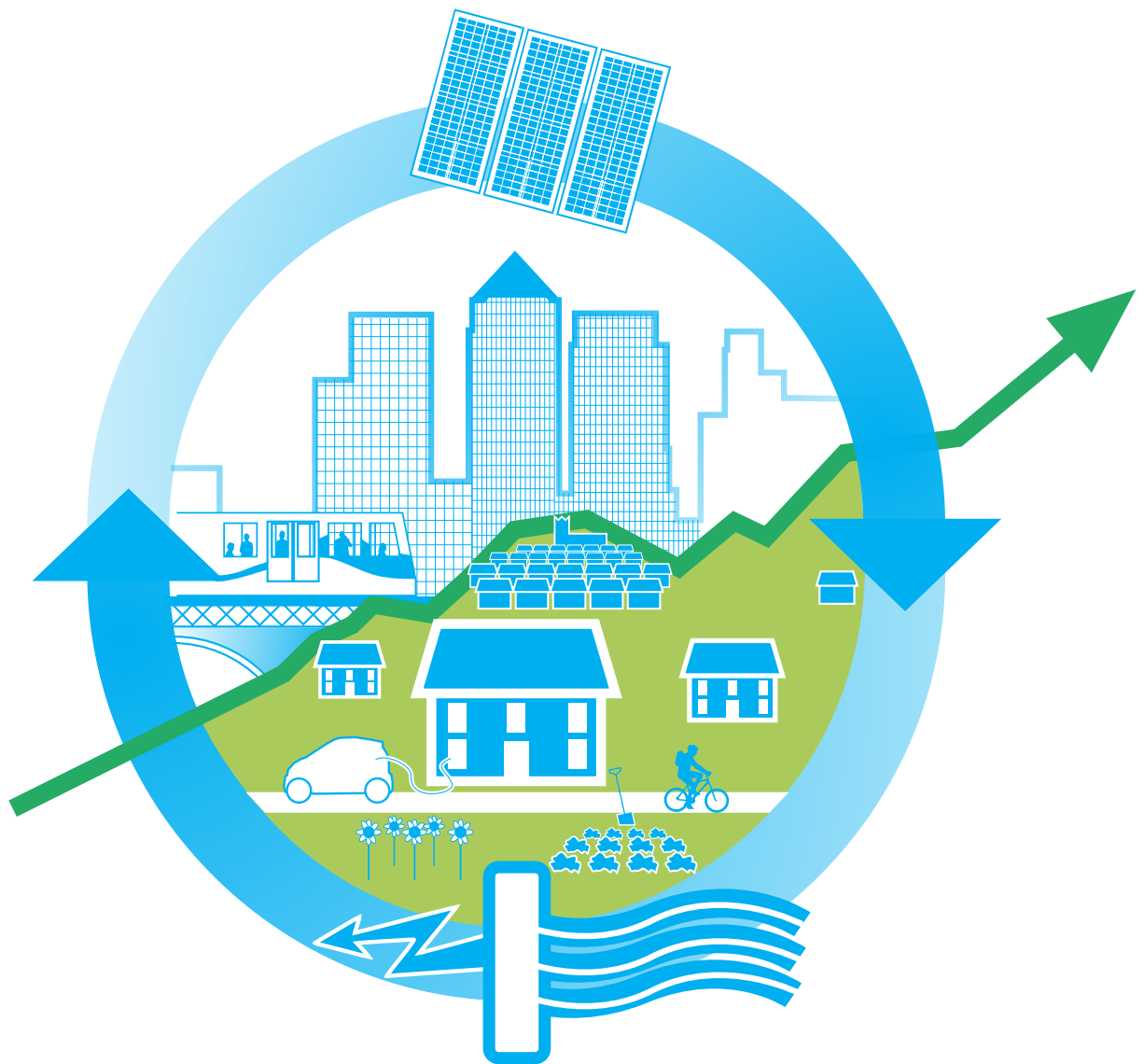


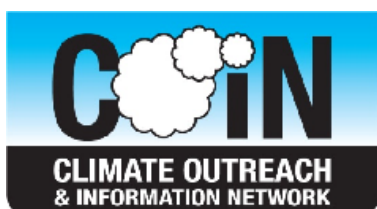
A new conversation with the centre-right about climate change:

Values, frames and narratives



Adam Corner

Climate Outreach & Information Network



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About COIN

The Climate Outreach & Information Network (COIN) is a charity that engages people from different backgrounds to understand and take action on climate change. We have established a reputation as leading specialists on climate change communication, and we work to develop meaningful narratives about climate change that engage a wide range of different people and organisations. Using our unique position as a bridge between research and practitioners, we translate academic knowledge on climate change communication and tailor it to the needs of a wide range of audiences, including NGOs, policy-makers and community groups. Through research, consultancy, training and workshops we disseminate the most effective methods of communicating about climate change.

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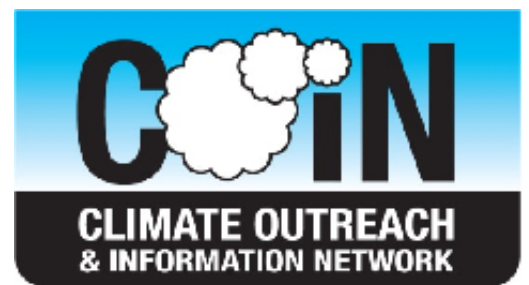
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Contents

Executive summary	2
Foreword	3
1. Introduction: Climate change: A communication deadlock on the centre-right?	4
The need for new narratives on climate change	5
2. Understanding public opinion and scepticism on the centre-right	8
Public opinion on climate change	8
Scepticism about climate change on the centre-right	9
3. Values & Frames: reclaiming climate change for the centre-right	12
Values of the centre-right and values for sustainability	12
How do values for sustainability and the values of the centre-right overlap?	14
4. New narratives for the centre-right	16
Localism	16
Energy Security	18
The Green Economy & 'New Environmentalism'	20
The 'Good Life'	22
5. New social norms and new heroes	23
6. Conclusion	26
Endnotes	28

Executive Summary

This report takes the first steps towards developing a better understanding of how to engage centre-right citizens on climate change.

At the end of 2012, a roundtable meeting with some of the UK's leading experts on communicating climate change to centre-right audiences was convened. In the words of one meeting participant, climate change must break out of its left-wing ghetto in order for a new, meaningful conversation with the centre-right to begin.

