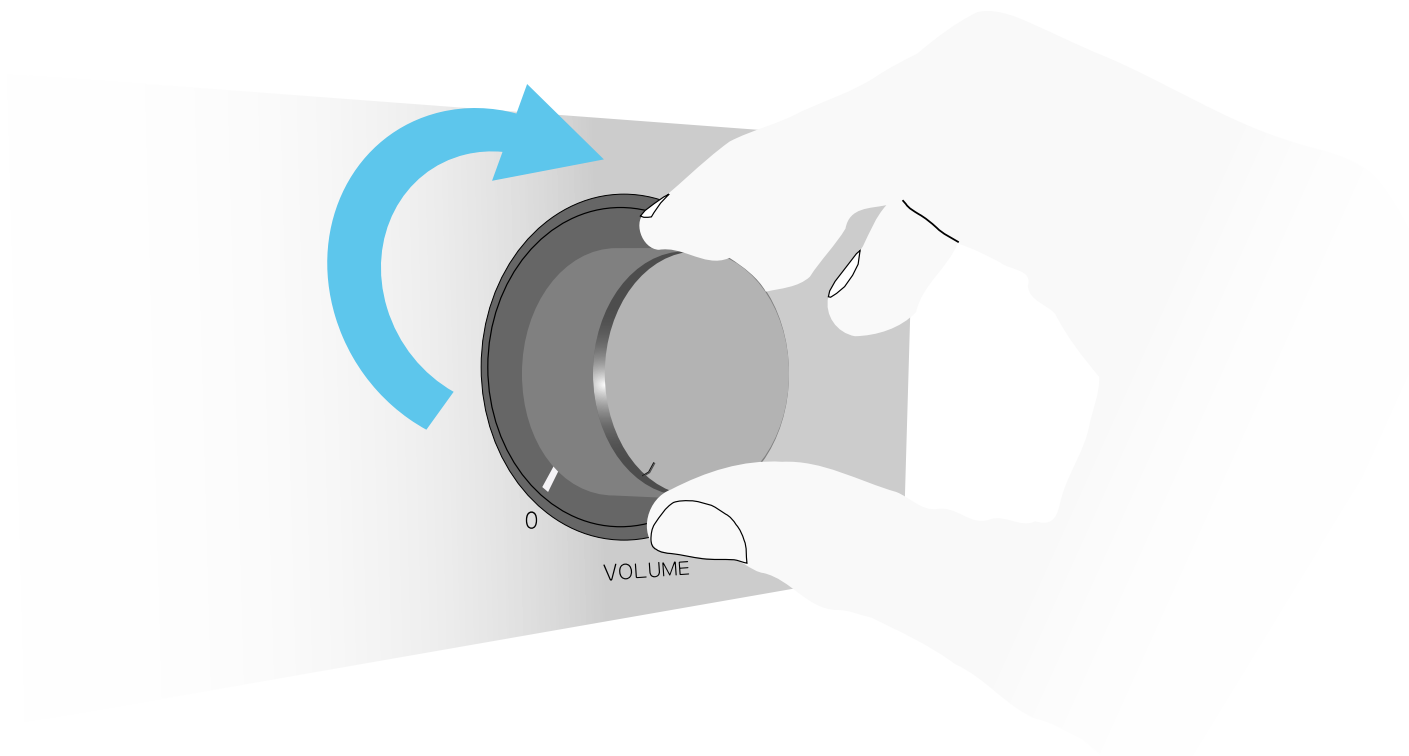


CLIMATE SILENCE

(and how to break it)



Climate Silence

Executive Summary

The climate silence is deafening.

In the first of a series of COIN briefing papers, we describe the 'climate silence' that has descended on the UK. After outlining the causes of the silence, we argue that the climate change debate urgently needs new narratives that make the link between the climate challenge and ordinary people's lives.

