



ADDRESSING THE COMMONS - CLIMATE

Alan Simpson: We need to put the debate in the context of the best aspects of the Government's record. For the first time in history, the Labour Government gave a statutory undertaking to eradicate fuel poverty in this country by 2016. The Government and the Labour party should rightly be proud of that awesome commitment. Equally, the Prime Minister made it clear to the House that meeting Britain's Kyoto targets was a statutory and binding obligation. He has also said that addressing the challenge of climate change will be the centrepiece of the next Labour Government, so the amendment should be at the heart of what Labour has tried to stand for: taking people out of fuel poverty while meeting our broader global obligations to tackle climate change. It is thus bizarre and somewhat absurd that the Government refuse to endorse the targets in the amendment that successive Labour Ministers have affirmed as Government policy. We are having an "Alice Through the Looking Glass" debate that has been constructed by officials in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, rather than Labour Ministers or the Labour party.

The reduction of the carbon target from 5 to 4.2 megatonnes has been justified on the ground that it was done on the basis of the best available evidence at the time. People have asked the nature of that evidence and where it came from, but it has not been adequately justified. Our advisers, the Fuel Poverty Advisory Group, said that it was at a loss to understand why the Government wanted to introduce a lower target. I think that in this Bill, as in those that have preceded it, civil servants have been faced with the prospect of targets, but rather than asking how they can meet them, they have asked how they can lower the hurdle. They want to know how they can appear to be meeting Government targets without breaking a sweat. There is a conflict not between different parties in the House, but between the House—it knows the policies that came from the Government—and the civil servants who have the job of writing measures to deliver and implement Government policy. They should not rewrite such policies to give themselves an easier life while leaving everyone else with bigger problems.

The Minister understandably rebuffed the question of whether that would contribute to our ability to choose not to go down the nuclear path by saying that it was not in his remit to address energy industry issues because we are merely discussing a Bill on housing. That is perfectly fair. By the same token, however, he cannot try to shelter from reducing carbon savings as a result of improving household energy efficiency by saying that other savings would be met and exceeded in other parts of industry. We made specific commitments in relation to the housing sector and it is against those commitments that we are being asked to define a position in the Bill.

Hon. Members have counted the number of Labour MPs who signed the early-day motion, with different results.

David Taylor : It is 229.

Alan Simpson: It seems that the figure is now 229.

Someone said that it is hard to find a loser, but there are 230 potential losers—the 229 Labour MPs who signed the early-day motion in good faith and the country. Those commitments are not abstract figures. They will affect the quality of life of the most fuel-poor people in the country. The Government need to accept that the challenge that faces us is to stand by the commitments that we have made.

In a letter on behalf of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs dated 28 October, Alan Clifford of the sustainable energy policy division wrote to Mr. Robson, chair of the Association for the Conservation of Energy and a member of the Government's Fuel Poverty Advisory Group, in an attempt to rationalise why the lower figure of 4.2 million tonnes of carbon emissions was being set. He said:

"the White Paper figure was based on the best information available at the time, and was not a target."

Unfortunately, we are getting into the realms of pantomime. Civil servants may consistently say that the figure was not a target, but other voices in the background say that it was. The Labour manifesto said:

"We will lead the fight against global warming, through our target of a 20 per cent. reduction in carbon dioxide emissions by 2010."

So that target was defined in the manifesto.

The letter went on to say that the energy efficiency action plan, published in 2004, reduced the target to 4.2 million tonnes because that was deemed to be the appropriate figure. So the 5 million tonnes was not a fixed figure. However, when the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Matthew Taylor) asked the Prime Minister:

"Will he make it clear that there is no truth in the interpretation that has been put on the comments of some Ministers that Britain will stick to the new Government's 20 per cent. target for cuts to CO₂ emissions only if other countries co-operate in cutting their emissions? Will he confirm that our target is not conditional on the action of others?", his response could not have been clearer. He said:

"It is not a conditional target".—[Official Report , 24 June 1997; Vol. 296, c. 687–88.]

We have targets that are defined as unconditional; targets that are defined as a quantum; targets that are defined by a succession of Labour Ministers; and targets that are endorsed, approved and supported by 229 Labour Members. I suspect that the overwhelming majority of local authorities, non-governmental organisations and everyone who works in the environment and fuel poverty sector all envisaged us setting and standing by our targets. The question that will baffle the public is why on earth we would want to renege on them now.