Climate change must break out of its left-wing ghetto in order for a new, meaningful conversation with the centre-right to begin

Responding directly to the issues raised in the roundtable meeting, the central argument of this report is that there is no necessary contradiction between the values of the centre-right and the challenge of responding to climate change. But until now the issue has not been framed in a way that resonates with centre-right citizens.

To engage this group more effectively, communicators need to drop the language and narratives of environmentalism that have only ever appealed to a minority of people. Climate change must become something that everyone has a stake in. A new conversation with the centre-right about climate change should begin with the values and concerns that this audience holds, and build a bridge between these and the values of a sustainable society.

This report summarises and condenses a growing body of academic and policy research on climate change communication into a set of principles, recommendations and core messages for beginning a meaningful conversation about climate change with centre-right audiences. It is aimed at anyone – left or right – who seeks to engage citizens with centre-right views on climate and energy issues: campaigners, politicians, community organisers and business leaders.

Following a general introduction to the topic, it is divided into the following sections:

- Understanding public opinion and scepticism on the centre-right
- Values and frames for communicating climate change
- New narratives and language for the centre-right
- New heroes and social norms for climate change communication

*Localism
Energy Security
The Green Economy
The Good Life*

The report identifies four narratives for engaging centre-right audiences more effectively: localism; energy security; the green economy/'new' environmentalism and the Good Life. It sets out why these ways of framing the issue are more likely to resonate with the values of political conservatives, and the sorts of words and phrases that could be used in beginning a conversation with this audience.

There is no inherent reason why climate change and the centre-right should be incompatible. However, there is a vacuum where a coherent and compelling conservative narrative on climate change should be. This report points to the ways of framing the issue that are more likely to resonate with the values of centre-right audiences – lifting climate change out of its left-wing ghetto, and into the mainstream.

Foreword

At COIN, we believe that communication is key to catalysing action on climate change. It is an issue that transcends politics: something that people of all political stripes – left, right or centre – have a stake in. Unfortunately climate change has become increasingly marginalised as an issue, considered as the preserve of the left of politics and associated with particular environmental ideas and values.

This groundbreaking report is an offer to broaden out the conversation about climate change, to reach out to the wide range of actors – whether campaigners, policy makers or community and business leaders – who want to engage centre-right audiences more effectively. It is a challenge to all those who have championed the issue and an opportunity for those who have so far felt it is not for them.

It is in no-one's interest for the issue of climate change to be predominantly 'owned' by one group or another. This report argues that climate change must be re-framed so that it resonates with the values of the centre-right – it is not an argument for persuading conservatives into accepting established positions. While there may be differences in opinion around the policy implications of climate change, there can be little argument with the idea that a wider audience needs to be engaged to create effective action.

Beginning a conversation is key – we certainly don't have all the answers but we have made a start. We have asked the people who have practical experience of the challenges of climate change communication on the centre-right and we have reviewed the available evidence from the academic literature and civil society. Our strategy goes beyond simple social marketing. Whilst this may be appealing in the short-term, the evidence suggests that a more holistic approach is needed – starting with the values of the centre-right but building bridges between these values and those of a sustainable society.

I hope you find this report a catalyst for engaging citizens with centre-right views and values on climate change. Please do contact us and tell us what you think of it – we welcome collaboration and believe it is absolutely central to taking this critical issue forward.



Jamie Clarke
Executive Director, COIN

1. Climate change: A communication deadlock on the centre-right?

Roundtable voices

The meeting was held under Chatham House rules, which means that no comments or views can be attributed to any particular individual, and no minutes of the meeting were taken. However, unattributed quotes from meeting participants will appear in this sidebar throughout the report

In 2008, with an almost unanimous cross-party consensus, the UK Climate Change Act was passed, giving the country the most ambitious legally-binding targets for reducing levels of carbon dioxide emissions in the world.¹ In 2010, when the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition took power, the Prime Minister David Cameron pledged that his would be the ‘greenest government ever,’ leaning strongly on green rhetoric.²

Although the UK’s climate change legislation is (for now) still safely in place, government rhetoric on climate change and the environment has undergone a drastic shift. There is a risk that if the centre-right does not develop an effective and coherent narrative on climate change, the cross-party consensus on climate change in the UK will begin to unravel.

Confronted with a stagnant economy, the Treasury is widely viewed as an obstacle to progress on climate change in the UK. Chancellor George Osborne has repeatedly signalled that he views investment in green issues as something that cannot be allowed to conflict with the more important goal of economic growth – despite the evidence that ‘green jobs’ are one of the few areas of the economy that have remained buoyant during an extended period of recession.³

With senior Coalition figures mostly silent on the issue, backbench Conservative MPs have expressed their outright opposition to many of the Coalition’s climate and energy policies.⁴ The small but influential Global Warming Policy Foundation (GWPF), led by Conservative peer Nigel Lawson, has continued to spread its messages of uncertainty and inaction externally through the media and internally through the Conservative Party. Critics of onshore wind have occupied senior positions of responsibility in both the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) and the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).⁵

To be clear: opposition to onshore wind does not constitute climate change denial. But if an opponent of onshore wind is a realist about the risks and dangers of un-checked climate change, the burden is on them to offer an alternative solution. And in this regard, the signals from the government (and more broadly across the centre-right of politics in the UK), are worrying.

Government communications budgets (including DECC's) have been slashed to almost zero. As a result, initiatives like the Green Deal, in principle a world-leading plan for insulating British housing stock, have an extremely low public profile.^{6 7} Although there are political actors on the centre-right who are deeply committed to taking strong action on climate change there are also many who seek to oppose it.

An honest appraisal of the situation suggests that the prospects of an effective, coherent strategy for public engagement with climate change on the centre-right of British politics are currently fairly bleak. The challenge, for climate change communicators of all political stripes, is to identify the ideas that will fire the imagination of citizens with centre-right values more effectively than climate-sceptic arguments do – something which this report begins to work towards.

The need for new narratives on climate change

"There is a flaw in the language and how we are communicating climate change: we're losing even though we should be winning"

Communicating climate change is not just difficult on the right – it is difficult for all audiences. 20 years of 'awareness raising,' grandiose pleas to save the planet, lots of talk about sacrifice, apocalyptic messages and photos of polar bears have trapped climate change in a niche that it urgently needs to break out of. A growing body of social science research has investigated the reasons for scepticism about climate change, behavioural inaction and ways to overcome it.⁸ But very little academic research has engaged directly with the question of how to more effectively speak to centre-right audiences on climate change.

