

Gordon Brown in Deep Water: Labour Negligence Caused Flood Disaster

by Marcia Merry Baker and Mary Burdman

As the damage toll continues to mount from the Summer flood disaster in Britain, Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Environment Secretary Hilary Benn are in deep water over revelations of the Labour Government's deliberate non-action on warnings made three years ago, and over their excuses.

In Bush-like fashion, the Tony Blair government, with Brown as Chancellor of the Exchequer, had refused to overhaul U.K. flood defenses and drainage systems, even when the infrastructure problems were pointed out by their own agencies. Two separate government reports, one in July 2004 and another a year later, were critical of existing anti-flood plans. But no action was taken. Instead, variations of the now-standard excuses were given: that flood control systems are "too costly," and that they are "bad for the environment." A wild anti-infrastructure plan was pushed, called, "Making Space for Water," which advocated that run-off be allowed to spread freely!

Now, the worst floods in over 60 years have deluged England. Well over 1 million people are affected, dozens of towns remain engulfed, 350,000 persons have had no safe drinking water for two weeks, and so on. The cost will be well over \$5 billion. Brown's sputterings that blame "global warming" are meeting an infuriated population. The "Katrina reaction" has hit. And the Queen might have as well said: "Good Job, Brownie."

Vast Flood Damage

The weather pattern changed this year as the jetstream shifted to a more southerly position earlier this year, and in June, heavy rains fell in central Britain. In July, torrential rains fell on the Severn and Avon River Basins, and the upper Thames watershed. On July 20, up to eight inches fell in one day in some locations of the West Country. Given the relatively gentle landscape of this region, the huge volume of run-off wrought havoc.

The Severn River became a raging torrent. The Severn, at 222 miles—small by world standards—is the longest of Britain's rivers. Its estuary demarcates the lower boundary between England and Wales. With a flood crest exceeding 20 feet over normal at places, it roared through the major cities along its course in Gloucestershire: Tewkesbury, Gloucester, and nearby Cheltenham. The usually placid Avon tore through Shakespeare's Stratford-upon-Avon, flooding the riverbank theater.

The Thames, rising in the storm area, raged eastward, flooding Oxford, Reading, Henley, and the towns along its way downstream. Much of London itself would have been under water, except that the tide was out when the Thames peak hit the



U.S. Army/Sgt. Michael J. Carden

As was the U.S. Army in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina (above), the British Army has been deployed to assist victims of the current floods in England, whose devastation has been made all the worse by the government's treacherous decisions to not maintain water management infrastructure.

city, so the floodwaters did not crash into a wall of seawater.

Hundreds of lakes were created out of the floodwaters in the river basins. At least 4,500 houses were flooded within three days, and thousands of cars submerged. The national tally of flooded homes is expected to hit 10,000.

Lacking throughout were flood-basin-wide systems of modern infrastructure—storm drains, dredged river channels to carry off the heavy flow, water defense walls at correct sites, and so on. In Gloucester, for example, dredging of the Severn channel had been *suspended* in recent years!

There are now vast pools of flood run-off mixed with sewage. Many localities do not have modern water management systems which keep stormwater separate from wastewater flows. This year's epic flooding may, in any case, have overwhelmed such systems, but without them, floodwater contamination is guaranteed, even with a lesser flood. Safe water is lacking for 350,000 people in Gloucestershire for perhaps up to two weeks, as water treatment plants in Gloucester and elsewhere were inundated and shut down. The Army mobilized to distribute 5 million liters of bottled water. Eighty tank trucks are trying to keep 926 bowsers—public-access water tanks—filled throughout the county.

In contrast, where flood defenses were in place, they proved their worth. The flood wall structures held in Oxfordshire at Kidderminster, Bewdley, Shrewsbury and Kidlington, in the Thames Basin. Otherwise, parts of Oxford are under 3-4 feet of water and many families were taken to shelter at the Oxford United's Kassam football stadium.

Without needed infrastructure, the order of the day was heroic intervention. On July 23, in Gloucestershire, the Waltham electricity substation was saved from going down after 20 million liters of water were frantically pumped out by firefighters and the Royal Marines. Electricity service was maintained for 500,000 people.

2004 Warnings Ignored

In 2004, the government said coordination among water companies, local councils, and the Environment Agency, under DEFRA (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) had to improve. In 2005, the government committed to "work towards giving" the Environment Agency "an overarching strategic overview across all flooding and coastal

erosion risks." But it never happened.

Moreover, DEFRA made cuts in flood management. Eight out of 12 regional engineers for flood control were axed. Three regional offices for flood response were eliminated—in Lincoln, Taunton, and Tunbridge Wells. On July 24, the Public and Commercial Services Union issued a warning that DEFRA planned to cut another 550 more jobs by March 2008. The Union's General-Secretary Serwotka said, "There is a real fear that cuts will hamper the ability of DEFRA to co-ordinate future responses to floods and extreme weather conditions..."

The government is on the hotseat. At Gordon Brown's first regular monthly press conference on July 23, he and Hilary Benn had to announce that there will be an independent review into the crisis.