Despite David Cameron's promise to lead the greenest government ever, politicians who claim to understand the urgency of the problem have been extremely quiet on climate change. Civil society, exhausted by the disappointment of the Copenhagen climate change negotiations in 2009, has largely fallen silent. Scientists, cowed by personal attacks, have become increasingly reticent. A door that was once firmly shut – to sceptical voices in the mainstream media – has been opened again, and the visibility of climate change has faded dramatically.

What public figures say matters – especially when they say nothing at all. Unsurprisingly, with such a muted national conversation, public interest has dwindled. The debate has become stale and fatigued.

The climate silence will not be broken by turning up the volume on the science. The underlying facts of climate change are like a dictionary which provides the basic vocabulary. But the real challenge is in weaving prose to inspire people to care about the problem. Climate change is fundamentally a human story, and public campaigns must reconnect with that basic fact.

COIN advocates a national series of conversations about climate change, initiated by representatives of different communities (not green campaigners). The conversations would not be designed to make an economic case, put forward scientific facts or win an argument. Instead, they would unearth the values and principles on which different people base their views about the world, and build a bridge – a meaningful storyline – between people's values and those of a more sustainable society.

The challenge for anyone invested in re-igniting public interest in climate change is to catalyse a chorus of public debate and discussion to break the silence – and this briefing outlines the process required to achieve this.

Introduction

As international negotiations on climate change begun in Warsaw during early November 2013, the Philippine Islands were devastated by Typhoon Haiyan. The tragic loss of life and visceral reminder of the devastating power of the climate provoked a brief statement from the British Prime Minister David Cameron, guardedly endorsing the view that climate change will increase and intensify patterns of extreme weather.¹ Climate change was – fleetingly – a part of the national news cycle. But it took a storm killing more than 5000 people to move Cameron to speak.

A month earlier, the release of the first part of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's 5th Assessment Report triggered a brief flurry of media coverage.² But the fact that this minor upturn in the national conversation about climate change was noticeable at all underscores a troubling feature of the current debate: most of the time, there simply isn't one.

The year as a whole will surely be remembered by the seemingly unstoppable rise of household energy bills. The energy companies, much of the media, and some politicians were quick to blame 'eco-taxes'. Climate change – if it was mentioned at all – was presented as the enemy of the common man: an elite, costly and distant concern that should not be considered during times of austerity. Even the angry public demonstrations against 'fracking' focused on the risk of local groundwater contamination, not the much greater climate risks posed by burning more fossil fuels.

In short, the climate silence has been deafening.

Rewind five years, and although climate change was hardly a household topic, there were some clear indicators that the issue had lodged itself in the public consciousness (albeit temporarily). Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* was bringing the science to the masses. The economist Nicholas Stern had made the financial case for tackling the problem sooner rather than later.³ The 2008 Climate Change Act had been passed, and optimism was high that there would be a global deal at the UN negotiations in Copenhagen. Public awareness of the issue and concern about its consequences was at its highest recorded level.⁴ The *cause celebre* of climate change was even being used to paint contentious (but low carbon) nuclear power in a more positive light.⁵ David Cameron was openly asking the public to vote blue in order to go green.⁶

But today, climate change has faded from view. After a couple of cold winters, the failure of Copenhagen, media debate about the trustworthiness of climate scientists, and the impacts of the global recession (that has relegated thorny, complex issues like climate change to the bottom of the political heap), public doubt about the reality and the seriousness of climate change has increased.⁷ The growing silence is now one of the most serious obstacles to progress on climate change.

It would be an over-statement to say that public support for tackling climate change has collapsed. Even at the nadir of public trust in climate science, in early 2010, the glass was still 'two thirds full'.⁸ It is more accurate to say that for the majority of people, the issue has simply slipped off their radar. Surveys show that large numbers of people are still somewhat concerned about the risks posed by a changing climate, and broadly supportive of a transition to a low-carbon society.⁹ But most hold no strong views about climate change: even those who accept the reality of the problem are dismissive of the role they can play in solving it, or quite literally do not spend any time thinking about it.¹⁰

Some have described this as climate 'fatigue'.¹¹ But that would suggest that people were sufficiently engaged with the issue in the first place to have become tired by it. Others suggest that public 'disavowal' of the problem is a reaction to the terrifying psychological reality of facing climate change.¹² But have most people even noticed that the consequences of unchecked climate change are really so profound?