For most people 'the science' is only a very small part of what climate change means to them. How will climate change impact on the way we travel, the food we eat, and the way we heat our homes? These are the kinds of questions that the public engage with – not so much 'what is climate change?', but 'what should we do about it?'

There are many different answers to this second question, and for anyone seeking to engage conservative audiences, these answers should clearly be ones that resonate with the values of those on the centre-right. However, there is a vacuum where a coherent and compelling conservative narrative on climate change should be, and this vacuum has been effectively filled by sceptical voices. How can the communication deadlock on the centre-right be broken?

To begin answering this question, we convened a high-level roundtable meeting involving nine individuals with unique practical and academic expertise in understanding how centre-right citizens engage with climate change (see Box 1). The group identified what they viewed as the most important priorities for improving climate change communication on the centre-right, and this report is the response to it.

It is aimed at anyone – left or right – who seeks to engage centre-right audiences on climate and energy issues: campaigners, politicians, community organisers and business leaders. The Conservative Party is the dominant centre-right party in British politics. But people who hold centre-right values – or at least endorse some of them – will not necessarily vote Conservative. This report seeks to identify frames and narratives for beginning a new conversation with citizens on the centre-right more broadly: political conservatives, not solely ‘Conservative’ voters.

This is not an exercise in ‘re-branding’ climate change for a centre-right audience. It means beginning a meaningful conversation with citizens on the centre-right about what climate change means to them, and how they think society should respond to it. It means being open to the possibility that centre-right answers to climate change might not be answers that those on the left agree with. But a debate about which of two climate policies is better is surely preferable – no matter what your political leaning – to a debate in which only one side is engaged at all. Responding to the questions raised in the roundtable meeting, we have synthesised the growing body of academic research on climate change communication and translated it into a format that will help climate change communicators of any political persuasion begin a conversation about climate change with centre-right audiences. The report is divided into the following sections:

- Understanding public opinion and scepticism on the centre right
- Values and frames for communicating climate change
- New narratives and language for the centre-right
- New heroes and social norms for climate change communication

Box 1: A roundtable meeting: Communicating climate change on the right

A roundtable meeting was held at the Ideas Space, Westminster, London on 13th November 2012. The meeting was designed to identify the most important barriers and opportunities for improving climate change communication on the centre-right. The meeting was chaired by Dr Adam Corner, with administrative support from Barbara Mendes Jorge. The meeting participants were:

Gregory Barker MP – Minister of State for Energy and Climate Change; Member of Parliament for Bexhill & Battle, Conservative Party

Ben Caldecott – Head of Policy, Climate Change Capital

Zac Goldsmith MP – Member of Parliament for Richmond Park & North Kingston, Conservative Party

Alistair Harper – Senior Policy Advisor, Green Alliance

George Marshall – Founding Director, Climate Outreach & Information Network

James Murray – Editor-in-Chief, Business Green

Guy Newey – Head of Energy & Environment, Policy Exchange

James Painter – Head of Journalism Fellowship Programme, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford

William Young – Chief of Staff, Bloomberg New Energy Finance

In addition, an individual meeting was conducted with **Laura Sandys MP**, Member of Parliament for South Thanet, Sandwich & The Villages, Conservative Party, which also informed the content of this report.

The meeting was held under Chatham House rules, which means that no comments or views can be attributed to any particular individual, and no minutes of the meeting were taken. However, unattributed quotes from meeting participants will appear in this sidebar throughout the report

2. Understanding public opinion and scepticism on the centre-right

Public opinion on climate change

Although many factors influence public opinion, one of the most important is the signals or ‘elite cues’ that people receive from high-profile figures such as politicians, and other opinion leaders. In a recent study tracking US public opinion over the past five decades, the statements made by national politicians were found to be the best predictor of aggregate public attitudes towards climate change, over and above whether people had experienced extreme weather, or been the target of an advocacy campaign.⁹ In short, what high profile political figures and opinion leaders say – and don’t say – matters a great deal. Over the past few years, there has been a decided lack of coherent narratives about climate change aimed at centre-right citizens.

There have been attempts to paint public opinion in the UK as having undergone a complete reversal on climate change following the disappointment of the UN climate change negotiations in Copenhagen at the end of 2009, a string of high-profile (although in reality, relatively minor) controversies around the science of climate change, a continuing economic slump and localised cold weather events.¹⁰

“Any optimist would like to believe the sceptics are right – tackling climate change is an enormous enterprise to undertake. If these people (sceptical voices) give hope, then some are going to take it”

It is typically argued that the public have neither the time nor the inclination to take an interest in climate change, that they no longer accept the scientific case for human impact on the climate, or that they are simply not prepared to accept time or resources being spent on reducing the risks of climate change. It is true there was a rise in uncertainty about climate change around 2010 (in the UK, US and other Anglophone countries.)¹¹ It is difficult to retrospectively fit a precise explanation to this shift in public attitudes, but all of the above reasons are likely to have played some role. And there is evidence that the level of trust in climate scientists (as well as almost every other authority group from journalists to politicians) has fallen in recent years.¹² But it is not true that public concern about climate change has collapsed.¹³

Large majorities of the British public are concerned about climate change, and would like to see the government lead the fight against it.¹⁴ A significant proportion of this group of people (not just Conservative voters) will hold centre-right views – and it is essential that there are strong, effective and compelling narratives for these citizens and voters to engage with.

Scepticism about climate change on the centre-right

In the context of climate change, scepticism is a problematically amorphous term – used both as a badge of honour and a label of denigration. But while legitimate, important and essential ‘scepticism’ about climate policy is offered by people from all sides of the political spectrum, there is also a great deal of activity that gives ‘scepticism’ a bad name. Active and publishing climate scientists are sceptics in the true sense of the word (as are all scientists) yet they do not find the basic tenets of climate change wanting. Those who doubt – without reasonable evidence – that human activities are causing changes in the climate and that (unchecked) this will have a range of serious, dangerous effects, are not ‘sceptics’ in the true sense of the word, yet it is this group that typically attracts the label.

It is now well established that concern about climate change is not simply a matter of a lack of knowledge about the underlying science.¹⁵ People with different prior beliefs and worldviews evaluate the same information in very different ways, and therefore reach very different conclusions.¹⁶ A significant body of academic research has found a consistent relationship between political ideology and scepticism about the reality or seriousness of climate change.¹⁷

Those who strongly support free trade and enterprise and the primacy of private ownership, who object to government regulation of industry, and who dislike government influence on the everyday behaviour of individuals, are more likely to be sceptical about climate change.¹⁸ Broadly speaking, these are views associated with the right of politics – although by no means all those on the centre-right would endorse neoliberal principles such as these. However, in Britain, Conservative voters are more likely to be sceptical about climate change, a pattern also reflected in the US and Australia.^{19 20} Sceptical voices are also more likely to be found in right-leaning than left-leaning media.²¹

“Most climate solutions involve the state and tax, and that automatically sets you up against most conservative-thinking people.”

