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[Carbon Graveyard](#)

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Almost half the UK's greenhouse gas emissions have gone missing. Here they are, and here are the amazing implications.

By George Monbiot, published on the Guardian's website, 5th May 2010

It's not surprising that neither Labour nor the Tories wanted to run the [Guardian's National Carbon Calculator](#). Had they done so, they would have had to acknowledge that the figures on which they base their climate change policies are a work of science fiction. The [government claims that our total emissions amount to 627 million tonnes of CO2 equivalent](#) (MtCO_{2e}). The Tories have never disputed this figure. It's convenient for both sides to accept this falsehood, and to pretend that the challenge is far smaller than it is.

As the figures pulled together by the calculator team show, the real total (using 2007 figures) should be 950Mt. The government artificially excludes the greenhouse gas emissions caused by the goods we import and the international travel we commission. It's not hard to see why ministers choose to overlook these figures. If just the outsourced emissions (gases released in producing goods we import) are counted, all the cuts the UK claims to have made since 1990 would be cancelled out – and then some.

According to [the government's provisional figures for 2009](#), the UK has cut its greenhouse gas emissions by 198MtCO_{2e} since 1990. But the Carnegie Institution for Science [estimates that we have outsourced 253Mt](#). The sad and shocking truth is that the apparent success of the UK's carbon-cutting programme, on which the government bases its boast that we're a world leader in reducing pollution, results from the collapse of our manufacturing base and its re-establishment overseas.

So throw in 253Mt for outsourced emissions, 7Mt for the international shipping we use, 67Mt for international aviation plus the 2Mt the government has failed to include for extra greenhouse warming (not CO₂) caused by domestic flights, and you discover that the UK has left 329Mt of carbon off its national accounts, or very nearly 50% of the 2007 total (636Mt). The figure would have been even higher had the team included the net 40Mt of emissions which [Professor Dieter Helm calculates](#) is caused by UK citizens holidaying abroad (net means that the emissions from foreign tourists holidaying here have been subtracted).

Even if the calculator achieves nothing else, highlighting this massive discrepancy should shake up the debate and change our view of what the UK has achieved.

Just as striking are the figures for manufacturing and consumption. When I started playing with the calculator, at first I skipped over the top category. This is because, like many environmentalists, most of my work has been focused on efforts to tackle our direct consumption of energy: the heat and electricity we use at home and in offices, and the fuel we use for transport. I immediately ran into trouble. However many wind turbines and nuclear power plants I commissioned, however many drivers I shoved on to the

railways and businessmen I dragged kicking and screaming out of aeroplanes, I couldn't get the totals down by anything like the required amount. Only then did I notice how great a proportion of our emissions come from manufacturing and consumption.

Consulting my book *Heat*, first published in 2006, I now realise that I used to be half-aware of the scale of this issue, but somehow, in the midst of all the excited debates about how our electricity should be generated, our homes improved and our transport networks run, I had managed to forget it. So it was a shock to discover that manufacturing and consumption (if you include the construction industry) accounts for 541Mt of our emissions, or 57% of the true total. This is a good bit higher than I thought in 2006, because the sector's impact is massively boosted by the outsourced emissions the official figures don't count. The great majority of the UK's offshore total results from our consumption of foreign goods. The exclusion of these figures from official accounts is one of the reasons why we have neglected this sector.

Of the 541Mt caused by manufacturing and consumption, 223Mt is embodied in the imported goods (minus food) we consume; 141Mt arises from the energy used by UK industries; 87Mt from all food production and consumption (onshore and offshore); 19Mt from industrial process emissions (the CO₂ released by chemical processes like cement manufacture); 23Mt from the waste we create and 48Mt from the freight vehicles (some of them excluded from official figures) required to move our stuff around.

Like most people in the environment movement, I spend my time talking vaguely about the need to reduce the consumption of goods, but specifically – with figures attached – about the need to reduce the direct consumption of energy. But however well we insulate our homes, change our travel habits, alter the electricity supply and switch to more efficient appliances, however much the public sector cleans up its act and the efficiency of commercial buildings is improved, we'll still be only scratching the surface of the problem. The real issue is not our direct consumption of energy but the greenhouse gases embodied in the goods we buy. It strikes me that in focusing on direct consumption I've helped to give both the government and business an unduly easy ride.

So here we bump into the second probable reason why Labour and the Conservatives have chosen not to try out the calculator ([Simon Hughes of the Lib Dems did run the calculator and shared the result](#)). It highlights the glaring contradiction in the manifestos of all three main parties: they all seek to boost economic growth by raising consumption, but consumption has already pushed greenhouse gas levels way beyond the point that they consider sustainable. You can pursue a policy of economic growth and reduced carbon emissions only by engineering a fudge of the kind the calculator exposes: offshoring one third of our emissions, most of which arise from the goods we consume. The impacts of rising consumption are hidden by excluding them from national accounts.

Only the Green party has approached this issue honestly, by accepting upfront that economic growth is the problem and that current levels of consumption cannot be sustained. It's time we called out the other parties on their failure to acknowledge, let alone tackle, this contradiction. And it's time we all recognised that consumption is the big issue.

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