The Minister said that there was a danger that setting the target would create a mood of complacency and we would be held back, but the final paragraph of Alan Clifford's letter nails the lie of that when he says:

"it has always been recognised that additional measures might be needed to achieve the domestic goal of a 20 per cent. reduction in carbon dioxide emissions below 1990 levels by 2010."

By setting the lower figure of 4.2 million tonnes, there is a calculated level of under-achievement in which officials recognise that the Government will be forced to identify other measures. Why do we build in a guarantee of failure to meet the targets that we have set for ourselves when it is within in our reach to do so and to stand by the commitments that we made?

Hon. Members are right to say that the energy efficiency industry waits for us—pleads with us—to set those targets, which it will meet. It is incomprehensible that the Minister asks the House to set lower standards when our original targets are within our reach and we should stand by them. I am not asking him to do a Dolly Parton and stand by our man, but I am asking him to stand by our manifesto, which would be welcomed by the public and the party.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I shall be brief because I agree with every word my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) and the hon. Members for Milton Keynes, North-East (Brian White), for Ludlow (Matthew Green) and for Nottingham, South (Alan Simpson) said. I declare a possible non-financial interest. For many years, I was a qualified architect, but for much of that time I was off the drawing board and now receive no income from my erstwhile profession. Indeed, I said in Committee and before that I have a reverse interest to declare because for years I paid professional subscriptions to the Royal Institute of British Architects to no avail.

I feel a sense of sadness about the proposal. I honestly do not think that there was any need for the Government to resile from their commitment to improve energy efficiency by 20 per cent. by 2010 on 2000 AD levels. They have made a tactical mistake, and I shall set out why. As hon. Members have said, they repeatedly assured us that that target would be set. My hon. Friend the Member for Poole said that they repeated that 15 times.

The target has got into the public psyche, which is good and heart-warming. It has also been fully supported by the Energy Saving Trust, the Sustainable Development Commission, the Government's official advisers and at least two other Departments—the Department of Trade and Industry and DEFRA. I cannot understand why the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has suddenly decided to revise it.

The plan is to save 4.2 megatonnes of carbon rather than 5 megatonnes. That is a reduction of 16 per cent., which is significant. However, as other hon. Members said, the revised target means that we will hit only a 19 per cent. overall improvement in energy efficiency instead of 20 per cent. by 2010. Overall, the House supports the Government in the early-day motion that has been tabled. I hope that the number of Labour Members who support the proposal does not

increase, as that detracts from the all-party nature of the issue, for which there is general support. I shall not be here in 2010, but if I am correct, my colleagues, whether they belong to the Government or the Opposition, will not feel a sense of triumph if the Government fail. There will be a sense of sadness, combined with respect for the fact that the Government kept to their original target. Even at the 59th minute of the 11th hour, I beseech the Minister, for whom I have a very strong regard, to change his mind or seek to persuade the Government to do so.

In conclusion, the Government have set myriad targets—some people may say too many—throughout the field of government. I am a member of the Public Administration Committee, which produced a report on Government targets. We may have complained that there are too many targets, some of which contradict others, but we have never suggested that pinpointed targets are anything other than a good thing for the Government to try to achieve. If the Government do not accept the Lords amendment, which was tabled by Baroness Hanham on 3 November, they will detract from the efficacy of their target-setting policies. I beseech the Minister, who represents Streatham—I must remember not to say "St. Reatham"—to reconsider his position, as he will win tremendous all-party support not only from hon. Members but from the public at large, persuading them that we take the issue of energy savings and energy efficiency very seriously indeed.

Alan Simpson: I have no doubt that both Opposition parties will vote in support of the Lords amendment and I have no reason to doubt the sincerity of the comments made by both Front-Bench spokesmen, but I must point out in terms of questioning the depth of this commitment that not a single Opposition Back-Bencher has been present throughout the debate on this clause. That is not the case in respect of Labour Members, and I want to address Labour's commitments in my remarks.

he Minister rightly said that a number of different objectives are built into the decent homes standard. I do not think anyone in the House would dispute the value of that, but it is not true to say that the Government can then use that as a pretext for getting out of what we have set for ourselves as the non-negotiable obligation to eradicate, in its entirety, fuel poverty by 2016.