There is a general and consistent pattern: being broadly of the right is associated with holding more sceptical views about climate change. The typical explanation for this finding is that people work backwards from policy outcomes that they dislike, and downplay the importance of the underlying problem.

‘The facts’ of climate science are not self-evident – they are filtered through people’s political ideologies and belief systems. When people consider the risks of climate change, they weigh them up in light of what the policy solutions to it might be.²² This means that ‘turning up the volume’ on the facts of climate science is unlikely to succeed in winning over new audiences. Put simply, if someone who strongly dislikes government intervention in citizens’ lives is told by a politician that the way to tackle climate change is through changes in personal behaviour, they are likely to simply dismiss that there is a problem in the first place.²³

Our reasoning – all of us, left, right or centre – is influenced by our ideology. If new evidence fits with our views, we are more likely to accept it.²⁴ But the scientific facts about climate change have not been presented in a way that meshes easily with a centre-right philosophy. The conversation with centre-right citizens about climate change has got off on the wrong foot. This means that opposition to climate change policies has become mixed up with a rejection of the science and the seriousness of the problem.²⁵

The underlying science of climate change may be value-neutral, but the solutions offered in response to climate change absolutely are not. So what would make climate change more appealing to those who oppose state intervention, behavioural change, or the regulation of industry? In the next section we explore how climate change could be communicated in a way that resonates with the values of the centre-right.

Box 2: Sceptical narratives in the Conservative media

In the absence of strong centre-right narratives on climate change, sceptical voices have flourished in conservative media.²⁶ We commissioned the independent researcher Barbara Mendes Jorge to analyse articles on climate change taken from two different publications aimed at centre-right audience: the influential blog ConservativeHome and the MailOnline, the online version of the Daily Mail newspaper (between April 2011 and April 2012).

Scientific and technological scepticism was present in both publications, with uncertainty about the consequences of climate change often used as a justification for inaction. However, scientific scepticism was far less common than policy scepticism: climate change scepticism was overwhelmingly political in tone.

The costs of climate change policies were consistently used as an argument against them, whether focusing on the burden of green taxes, the high prices of renewable energy investment, fuel poverty from (supposedly) higher energy bills or the ‘expensive aid’ that poorer countries are receiving from Britain to help tackle climate change.

Businesses were often portrayed as being at risk of being run into the ground due to tough environmental regulations. Decarbonisation was frequently conflated with deindustrialisation, and presented as severely damaging for the UK economy. Alternatively, businesses were criticised for profiting unfairly from climate policies.

“Self-immolating” unilateral climate policies were not well-regarded; many commentators argued that there was no advantage in Britain taking the lead on climate change, claiming that this role was better suited to the US or China.

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Box 2 Continued

A distrust of renewable energy was present in many of the articles reviewed. Shale gas and nuclear power were often touted as more reliable and cheaper alternatives, large government subsidies for renewable energy technologies were typically criticised, and portrayed as immature technologies. Wind farms were the most common target, labelled variously as expensive, ugly and ineffectual.

This limited but focused analysis helps to reveal the kinds of sceptical narratives which circulate among centre-right audiences:

- *The cost of centralised – and often European-linked – climate policies is unreasonable.*
- *Renewable energy projects threaten the sanctity of the countryside and nature.*
- *Tackling climate change conflicts with economic goals – and may hurt small, local businesses in particular.*

Understanding the way that sceptical voices articulate arguments against climate change on the centre-right is essential for identifying ways to engage with this audience more effectively. A new conversation with the centre-right about climate change should begin with the values and concerns that this audience holds, and build a bridge to the values of a sustainable society.

3. Values & Frames: reclaiming climate change for the centre right

“Different audiences have different values and this must be kept in mind. Sceptics have been successful because they have used language successfully”

In the words of Conservative moderniser and climate change communicator Ben Caldecott, the environment is – and has been for two hundred years – natural conservative territory.²⁷ But currently, there is little evidence of the centre-right taking ownership over the issue of climate change and what it will mean for society in the future. There is no reason why a conservative ideology should be inconsistent with taking action on climate change, but centre-right voters need something to identify with in climate change, reasons to care about it, and sources of information that accept the broad tenets of the scientific consensus but are credible and likeable.

This report argues that the issue needs to be re-framed so that it appeals to the values held by audiences on the centre-right. A new conversation with the centre-right should begin with the values and concerns that this audience holds, and build bridges to the values of a sustainable society.

Values of the centre-right and values for sustainability

We use the term ‘centre-right’ to refer to people who endorse a loosely-defined but nevertheless distinct and identifiable set of values and beliefs. These values and beliefs are taken to include, but are not limited to, the following:²⁸

- *Pragmatism – responding flexibly to problems as they arise.*
- *A willingness to defend existing cultural and political institutions from change.*
- *A preference for socially conservative (rather than liberal) policies.*
- *Scepticism towards centralist, state-imposed solutions.*
- *Belief in intergenerational duty – a Burkean contract between the dead, the living and the not-yet born.²⁹*

In a report published by the think tank Respublica, Guy Shrubsole suggested that the challenge for engaging the centre-right was to identify the aspects of British conservatism that are potentially congruent with the values and principles that “underpin a deep commitment to sustainable development” (p.33), and to distinguish them from the values of the neoliberal ‘new right’, which centre more on economic liberalism.³⁰ But what are the values that underpin a deep commitment to sustainable development?

There is a major body of social psychological research that has examined the types of personal values that people hold. Based on extensive empirical research in nations around the world, and across several decades, it is now understood that certain values tend to be associated with each other, while others tend to be opposed to each other.³¹ In particular, individuals who identify strongly with ‘extrinsic’ or ‘self-enhancing’ values (e.g. materialism, personal ambition, power) tend not to identify strongly with ‘intrinsic’ or ‘self-transcendent’ values (e.g. benevolence, or biocentrism – granting nature intrinsic value). Although most people identify with a range of values to some extent, speaking exclusively to one set of values tends to diminish the importance of other values (at least temporarily).³²

There are ten universal values, and these are displayed (and organised into categories) in Figure 1.