Politicians have not given up on climate change. Significant policies aimed at industry and the public are being rolled out by the government, and the stringent targets enshrined in the Climate Change Act are still (for now) intact. But rarely is climate change front and centre in the way that politicians talk about these policies to the public (except when sceptical voices are condemning them). And as a result, a blanket of disinterest is smothering the debate about climate change.

In the first section of this COIN briefing we describe the different elements of climate silence in the UK – from policy-makers, the media, NGOs, scientists and the public. In the second part we ask what it would take to break the climate silence and restore the issue to the prominent place in the public consciousness that it deserves.

Silence from Westminster

The UK government set up the Department for Energy & Climate Change (DECC) in 2008. A large part of its budget (at least 50%) goes on maintaining decommissioned nuclear power plants, so arguably the department has always been more ‘energy’ than ‘climate change’.¹³ But nevertheless, some early public-facing policy initiatives referred explicitly to climate change. The ill-fated *Bedtime Stories* advertisements, which depicted a child being read a scary story about rising flood waters were widely criticised for communicating about climate change in the wrong way.¹⁴ But in hindsight, it now seems refreshing that DECC was communicating about it at all.

The government’s flagship public-facing policy on home insulation and energy efficiency, the *Green Deal*, underscores the point. The Green Deal aims to provide finance for household insulation and other energy-saving measures in millions of homes across the country. The success of the Green Deal – let alone the many other policies that will follow over the coming years – hinges critically on people accepting the rationale for saving energy. The rationale is, of course, climate change. But this is difficult to tell from an announcement that launched the initiative:

“Energy saving has never been so attractive” – that’s the message from Edward Davey today...Householders who use the Green Deal to make improvements such as loft insulation, solid wall insulation and new heating systems will qualify. Packages could be worth over £1,000. The more work households decide to have done, the more cash they could receive. To qualify for the Cashback Scheme, households need to book a Green Deal property assessment so they are then ready to have improvements installed under the Green Deal from 28 January and get their cashback.”

The full press release does not mention climate change once. Replace the term ‘Green Deal’ with the only slightly more generic ‘Good Deal’, and it would be difficult to know what was being promoted at all. No-one is being encouraged to think about what climate change means, or how different behaviours (around the home, and when commuting, for example) might be related. No-one is being encouraged to think about climate change at all. The exclusively economic framing of the government’s flagship public engagement policy sends a clear message: people should take part in the Green Deal because it will be financially beneficial.

Why does this matter? The dangers of using an overly-economic framing for climate change and sustainability messages are well documented.¹⁵ If all that was necessary to tackle climate change was making a few, unrelated, financially beneficial changes to things like cavity wall insulation, then the ‘cashback’ framing of the Green Deal would be a brilliant public engagement strategy. But given that what actually needs to happen is a little more challenging than this – ultimately involving a complete overhaul of how we travel, eat, heat our homes, consume and work – this approach seems short-sighted. The Green Deal is a missed opportunity for the government to begin a positive national conversation about climate change.

Dr Tim Chatterton, an academic based at the University of West of England in Bristol, who completed a fellowship with DECC during 2012 to inform their ‘energy behaviour’ strategy, explains it like this:

“You could argue that in terms of a public narrative about climate change from the government, the legally binding targets of the Climate Change Act are one of the worst things that could have happened. It is now a matter of numbers – of achieving technical targets – rather than a social issue to be talked about and discussed”.

Chatterton’s argument is not that legally binding targets are a bad thing per se, but that they have bred complacency among policy makers in terms of communicating with the public about the issue:

“Exactly the same thing happened with air pollution controls set in 1996 – it became a technical issue, and everyone forgot about engaging the public. They lost any significant political profile and fifteen years later we had failed to achieve them. We can’t let the same thing happen with climate change”.

