

Britons are split into five 'tribes' on climate change but many agree on one thing... why do our best if the others keep polluting?

ARE you a tree hugging or a climate criminal? A Net Zero evangelist or a denier? As with so much else, the public debate on climate change and what to do about it seems polarised between two extremes. Yet as my polling often finds, the voters are a good deal smarter and more thoughtful than this. And with the issue set to become a major election battleground, they need a good deal of convincing that sensible answers are at hand.

My research finds that the public divides into five 'tribes' on this question. Impatient Idealists want faster action and think Net Zero is worth paying for; Committed Contributors are the most likely to have changed their own behaviour; Squeezed Sympathisers believe

‘Achieving Net Zero in UK will make little or no difference’

the climate is changing but say they can't afford to pay more; Cautious Pragmatists are not hostile to the environmental agenda but prioritise other things; and Staunch Sceptics think the threat is exaggerated and resist bigger bills.

Even within these groups, opinion is nuanced. Many of the most climate-conscious also worry about their energy costs and wonder how far we can rely on wind and solar power. Those at the sceptical end doubt the wisdom of dashing to Net Zero ahead of other countries. But few of them deny that climate change is real or that human activity is a factor. The debate is over what action is needed, how fast it should go, and



By **LORD ASHCROFT**

who should pay for it all. Clear answers are hard to come by because there are few trusted sources to provide them. Voters have not forgotten a previous government encouraging people to buy diesel cars (to help combat climate change, indeed) only for its successors to clobber them.

To many, green schemes always seem like an excuse to raise tax. Businesses are suspected of using climate change as cover for higher prices. Environmental groups will naturally want to present the worst-case scenario. Even climate scientists, who must be funded from somewhere and whose findings must surely be open to interpretation, are not considered unimpeachable.

Overall, I found the balance of opinion (by no means unanimous) was that achieving Net Zero would probably mean higher costs for their households, and that tackling climate change was outranked by affordability and independence from foreign suppliers when we asked what mattered most when it came to energy policy.

They were also more likely than not to favour new oil and gas exploration. Last week, the Government gave the go-ahead to the long-planned Jackdaw gas field, while today The Mail on Sunday reports Prime Minister Andy Burnham and his Chancellor John Healey will approve oil drilling at the more controversial Rosebank site. The decision will be popular with the public, though not the wider Labour Party whose ban on new exploration I found was backed by only

one in three voters. Many thought it absurd to forbid ourselves from drilling while cheerfully importing North Sea oil from Norway.

At the same time, many saw Net Zero as an opportunity rather than a burden, holding out the prospect of new industries, new jobs and, ultimately, cheaper energy. The policies for achieving it were another question.

Testing hypothetical ideas, majorities favoured new wind and solar farms, more nuclear power stations, and taxes on frequent flyers and high-carbon goods – provided the revenues made their way back to them in some form. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, the closer to home the ideas got, the more resistance they encountered. Traffic charges, banning petrol and diesel cars, phasing out gas boilers and charging more for meat and dairy products to reflect their emissions went down considerably less well.

Two things were clear: many have had enough of politicians 'policing your household', as one of my focus group participants put it. 'I'm fed up with the Government going, "You've got to do this", "you've got to do that", they added. The second conclusion was that people's patience with ever-rising costs and taxes is at an end. 'It's any excuse to put a tax on something,' said a contributor, who urged firms to 'be environmentally friendly but don't charge us extra for the privilege of it'. Just under half said they didn't know how much Net Zero policies added to their energy bills, and

almost as many said they were unwilling to pay more.

Who, then, should pay for the transition to greener energy? Big businesses, energy companies and high-polluting individuals were the most popular targets, predictably enough. Some argued that this would soon amount to the same thing: higher business costs would ultimately be extracted from customers, just as government largesse is ultimately paid for by taxpayers.

Looming over this is a question that bothers even some of the

‘People want to know what's the plan – and what's the cost’

most environmentally minded: what is the point of Britain making expensive efforts to cut its small share of global emissions if bigger countries are not doing the same? Voters overall agree by an 18-point margin that the UK achieving Net Zero will make little or no difference to climate change. They are more likely to accept that we should do all we can regardless of other countries – but even then, some wonder who we are leading if no one is following.

As far as the electorate is concerned, climate change is not a scientific controversy but a political one. What is the plan? What will it achieve? What will it cost, is it worth it, and who is going to join in? Voters are waiting for answers that sound sensible and fair.

● Lord Ashcroft is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His research is at LordAshcroftPolls.com. X/Facebook @LordAshcroft

QUOTES of the week

‘Human remains should only be displayed where there is documented and informed consent from the deceased individual.’

Glasgow Life, which runs the city's Kelvingrove Art Gallery, as it withdraws ancient Egyptian mummies from an exhibition because they did not give their consent.

‘Tripsnacking.’

New travel trend to describe tourists who take a succession of one-night city breaks.

‘Does he really think everyone has collective amnesia after the last few years?’

Palace source after Prince Harry claimed 'some people' do not want a Royal Family truce.



‘Mascara, concealer... I don't know, a bottle of sauvignon blanc.’

Housing Secretary Angela Rayner, when asked which items she would stockpile in a 'disaster bag' in case of a national emergency.

‘They should go FULL BLAST!!! Take down the costly and ridiculous windmills.’

Donald Trump urges Britain to drill at the Rosebank oil field after ministers gave the go-ahead to exploiting the untapped gas site Jackdaw.

‘I decided to switch off at half-time and watch a drama instead. It was slightly less distressing, even though a lot of people died.’

Radio 4 host and ardent Manchester United fan Nick Robinson reflects on his side's 4-1 Champions League drubbing against Como.

‘Hearts far from this valley will ache with yours.’

The King helps to mark the 60th anniversary of the Aberfan school tragedy.

‘Even the Dodgy Dossier was better than this.’

Daily Telegraph headline on a one-star review of Alastair Campbell's new book, Perseverance – a portmanteau of the words perseverance and resilience.