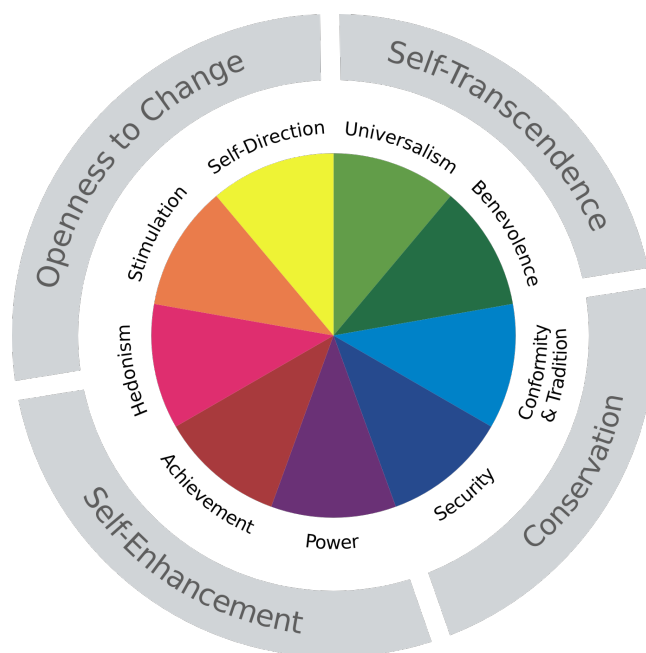


Figure 1: The ten universal values identified by decades of social-psychological research.³³ Self-transcendence values have been strongly associated with a range of pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours.

There are some important practical implications to this body of research: people who lean more strongly towards intrinsic values (especially high levels of altruism) are more likely to engage in sustainable behaviour, show higher concern about climate change, are more likely to engage in specific sustainable behaviours such as recycling and are more likely to support policies to tackle climate change.³⁴

This means that unless campaigns to engage people with climate change make an attempt to target the intrinsic values that underpin public engagement with climate change, they may inadvertently promote ways of thinking that will make sustainable behaviour less likely in the longer term.³⁵ This is why the way that messages and campaigns are framed is so important.³⁶ Yet climate change is typically presented by the government – in policy documents, and in public messages around the Green Deal – in exclusively economic terms.³⁷

How do values for sustainability and the values of the centre-right overlap?

The obvious question that arises from a consideration of ‘values for sustainability’ is whether – and to what extent – they overlap with the values of the centre-right.

Guy Shrubsole’s analysis for Respublica suggested that an emphasis on intergenerational duty and the idea that people are responsible for their local communities are core centre-right values. These are also both instantiations of the value ‘benevolence’ – a solidly self-transcendent value.³⁸ Cultural conservatism, to preserve the nation’s heritage – such as the British countryside – is another instantiation of an intrinsic value that is congruent with a centre-right philosophy.

However, it has been widely assumed that reaching centre-right audiences on climate means spelling out the economic advantages of low-carbon industry, or the value of renewable energy technologies for the economy. The way that climate change is talked about in UK policy documents is overwhelmingly extrinsic in its focus, typically framed around economic burdens and benefits. But because intrinsic values have been shown to correlate with pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours, in a wide range of studies, this conventional way of communicating about climate change is problematic – it is unlikely to lead to meaningful, long-term engagement with the underlying issue of climate change.³⁹

Consider two different ways of encouraging people to car share on the commute to work. One option would be to tell people how much money they will save on petrol. This would be an extrinsically-oriented reason for car sharing. Appealing to people’s wallets may be an effective way of selling the idea of car-sharing to them. A second option would be to emphasise the environmental benefits of car sharing. This would be an intrinsically-oriented reason for car sharing – because it does not (directly) benefit individuals. This may also be an effective way of encouraging people to car share.

If the challenge of sustainability was simply to sign as many people up to car sharing schemes as possible, then the choice would be simple: go with the one that is most effective. But the challenge of sustainability is vastly more complex than this – which means that anyone seeking to promote public engagement with climate change has to ask ‘what happens next?’

Research suggests that in order to create a situation where one behavioural change will lead to another and promote a meaningful level of engagement with climate change, it is important to focus on intrinsic values.⁴⁰ This does not mean ignoring the views and values

that people hold, as everyone holds a range of values, both intrinsic and extrinsic. And crucially, even people who identify strongly with materialistic values are likely to express a stronger sense of moral duty, and a greater obligation to act towards meeting shared challenges like climate change if they are encouraged to reflect on the self-transcendent reasons for doing so.⁴¹

One recent piece of research examined two different ways of framing messages about climate change in order to appeal to different types of values, and measured their impact on Conservative voters.⁴² Participants in the study were shown one of two versions of a video where an actor gave a speech on low-carbon transport.

Both speeches were identical in the way they introduced UK transport problems and the need for the electrification and increased use of public transport, as well as cycling and walking. Whereas the 'extrinsic' video framed these issues around economic and nationalistic concerns, the 'intrinsic' video discussed dangers and benefits for the health of communities, intergenerational duties and the intrinsic value of the environment. Two very interesting results emerged from this study.

Firstly, people who were exposed to economic arguments showed a stronger externalisation of responsibility to the government, who they considered responsible for achieving a sustainable transport system. In addition, this group also showed higher levels of fatalism which impeded people's perception of their own ability and responsibility for making a positive difference to transport and climate change. In contrast, the intrinsic video seemed to provoke a feeling of empowerment which then translated into motivation to act.

Secondly, the intrinsic frame resonated particularly well with women, whereas no gender difference appeared in the group that saw the extrinsic video. Women tend to show greater concern for environmental issues, but this study implies that emphasising community health and intergenerational responsibilities may play especially well with female voters on the centre-right.

The lesson from this study is clear: communicators on the centre-right should explore framings of climate change that embrace intrinsic shades of Conservatism, such as an emphasis on community well-being, intergenerational duty and a representation of the environment not as a 'service provider' but as (for example) something that we have a duty to protect.

So what might a narrative on climate change, reframed for the centre-right and speaking to values congruent with sustainability look like? In the next section, we explore four possibilities.

4. New narratives for the centre-right

"The environmental movement needs to change and leave the 'left-wing ghetto' which it inhabits"

The language, narratives and imagery of climate change are almost exclusively of the left. The answers to the problem of climate change look, sound and feel like the kinds of things that those on the centre-right should oppose – global agreements, taxation, the regulation of industry, or government interference in everyday behaviour. In what follows, we outline four narratives for engaging centre-right voters on climate change.