Silence from the NGOs

In hindsight, the international climate change negotiations in Copenhagen during December 2009 were never likely to deliver the globally binding deal on carbon dioxide emissions that campaigners and civil society organisations had said they would. ‘Hopenhagen’, as many banners and placards in the run-up to the negotiations read, was always likely to be a let-down. No binding target was agreed. The US and China did not compromise on their pre-conference positions. The world was not saved.

But neither did the world end. And while one genuinely significant opportunity to avert the worst impacts of climate change may have been squandered that year, the juggernaut of international negotiations ploughed on. What changed was the energy and enthusiasm of the campaigners who had worked so hard to bring climate change to the top of the global news agenda. Crushed partially by the failure of the negotiations, and partly by the weight of their own rhetoric, the NGOs that had coalesced so strongly on climate change prior to Copenhagen dispersed.

Prior to 2009, climate change had been strongly framed by both campaigning and sceptical voices as something primarily scientific. Scientists themselves were certainly part of the media and public discourse. But more often it was environmental campaigners and sceptics – neither particularly well-qualified to defend or interrogate the science – who would engage in passionate debates about ice-core data, temperature graphs and computer modelling. The problem was not that non-scientists were debating the science, but that so much weight was placed on the science itself.¹⁶

When, inevitably, minor flaws in the science were identified – or when the inner workings of science were laid bare in the hacking of University of East Anglia emails (dubbed ‘climategate’) – campaigners were faced with a serious problem. While sceptic voices grew more shrill, many NGOs backed away from the debate, unwilling, or unable, to enter into a ‘fact-throwing’ competition with the voices challenging the science. Rather than provide further fuel to the sceptics, many campaigners opted to starve them of media oxygen. At least one large UK environmental NGO took the decision not to publicly talk about climate change once the Climate Change Act had been passed because of the potentially toxic nature of the discussions it created. The result? A marked drop in the number of civil society voices prepared to stand up publicly for climate change.

Silent scientists and a muted media

It was not only the NGOs that lost their voice on climate change following the climate science controversies of 2009/2010. When the ‘climategate’ story broke, and the global media spotlight shone on a handful of scientists with no experience of dealing with such a situation, many academics either refused to comment or waited until the media storm had passed before making statements. Repeated attacks on scientists’ credibility – some legitimate, but most deceptive and disingenuous – left many academics cowed, and disinclined to offer

public views or enter into media debates. For a period, the voices of the sceptics went largely unchallenged. Although public trust in climate scientists has recovered, it temporarily took a hit.¹⁷ As Bob Ward, the LSE Grantham Institute's Communications Director puts it:

"There was a great deal of negative media coverage about climate scientists and their research in 2009 and 2010. This coverage included unfairly casting doubt on the conduct and motives of individual researchers. Understandably, many researchers became more wary about engaging with the media under such hostile conditions".

But perhaps nowhere was the impact of 'climategate' felt as strongly as in UK newsrooms. Even sympathetic editors, caught on the back foot by what looked for a time like a genuine controversy, accused their environmental journalists of failing to properly investigate and check the claims of climate scientists and campaigners. James Painter, of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University explains the change in UK media coverage like this:

"The coverage has been nothing like as voluminous since the peak of Copenhagen, and indeed has not recovered even to 2007 levels, except for a small peak at beginning of 2013. After 2009, there is plenty of evidence that some newsrooms in UK did re-think their coverage of CC, but not necessarily in terms of volume, more in terms of putting more sceptical voices in the newspapers."

The UK media has not uniformly facilitated a culture of silence on climate change. Certainly, there are still outlets which regularly cover climate change. But a door that was once firmly shut – to sceptical commentary in the mainstream national media – has once again been opened.

Silence among the public

Given the prevailing trends among politicians, the media, NGOs and the academy, it is hardly surprising that climate change has fallen off the public's radar. Many will recognise the experience described by COIN's George Marshall:

"I am constantly dropping climate change into conversations with strangers, talking about the weird weather or something similar. I'm always casual about it - after all, no one wants to find themselves sitting next to a zealot on a long distance train journey."

