

'Green Tokenism' – Government Cars

The UK Government has been making some attempts to change the way it operates in order to benefit the environment. One example of such a change in practice is the move towards purchasing hybrid-engine or low CO₂-emitting vehicles – especially the well publicised Toyota Prius.

Car purchases

The Government Car & Despatch Service (GCDS), which provides a chauffeur service for civil servants and government Ministers, currently owns 98 Toyota Prius's and 12 Honda Civic Hybrids¹. Up from 35 Toyota Prius's at the last annual report.

The list price for the Toyota Prius is £20,677 and for a Honda Civic Hybrid £16,285. These are significantly more expensive than a similarly sized car like a Ford Focus Hatchback at £12,122².

| Make/Model | Number | List Price* |
|--------------------|--------|-------------|
| Toyota Prius | 98 | £20,677 |
| Honda Civic Hybrid | 12 | £16,285 |
| Ford Focus 1.4 | (110) | £12,122 |

Government agencies refuse to release details of discounts obtained on commercial orders, but had the GCDS bought the same number of Fords instead of hybrid-engine cars at list price, they could have saved the taxpayer **£888,000**.

Environmental impact assessment

In May 2007, the former Prime Minister Tony Blair told National Public Radio in the United States³:

"The reality is, if we shut down the whole of Britain — shut it down, nothing emitted — within two years, the growth in Chinese emissions would wipe out the difference we would make."

The implications are clear: Marginal differences in a small portion of the UK's carbon emissions will not make a significant difference to total global emissions which, it is feared, contribute to climate change. There is a strong argument that the £888,000 is therefore wasted.

However, if the GCDS really wanted to cut emissions it could have bought non-hybrid cars – like the Ford Focus - and spent the £888,000 to plant **74,028 trees**. This tree-planting

¹ Number of cars obtained by phone from Government Car & Despatch Service. Numbers have changed since last Government Car & Despatch Service annual report.

² Car prices obtained from What Car comparison service at <http://www.whatcar.co.uk/car-comparison.aspx>

³ National Public Radio, "British Prime Minister Tony Blair Defends Iraq War", downloaded from <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10237248> on 27/7/07



service – which is endorsed by environmentalists as an effective carbon reduction measure – can be bought at a rate of just £12 per tree from the company CarbonFootprint.Com. It is endorsed by TV Wildlife celebrity and conservationist Bill Oddie⁴.

These trees would 'breathe in' about 730 kg of carbon dioxide each over their natural lifetimes⁵. A small forest of 74,028 trees would take over 54 million kg of CO₂ out of the atmosphere.

Using official emissions data from the Vehicle Certification Authority (VCA)⁶ we can establish a weighted average of hybrid car emissions to be 104.54 g/km. That can be compared to emissions from the Ford Focus of 157 g/km. That leaves the average emissions saving per kilometre from using the hybrid-engine cars instead of a Ford Focus fleet at around 0.05kg.

That means that each Toyota Prius or Honda Hybrid car would have to drive over **9 million kilometres (5.8 million miles)** before it is retired to equal the carbon saving that could be achieved spending the money planting trees. It is distinctly unlikely this will happen as cars rarely last more than a few hundred thousand kilometres, and government cars are replaced far more frequently even than that.

It is therefore evident that purchasing a large fleet of hybrid-engine cars is a waste of taxpayers' money, and also a very ineffective measure with which to curb carbon emissions.

Comment from the TaxPayers' Alliance

Blair Gibbs, Campaign Director of the TaxPayers' Alliance, said:

"Our politician's obsession with the Toyota Prius is the worst sort of green tokenism. For the same money they could have purchased ordinary Fords with enough left over to plant more than 70,000 trees, which would have been much better for the environment and given our children a forest of trees to play among for generations to come. Instead, the government blew our money on the Hollywood option."

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⁴ CarbonFootprint.Com, "Pledge a Tree in your local area (available in the UK)", downloaded from <http://www.carbonfootprint.com/shop2.html> on 27/7/07

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ Vehicle Certification Authority, "VCACarFuelData.org.uk", downloaded from <http://www.vcacarfueldata.org.uk/> on 27/7/07