In constructing these narratives, we took the views expressed by participants in the Roundtable Meeting preceding this report as a starting point. We then explored and reviewed the available evidence on communicating climate change, with a view to producing a rudimentary toolbox for the terms, phrases and narratives that might more helpfully begin a new conversation about climate change with the centre right.

Localism

The philosopher Roger Scruton has attempted to recapture, in terms of intellectual ownership, environmentalism from its current position as a perspective typically associated with the left of politics.⁴³ Scruton argues that conservatives want to conserve the aesthetic value of the landscape they see around them, and have a love of the land (what he terms 'oikophilia'). Environmentalists and conservatives both want to defend a shared but threatened legacy from predation by its current trustees, and the 'common cause' between environmentalists and conservatives is a love of the local environment.

Historically, there is a proud tradition of conservation and respect for the natural environment within British Conservatism. However, the 'conserve' part of conservatism currently seems to apply only to the hyper-local, with debate focusing on the aesthetics of wind-farms instead of the value of renewable energy for the protection of the UK's countryside against fossil-fuel induced floods, and other extreme weather. But Scruton's thesis is that a love for the local is an opportunity for promoting environmental issues to conservatives. **Stewardship, trusteeship and the acknowledgement of a shared responsibility to conserve and protect the natural environment are all embedded deeply at the heart of traditional conservatism** (although not in the more recent neoliberal ideas that have become popular among some sections of the right.)⁴⁴

Scruton is by no means the only centre-right voice advocating a more locally-oriented approach to communicating about climate change. Phillip Booth has argued that a more decentralised approach to dealing with climate change would appeal to those on the centre-right; cabinet Minister Greg Barker favours micro-generation, community ownership and feed-in tariffs as a Conservative-sounding answer to climate change.⁴⁵ Zac Goldsmith has repeatedly argued for a localisation of the politics of the environment, away from big environmental summits and towards local decision-making.

It is not only commentators on the centre-right who have argued for a more localised approach. The Transition Towns movement revolves around taking practical, local steps to promote awareness about climate change, while the think tank Green Alliance has repeatedly explored and promoted the link between localism and climate change on the right.^{46 47} And research has found that reducing the 'psychological distance' between people and the threat or the impacts of climate change is one way of making the issue seem more tangible and relevant to their lives.⁴⁸

A focus on local, regional and community-based climate change action could help engage those apathetic and sceptical about climate change on the centre-right, and perhaps even provide some common ground with other voters across the political spectrum, similarly disillusioned with international negotiations and processes to tackle climate change.

Localism: core messages

- The landscape and countryside of Britain is something we should all be proud of, and work together to protect. Over the years, we have cleaned up our rivers, banished smog from our cities, and protected our forests.
- Climate change poses new dangers to the countryside we value so much: more frequent and extreme flooding, disruption to seasonal changes, and the wildlife which depends on them.
- The only responsible course of action is to reduce the risks we face from climate change. We owe this to our children and grandchildren - but also to the millions of people who live and work in the countryside right now.
- We don't need global agreements and international bureaucracy to look after our local environment: action on climate change begins at home.

Energy Security

Energy security and climate change are inextricably linked. Not only is there a need for the energy system be decarbonised, but it must happen in a way that maintains a secure, reliable and resilient supply of energy for households and businesses.

Only a handful of studies on public attitudes to energy security have been conducted, but there is significant support among the British public for attaining ‘energy independence’.⁴⁹ Solar and wind power are generally perceived most favourably and coal least favourably in terms of being able to deliver reliable and secure energy. Other renewables are also perceived as more secure than oil, gas and nuclear power. Arguments based on energy security could be more persuasive reasons for conservatives to support renewable energy technologies than arguments based on climate change.

The Republican communications strategist Frank Luntz proposed that energy security and clean energy – rather than climate change – should be the focus of attempts to engage the American right.⁵⁰ Luntz found that a majority of the people in a study conducted in 2010 agreed with the statement: “It doesn’t matter if there is or isn’t climate change. It is still in America’s best interest to develop new sources of energy that are clean, reliable, efficient and safe.”

Luntz argued that for Americans, national security trumps every other reason to support a transition to renewable technologies, freeing the U.S. from foreign oil dependency, and opening the door to greater security and prosperity. These messages, more than rhetoric about saving the planet, Luntz claimed would appeal to voters on the centre-right in the US.

“There is a danger if you pivot to other arguments away from climate change such as energy security – in some ways they are on dodgier ground”

However, a significant note of warning should be sounded here: Arguments about energy security have also played a key role in justifying the enormous expansion in unconventional fossil fuels (in particular shale gas) that has recently taken place in the US. This means that although there is potential to use energy security arguments to engage centre-right voters in the UK on climate change, there are also risks.

The Public Interest Research Centre and Platform conducted research looking specifically at the potential pros and cons of using an energy security frame for engaging the public on climate change.⁵¹ They concluded that talking about energy security was in many ways problematic, and that the values spoken to and reinforced by an energy security agenda tended to revolve around a narrowly defined, exclusionary type of national security. Fears over ‘energy terrorism’ and the dubious status of ‘foreign oil’ are routinely raised in the media, as well as concerns over the rising demand from countries such as China and India.

This type of security framing promotes strongly self-enhancing, nationalistic values, and research shows that people who endorse this type of self-serving security as a value tend to be prejudiced towards people unlike themselves, and be less politically engaged.⁵² So a framing of climate change based on energy security as a means of insulating ourselves from the rest of the world could backfire as a strategy for engaging centre-right voters.

However, this is only one way of interpreting energy security. It can also be interpreted through the lens of increasing **resilience** through diversifying and localising energy supply chains; as reducing the **risks** of climate impacts on the British landscape and countryside; or as a reason to usher in a new era of **home-grown manufacturing**, based around secure, renewable energy technologies.

Energy Security: core messages

- During the industrial revolution we built our country using our natural resources – coal, oil and gas – and we led the world into a new, prosperous era.
- These resources are now scarce, becoming increasingly expensive, and dangerous to extract. But we are also rich in the natural resources that will meet the challenges of the 21st century: renewable energy that harnesses the sun, the wind and the waves.
- Our future security rests on clean, renewable technologies that will never run out, and will provide safe, secure, long-term jobs and opportunities for British people: engineers, labourers, technicians, scientists, and tradespeople.
- To keep the lights on, we must make ourselves more resilient – and that means wasting less energy, and powering our homes and industry through a mix of clean, renewable energy technologies.
- British energy is changing. But it is up to all of us to decide what our energy future should be.