Whom can the government blame? "Global warming." At the July 23 press briefing, Benn recited the usual litany, "The scientific consensus is clear that the climate is changing, that human activity is having an effect, and that is why acting against global warming is everyone's responsibility."

Brown said: "I think that every advanced industrial country

Global Warming To Blame? This Is All Wet!

The charge has been flying in British media, as well as from Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Environmental Secretary Hilary Benn, that global warming is to blame for the flooding disaster in Britain. This is all wet.

The most common Al Gore assertion is that, the rains are just part of the "extremes" now experienced in Earth's weather patterns—including hurricanes, droughts, floods, and such—attributable to the baseless claim that the planet is heating up because of greenhouse gas emissions. That has been refuted, including by *EIR*, so often, it is only noted here in passing.

One specific charge made by the London *Independent* newspaper, is that a research paper published July 24 in the journal *Nature*, shows that there is a link between the British Summer flooding and man-caused climate change.

The cited *Nature* article shows no such thing. One of the authors, Nathan Gillett, of the University of East Anglia, told the London *Daily Mail* and the *Guardian* explicitly that the *Nature* article looked only at the average annual rain and snowfall over the last century, and does not make the case that the current flooding in the United Kingdom is being caused by man-made global warming.

Let us now look more closely at the article in *Nature*. Entitled "Detection of Human Influence on Twentieth Cen-

tury Precipitation Trends," it was authored by Xuebin Zhang and Francis W. Zwiers of Environment Canada; Gabriele C. Hegerl of Duke University; F. Hugo Lambert of the University of California at Berkeley; Nathan P. Gillett of the University of East Anglia; Susan Solomon of the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Earth Sciences Research Laboratory; Peter Stott of Hadley Center Meteorology Office, U.K.; and Toru Nozawa, of the National Institute for Environmental Studies Japan.

The article is based on the output of 14 different climate models, the same ones that were used in the preparation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fourth Assessment Report. The computer models were run with three different model inputs: One group of models was run with only natural causes (solar radiation, volcanos); another group of models was run with only greenhouse gases produced by human beings; and the last group of models was run with a combination of the other two.

Then the research team did what is known as "ensemble modelling." In this, the models are run 50 or more times, and then the average of all of the model output is taken. After averaging the model results, the research team claims to have found the human fingerprint on global warming and the increase in precipitation trends over the last century, because its model output with greenhouse gases had a slightly larger percentage change.

The *Nature* article is a study in statistical voodoo, and with that kind of trickery the only fingerprint that could have been found was the fingerprint on the money used to fund the research.

is learning we will have to adapt to new ways of doing things including improving our infrastructure and the siting of our infrastructure in the future, and to make sure we can respond to all emergencies as they arise. We are coming to terms with some of the issues surrounding climate change. It is pretty clear that some of the 19th-Century infrastructure and where it is sited is something we will have to review.” (See box).

Cueing off this, a diversionary, contrived debate is ensuing over whether to cease allowing homes to be built in flood plains. Never mind that this would disallow the Prime Minister’s headquarters at No. 10 Downing Street, which is in the Thames Basin!

But as one irate blogger from London wrote in the midst of the Thames overflow: “Any hint that this is to be blamed on Climate Change is an insult to the people whose homes have been destroyed....”

The real issue is infrastructure.

Holistic Hokum—‘Making Space for Water’!

In 2004, the Environment Agency, under DEFRA, adopted an anti-infrastructure flood strategy called, “Making Space for Water,” terming it a “holistic” approach to water and land management. This is a rationalization for not building water-control walls, dredging channels, and other drainage control measures, which are considered to be too costly, and instead allowing water to find its own “space” on the land.

Elaborate justifications included how it would be good for agriculture, riparian wildlife, and the like. The arguments were the same as those advanced after the epic 1993 Mississippi River flooding. At that time, *The New York Times* publicized the “Let the Rivers Run Free” policy, to oppose the rehabilitation of levee systems.

The DEFRA do-nothing ruse created deep public upset over the prospect of floods. To counter this, DEFRA launched a campaign to overcome “cultural barriers” to its policy. One DEFRA paper said, “The Environment Agency is considering how to adopt a more rigorous approach to abandonment of sea walls where costs exceed benefit.”

Now the “Katrina effect” may be forcing DEFRA to back off. DEFRA itself has had to admit, according to the July 24 *Guardian*, that there is a lack of central responsibility and information for those hit by the flooding, that there was insufficient risk assessment, that development planning was made without assessing the risks of urban flooding, and that wider drainage problems were ignored in making investment decisions.

“UK Floods Lead to Strategy Rethink,” is how the *Builder & Engineer* website puts it. It reports: “Indeed, a scoping report by the engineers Babbie in 2003 looked at the dangers of the Severn flooding around Gloucester and concluded that such holistic measures were unlikely to be effective in such areas. At the same time the report noted that there was considerable local unease that dredging—reasonably effective but environmentally costly to wildlife—had been stopped.”

Now Gloucester is under water.