But I need not worry because, however I say it, the result is almost always the same: the words collapse, sink and die in mid-air and the conversation suddenly changes course. This is hard to describe, but anyone who tries it knows exactly what I mean. It is like an invisible force field that you only discover when you barge right into it. Few people ever do, because, without out having ever been told, they have somehow learned that this topic is out of bounds.”

Marshall’s anecdotal evidence is backed up by research. In annual polling by Ipsos MORI, climate change has steadily declined as a spontaneously mentioned issue of environmental concern,¹⁸ and a forthcoming report from the Royal Society of Arts reveals the lack of climate change conversation among the British public.¹⁹ A full 40% of 2000 people surveyed in 2013 said that they never speak about climate change to their friends, family or colleagues. The few conversations that were held tended to be short, with more than two-thirds of people talking for less than ten minutes about the issue.

The latest figures from Yale University paint a similar picture of US public opinion, suggesting that climate silence is by no means only a UK phenomenon. A vanishingly small proportion of Americans were talking about climate change to each other in 2013: only 8% reported communicating publically about it (including social media), while almost 70% reported that they rarely or *never* spoke about it, even privately to friends and family.²⁰

In an analysis of public opinion on climate change over almost a decade, the sociologist Robert Brulle tracked changes in public attitudes against a range of underlying trends.²¹ He found that scientific publications – such as the much vaunted Assessment Reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) – had very little impact on aggregate public views. While media coverage exerted an important influence, Brulle argued that the coverage itself was largely a function of economic factors and what he termed ‘elite cues’. Brulle concluded that information-based science advocacy has had only a minor effect on public concern, but that messages and positions from political elites and advocacy groups are critical in influencing climate change opinion. What public figures say matters – especially when they say nothing at all.

To some extent, the public’s withdrawal from the climate change debate is because the physical signs of climate change – tangible, concrete examples of human impact – are difficult to conclusively identify in countries like the UK. There is some evidence that people who have experienced flooding are more likely to make a link between human activity and climate change.²² But if it is necessary to wait until every British citizen has had the misfortune of experiencing the impacts of climate change, it will be too late to do much about it.

There is also some evidence that the recession, and associated cuts to public services, have dominated not only the policy agenda but also decimated people's 'finite pool of worry'.²³ Public attention to any issue is thought to move in cycles, and dramatic events or developments can shift these cycles quickly into a different phase. However, there is a perverse kind of logic in waiting for a climate emergency in order to engage the public.

Perhaps more than anything, as the work of anthropologist Kari Norgaard has demonstrated, people are capable of a spectacular form of double-think – socially constructed silence – when necessary.²⁴ Over the course of two years, Norgaard interviewed 46 people in Bygdaby, a remote coastal town in Norway. Awareness of climate change was high and people openly recognised that the weather was changing dramatically. In particular the ski hill, an essential component of the town's local economy and cultural identity, was opening weeks later and only with the help of artificial snow. Despite this, there was virtually no discussion about climate change. As a local teacher put it to her "We live in one way and we think in another. We learn to think in parallel. It's a skill, an art of living."

It is certainly easier to not think, talk or communicate about climate change. Even those among the public who are concerned about the problem may feel deeply conflicted about acting on it. We have more than enough psychological tricks to procrastinate the problem away.²⁵ In Part II of this briefing series, we explore in detail the complex social and psychological reasons for climate silence. But there is a more pressing question: how can the climate silence be broken?

New narratives for breaking the climate silence

Most people do not oppose action to tackle climate change, are not sceptical about its causes and say they are prepared to make behavioural changes to address it. But at the same time, few are actively, deeply engaging with the issue. We have failed, collectively, to make climate change something that inspires passion in all but a vocal minority (on either side of the argument).

Unfortunately, the facts of climate change do not speak for themselves: the climate silence is not going to be overcome by turning up the volume on the science. It is now well-established that people's values, identities, aspirations and the social norms of their peer groups shape the way they think about climate change.²⁶ Climate change is fundamentally a human story,

and the challenge for anyone invested in re-igniting public interest is to reconnect with that basic fact. But the narratives and storylines that could bring climate change to life are conspicuous by their absence.

