can recognise a crisis when you meet one, and can analyse it quickly and creatively. Sudden circumstance has dropped you into a corker of a crisis now. But as the Hartwellites write, this is a good crisis not to waste. One for all and all for one! We are more numerous than the Musketeers, and the Hartwellites stand ready at your service. **U**

