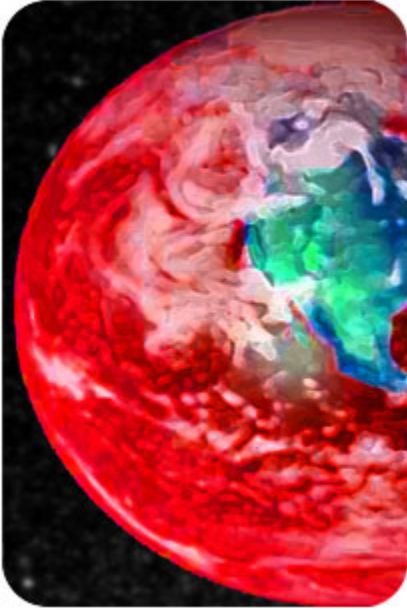


GLOBALISATION OFF THE RAILS



We are heading into the General Election campaign and already it needs to be rescued. There is no shortage of towering issues we could address – climate change, air pollution, secure pensions, the future of the NHS, transport needs of the 21 st century, or avoiding a succession of Middle East wars. Instead, we may simply face a barrage of abuse.

It could easily degenerate into an embarrassing bore. Whose leader is the ugliest? Whose track record is most dishonest? Whose policies are the most confused or contradictory? Who can lock up most people in their own homes or be toughest on immigrants? It could make the Big Brother house look positively intellectual.

Other voices push more serious issues at us. The conference of scientists in Exeter last month set out how short a time we have to tackle climate change. Essentially, if we don't have a serious programme in place by 2015 we are stuffed. It isn't that the world will end then but that the process of global warming would become irreversible. We could not then halt the melting of the Greenland or Antarctic ice shelves. If either ice shelf fragmented sea levels could rise by 18ft. The Gulf Stream would probably cease and, in a warming planet, Britain would face frozen winters. The predicted drop of 5C in Britain 's winter temperatures would make it colder than the "Little Ice Age" of the 17th and 18th centuries. This was when the Thames froze over and people held fairs on it.

We need a complete rethink on policies for transport, energy, and agriculture. Everything has to be reassessed against the question of sustainability. It affects our global policies as much as our domestic policies. Investment in public transport infrastructure is critical for Britain , but decisions made in China and India could be the big factors in our future.

The Chinese government has promised people that within a decade every family with one child will also be able to have one car. It would change their car ownership from 33 per thousand to 333. The planet would suffocate in its emissions if we don't move to carbon neutral cars. India won't be far behind. And neither country has the roads infrastructure to cope anyway. The compelling case in Europe for a public transport infrastructure as an alternative to the roads folly becomes even more compelling when you look at the developing world.

We are already waking up to the realities of erratic weather patterns. They found this out in Boscastle and Carlisle , but in every major town and city we know that the existing drains and sewer systems can not cope with the flash flooding that hits them. There is only so long that we can live off the engineering generosity of the Victorians. Now it is our turn to invest in a re-engineering of cities that will address the needs of future generations rather than just short term dividends.

The massive emphasis on global free trade has produced a dangerous ignorance of its consequences. Huge amounts of food are shipped from one side of the planet to another. The trade is largely in pursuit

of lower wages to farm workers, lower environmental standards, and huge amounts of food miles. Not only does this force our own farmers into bankruptcy, it ends up subsidising huge carbon emissions in transport and makes it much harder for people to get access to genuinely fresh food.

In the developing world it also means that they get saddled with intensive agriculture systems (owned by corporations) that drive millions from the land in order to feed consumers in the North rather than their own children in the South.

I've just come back from meetings in Brussels with the European Commission and from discussions with companies in the environmental technologies industries. I have no doubt that a sustainability agenda could create a massive number of jobs as well as a cleaner and more secure environment. I have no doubt that environment commissioners and environment ministers hold the same views. My sadness comes from seeing these same ministers sidelined by the industrial lobbyists who see any such intervention as a breach of their market rights.

In rail services we saw the same mentality drive maintenance work and track renewal to the sidelines, while track operators fed themselves on stock options, share dividends and telephone number salaries. Only later did we begin to pay the price in lives.

In its origins, Labour was never afraid to stand up for the poor, never afraid to demand a decent wage and secure employment. Now we must find the courage to add to this a demand that our children have a planet fit to grow up in. If we duck this, don't expect our children to thank us.