The Green Economy & 'New Environmentalism'

"We need to be practical over the next few years... how do we normalise technologies and create sustainable business models?"

Recent months have witnessed an unprecedented number of coordinated calls from groups calling for governments around the world to re-affirm their commitment to tackling climate change. But these calls were not from coalitions of environmental lobby groups – they were from insurers, investors, and industry.⁵³ Pointing out that the 'green economy' grew 4.7% in 2011, against a backdrop of zero growth or contraction elsewhere, these advocates for a low-carbon economy are about as far away from the 'hair-shirted hippy' caricature of environmentalists as it is possible to be.

As the editor of a news website (BusinessGreen) that speaks directly to the growing number of businesses that would consider themselves part of the 'green economy', James Murray understands that the traditional language of environmentalism is not something that most organisations in the private sector naturally respond well to.⁵⁴ Instead, Murray has proposed a business-friendly update to the green movement's language and rhetoric: New Environmentalism.⁵⁵

In an article published in late 2012, Murray argued that climate change needs to break out of the "left-wing ghetto" it inhabits, and that tackling climate change means building better societies and economies for the future.⁵⁶ Murray suggests that New Environmentalists should learn from history – not just from civil rights struggles, but from the digital revolution, where new and unfamiliar ideas spread rapidly across the world.

New Environmentalism is optimistic and techno-centric, and unashamedly in favour of responsible forms of capitalism (but not business as usual). Corporations are viewed as in need of transformation, not opposition. According to Murray, there is a silent majority of businesses that are desperate for certainty for investors, happy to abide by proportionate regulations and targets, and see a greening of the economy as a profitable step forward.

The 'business case' for climate change was in many ways made several years ago, when the Stern report set out the projected costs in terms of GDP of tackling climate change sooner rather than later.⁵⁷ It is an argument that might be expected to appeal to many different audiences, especially on the centre-right. But if tackling climate change is good business sense, as New Environmentalists argue, why has this narrative not picked up steam?

One possibility is that the techno-centrism is not being linked explicitly enough to people's values and social views. While it is comforting to draw sharp distinctions between politics, technology and individuals, the reality is that human behaviour underpins it all.⁵⁸ Political parties will not pass legislation that is patently unpopular among the electorate.

Technological advances can provide low-carbon alternatives like electric buses, but a low-emissions bus will have also have a low number of passengers unless people decide to use it.

A second reason is that despite their intuitive appeal, economic arguments may not always be the most effective way of engaging people with climate change – in the long or the short term.^{59 60} Any technological change is dependent in part on public attitudes, and public attitudes are impacted by the prevailing social norms, political narratives and the constraints of day-to-day life.⁶¹ Every single policy for every single wind farm or smart meter or home insulation programme will be an uphill struggle unless there is public support for the issue that links them – which is climate change, not economics. Achieving public support for these initiatives means making the argument for why they are so important. This means that New Environmentalism must do more than make the business case for sustainability. It must also articulate what a new, low-carbon economy means for people's lives.

New Environmentalism: core messages

- Business as usual is unsustainable – but sustainable businesses are a central part of the answer to climate change. We need a second industrial revolution – one that works in harmony with the environment, rather than damaging it.
- The challenge of climate change is too important be left to 'hair shirt and sandals' hippies, who are nostalgic for the past. Creating a modern, efficient and productive low-carbon future is the responsibility of business leaders and entrepreneurs – the people who get things done in society.
- The short-term costs associated with creating a lean, green economy will deliver long-term benefits for everyone. We can build a green economy by harnessing what businesses do best: investing and innovating to improve society.
- Look how quickly revolutionary new ideas can take root when the collective energy and intelligence of society is harnessed: two decades ago, barely anyone had a computer. Now most of us have one in our pocket. We need to apply ourselves in the same way to the challenge of climate change.

The 'Good Life'

As modernising Conservatives regularly argue, the centre-right vision of the good life is about more than money: richness comes from quality of life.⁶² But climate change threatens this quality of life, by degrading local environments through more widespread droughts and flooding and damaging the health of both the natural world and local communities. Deaths from extreme heat – such as the heat wave that claimed the lives of 2000 people in England and Wales in 2003 – are predicted to increase by 70% in the 2020s.^{63 64} Seasonal changes are likely to prolong conditions like hay fever and asthma, and air quality is impacted negatively by burning more fossil fuels.⁶⁵ Only clean energy technologies can guarantee a clean local environment.

Several studies with US citizens have suggested that reframing climate change as a public health problem – for example because of declining air and water quality – might be an effective way of reaching audiences who would normally avoid or even dismiss the issue.⁶⁶ Because people's health is typically more easily accessible than a distant and intangible threat like climate change, public health frames may produce stronger emotional reactions to climate change.⁶⁷ And recent research with US conservatives found that people were more favourable towards environmental messages when these focused on pollution, and the 'purity' of the natural environment – rather than the more conventional set of arguments about a moral responsibility to avoid harm.⁶⁸

The 'Good Life': core messages

- Climate change not only threatens the health of our environment – it threatens the health of our communities too.
- Taking practical steps to keep the threats posed by climate change at bay – such as an increased risk of the flooding that devastated hundreds of people's homes last November – is a sensible response.
- Improving public transportation and making it easier to walk and cycle around our neighbourhoods is good for everyone's health.
- Cities filled with smoke and congested roads would be a thing of the past if we embraced electric vehicles.
- Climate change will result in more frequent flooding, and more severe flooding in certain areas. Old people, young children, and rural communities face serious threats to their health if we do not take action to reduce flood risk.
- Using cleaner forms of energy such as solar and wind power will reduce air and water pollution, preventing unnecessary illness.

5. New social norms and new heroes

"What we need is new heroes – not the same old voices...A Mayor Bloomberg equivalent in the UK"

The iconography of climate change is by now familiar to most: polar bears on melting ice caps, starving children in arid sub-Saharan landscapes, burning globes and exploding thermometers. These images speak strongly to a particular type of person: the sort of person who is moved by the welfare of endangered animals, and not coincidentally the type of person who might support (or design campaigns for) environmental campaign groups.⁶⁹ Green NGOs have played the central role in shaping the type of issue that people think climate change is. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the enormous environmental implications of climate change.

But, as the previous section on framing demonstrates, climate change is not only – perhaps not even mostly – an environmental problem: It is equally a story about human rights, about energy security, about rethinking the way our agricultural and transport systems work, about the emergence of new industrial projects to power a carbon-constrained world, and about how a healthy economy can be maintained within finite resource limits.