Without a way of translating the dry, faceless facts of climate science into living, breathing reasons to care about climate change, meaningful public engagement will remain out of sight. For too long, climate change has been stuck in a rut – pigeon-holed as a scientific and an ‘environmental’ issue – a niche topic that has little direct relevance to the lives of ordinary people.

Does it matter whether scientists are 90% or 95% certain that human carbon emissions are causing climate change? These kinds of technicalities, as important as they are, do not fire the hearts and minds of the general public. Climate science is like a dictionary. The facts provide the basic vocabulary, but the real challenge is in weaving poetry and prose to inspire people to care about the problem, to consider what it might mean to them, or to engage in the deep, reflective forward-planning and dreaming that climate change demands of us.

This means seeding a whole series of new conversations about climate change – letting 100 flowers bloom – and beginning our attempts to engage the public with the public themselves. What do different groups of people care about? What are the things that make them proud? What are their hopes and dreams for the future? How do they express their values through the subjects that they talk about and the language that they use?

At COIN, we want to start these conversations with people who haven’t traditionally felt engaged with climate change. Earlier this year, we began one new conversation with citizens on the centre right, who tend to be more sceptical about climate change.²⁷ Instead of asking how we could convince right-leaning climate sceptics that they were wrong, we argued that there is no inherent reason why climate change and the values of centre-right should be incompatible (but that there is a vacuum where a compelling conservative narrative on climate change should be). The report we published was the first serious attempt to build a bridge between the values of the centre-right and those of a more sustainable society.

Crucially, it was not based on the hunches and intuitions of campaigners or advertising agencies, but on the research evidence describing the best way to engage the public on climate change, and how to promote the values of a more sustainable society. Based on this evidence, we proposed four narratives for engaging the centre-right more effectively, linking

climate change to a love of local landscapes; the challenge of securing a more resilient energy system; the ‘good life’ based on healthy communities and the promise of a ‘new’ environmentalism focused on building a better future.

Our centre-right project is only one example, but it provides a model for engaging the public that offers a way of breaking the climate silence. The audience could be a faith-based community, keen motorists, trade unionists or a group of small businesses – the same three-step logic would apply:

- **Unearth the values and principles on which any given group bases their views about the world**
- **Identify the language and narratives that resonate with this group on any topic – not specifically climate change**
- **Find ways of building a bridge – a meaningful storyline – between the group’s values and those of a more sustainable society.**

COIN advocates a national programme of debates and conversations, begun not by green campaigners but by representatives of different communities (people who could become new heroes on climate change). These events would be designed not to make an economic case, put forward scientific facts or win an argument, but to allow people to express and discuss their concerns, fears, dreams and hopes for the future. What could be more useful than providing the fora and support for citizens to talk to each other about how climate change will impact on their future, and how they want to respond to it?

Isolated examples of these kinds of initiatives have taken place before.²⁸ When they have occurred, a striking pattern has been observed: people move from disinterest to a position of engaged concern.²⁹ Without a doubt, ‘conversations’ are only part of the answer. In the absence of meaningful action, words are not enough. But getting people talking – on their own terms, and in their own social networks – about climate change is a crucial start. As Dr Jonathan Rowson, Director of the Social Brain Project at the Royal Society of Arts puts it:

“A big part of the silence is the absence of a sense that the problem can be solved. Even getting people to disagree about solutions is a form of progress.”

There are some tentative signs that the climate silence won't last much longer. Civil society groups are once again finding their voices, looking towards critical events in 2015 like the UN climate negotiations in Paris. The general election will force the Coalition Government's divisions on climate change out into the open. And as the destructive impacts of climate change – melting icecaps, super-strength storms and chaotic weather – continue to manifest themselves, it will be increasingly difficult to avoid talking about the climate.

The challenge for anyone invested in re-igniting public interest is to ensure that this time around, the conversation involves a much wider cross-section of society – allowing a chorus of public debate and discussion to break the silence on climate change.

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