"Greens have an enormous amount to reflect on - the movement is being stupid"

The challenge for climate change communicators who speak to centre-right audiences is not to be more like environmentalists: If anything, environmentalists need to be more like everyone else, and the language and imagery of climate change must be reclaimed by the myriad of groups – including conservatives – who have a stake in minimising the risks that climate change poses.

But in order for voters on the centre-right to begin to take ownership of climate change, they must see it as an issue that is relevant for people like them. Caring about climate change and taking steps to tackle it needs to become the norm, rather than the exception – and there is a large body of research that shows how to harness the power of social norms for promoting sustainability.⁷⁰

Psychologists have been interested in the way that social norms shape behaviour in the context of climate change for a long time. People tend to act in a way that is socially acceptable, and so if a particular behaviour (littering, for example, or driving a car with a large engine) can be cast in a socially unacceptable light, then people should be less likely to engage in it. No-one likes to feel like they are acting in a way that their friends or colleagues don't approve of. So communicating the idea that sustainable behaviour is 'the norm' is a powerful tool.

Studies have shown that when hotel guests are provided with information that other guests are re-using their towels, they are more likely to do this as well – over and above the impact of telling them about the environmental benefits.⁷¹ These principles are now being put into practice by the energy company Opower, who have achieved small but consistent savings on average energy use with their US customers.⁷² Opower's approach is simple: every customer who receives an energy bill also receives information about how much energy they are using relative to their neighbours. The energy bills that Opower customers receive show average usage relative to immediate neighbours (people 'like them'), give feedback about recent bills (through positive or negative emoticons) and contain advice for saving energy.

But for this kind of approach to become really effective for a group that is hard to reach – like centre-right voters – these kinds of strategies have to be seen as relating to a relevant peer group or social network.

Box 3: Networks for engaging centre-right citizens on climate change

An individual or organisation that shares (or is perceived to share) the values of a centre-right audience is worth a hundred campaigners who are seen as different, or 'other'.

The National Trust is an organisation that embodies values that are appealing from a centre-right viewpoint (respect for history and tradition; conservation) and yet are potentially congruent with promoting sustainability and climate change.⁷³ Despite high-profile opposition to the siting of wind farms near to their estates, the National Trust is exactly the sort of organisation that could bridge between centre-right values and those of a sustainable society.

The Conservative Environment Network is a network within the Conservative Party, founded by – amongst others – Ben Caldecott, who participated in the roundtable meeting for this report. It exists to advocate for solutions to environmental problems that are consistent with conservative principles.⁷⁴

Business Green is a hub for news and opinion related to businesses focused on sustainability, edited by James Murray (also a participant in the roundtable meeting preceding this report).⁷⁵ With a large audience of business-oriented readers, it offers a link between corporate and environmental concerns.

Identifying and forging links with organisations such as these (or, at a more local level, community groups or individuals who can act as 'brokers') will provide trusted intermediaries between climate change and conservative audiences.⁷⁶

In February 2012, the Conservative backbencher and staunch anti-wind campaigner Chris Heaton-Harris organised a letter to David Cameron from 100 MPs, opposing the government's policy on onshore wind.⁷⁷ 100 names does not constitute a majority of Conservative MPs, but the larger (silent) number who support onshore wind did not write back, and so the impression given – the perceived norm – is that most Conservative MPs oppose onshore wind. Unless strategies like these are challenged – not by environmental groups, but by other conservative opinion leaders – it will be difficult for centre-right voters to take any psychological ownership of climate change.

The centre-right needs 'new heroes' on climate change. These must be people not necessarily associated with climate change or environmental causes, but respected by centre-right voters. Whether these 'heroes' are drawn from business, from civil society or from the media, they must be perceived as espousing conservative values first and foremost, and environmentalist values second – or, even better, not perceived as being environmentalists at all. Finding and nurturing those people, and providing platforms for their views to pick up support, is critical.

6. Conclusion

This report takes the first steps towards starting a new conversation with the centre-right about climate change. Responding to the key questions raised in a roundtable meeting of leading experts on how centre-right audiences engage with climate change, it summarises and condenses a growing body of academic and policy research into a set of principles, recommendations and core messages for communicating more effectively about climate change with audiences on the centre-right.

Our central argument is that climate change has not been framed or communicated in a way that resonates with centre-right voters. To begin a new conversation with the centre-right on climate change, climate change communicators must drop the language and narratives of environmentalism that have only ever appealed to a minority of people. Climate change should be something that everyone – left or right – has a stake in.

This report offers guidance for climate change communicators of all political stripes seeking to engage centre-right audiences more effectively. The guidance is as evidence-based as possible – both in terms of the expert opinions of the roundtable participants, and our review of the available published research. But there is one critical element missing from the ‘conversation’ with the centre right: the views of ordinary, centre-right citizens. There is an urgent need to take the messages, frames and narratives presented in this report, and test them with centre-right audiences – thoroughly, and on a wide-scale.

Clearly, the narratives we have identified are not exhaustive, but neither are they entirely compatible. The techno-centric, business-oriented optimism of ‘new environmentalism’ stands in contrast to the aesthetic approach encapsulated in ‘oikophilia’. But this simply serves to emphasise that there is no silver bullet that will work for all audiences (even within a group with broadly the same values), and underscores the need for systematic research to further understand people’s responses to them.

One consequence of exploring the values on which a centre-right framing of climate change might be based is the overlap that exists – encapsulated in the shared challenge of sustainability – between left and right. An appreciation of the beauty of the British countryside, or a conception of the ‘good life’ that rests on more than just money, are surely principles on which both left and right would often agree. This holds out the possibility that even people with very different political orientations may find common ground in the issue of climate change – so long as it is framed and communicated in the right way.

It is in everyone's interest – left and right – that climate change has a strong, proud conservative face. If it does not, climate change will remain stuck in an environmentalist niche – the kind of issue that large numbers of people with centre right views see as 'somebody else's problem'. Without deeper engagement among centre-right citizens and politicians, the cross-party consensus on climate change, developed so painstakingly during the last decade, cannot be assumed to be secure.

Beginning a new conversation with the centre-right about climate change is critical if meaningful progress in tackling climate change is to be achieved. This report – the first steps in that conversation – points to some ways of framing and presenting the issue that are more likely to resonate with the values of centre-right citizens. The challenge for climate change communicators is to find ways of firing the imagination of centre-right citizens on climate change, lifting it out of its left-wing ghetto, and into the mainstream.

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5. New social norms and new heroes