The Minister will know from a number of delegations that I have been involved with, particularly from the parliamentary warm homes group—I brought them to see him to discuss this matter—that we have also tried to explore other choices that the Government have. By and large, we have taken a twin-pronged approach to the eradication of fuel poverty: one through the warm front programme and the other through income support measures, involving the Chancellor and the Treasury. However, it is absolutely right to say, as the hon. Member for Ludlow (Matthew Green) did, that the viability of that intervention in income support will be put seriously to the test.

We have seen the end of the era of low energy prices; we are knee-deep in an era of dramatically increasing energy prices. None of us should kid ourselves that it will come cheap to the Government to intervene to pay people to throw money out of poorly insulated properties for no gain at all. There will certainly be a negative consequence of massively undermining our commitments to carbon reduction targets. The best way to tackle this is to address the structural condition of Britain's housing. As other Members have mentioned, on 19 April this year my hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment and Agri-environment pointed out that the best way to do that would be to set a minimum SAP rating of 65 for all social

housing.

I suspect that if we were to do that, some other points that have been made to the Minister would come in on the shirt tails of it. He could, for example, also meet the fuel poverty reduction targets by making those standards apply to the private rented sector. We have tried to make the same representations. But we see in subsequent clauses that we will not go down that path either. We could, as the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor) pointed out, give a fresh remit to local authorities for a new era of council house building, which is by far the cheapest and most effective way of intervening in the social sector. As yet, however, none of the promises of a level playing field in respect of local authority housing are in the framework for delivery by either the Minister for Housing and Planning or other Ministers.

What should we do to meet our existing legal obligations to eradicate fuel poverty? The Government's Fuel Poverty Advisory Group is now saying, in consistent terms, that we are not on track to meet our legal targets. We have choices about how we can meet those targets, but one choice that we do not have is to do nothing. Unfortunately, one of the ways in which we have built up cost consequences is by structuring the warm front programme so badly in the first instance that we are duplicating costs. We began by quoting numbers of households in fuel poverty that we have helped—we never said that we were not helping them out of fuel poverty, but we said that we were helping them in it.

The reality of the fuel poverty benchmark will not go away. The amendment gives the House the chance to address a structural issue with a structural solution. I beg the Minister to take that on board, not as a threat or challenge from the other place, but as a way of helping us out of a hole into which we have been digging ourselves.

Ms Keeble: I had not intended to contribute to the debate today, and only the challenge from the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) made me feel that it was worth saying something in support of the Government's position and opposing that of the other place. It seems to me that the Conservative party has completely misrepresented some of the basis of tackling fuel poverty and of the intent of the decent homes strategy, for two reasons in particular. First, one of the reasons that we needed a decent homes strategy was the legacy of disrepair that we inherited when the Conservative party left government. I was a council leader in one of the areas with some of the worst social housing in the country, and I recall how those homes were starved of funds, the price paid in terms of the discomfort of people living there and the real hardship of thousands of families in social housing that was on the skids. We needed a decent homes strategy so that social housing could approach a reasonable level after all that disrepair.

Like so many things that the Government have done, that strategy might not seem the most wonderfully heroic new socialist dawn. Given what we took over, however, it was a supremely ambitious programme, and extremely difficult to deliver. Once it is achieved, which I am sure it will be, the Government will have every right to be extremely proud of it. The only way to achieve our decent homes target is to balance the key measures that make homes unpleasant and unfit for people to live in. That is a question not just of technical standards but of what

happens to the people who live in those properties and what they need.

Secondly, when we came into power we were confronted by massive fuel poverty, particularly among the old. A key factor in fuel poverty, which the Minister addressed and the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings did not, was income. That is why we introduced the winter fuel allowance, which the Conservative party opposed bitterly. It ill behoves a party that so opposed the winter fuel allowance to preach to anyone about fuel poverty. The reason why it is residual groups such as single people on low incomes, households with families or people with disabilities who are in fuel poverty is that we dealt with fuel poverty among pensioners with the winter fuel allowance, which has been increased year on year.

If we are talking seriously about tackling fuel poverty, I can certainly describe my wish list—as the Minister well knows, for I have berated him about housing improvements on several occasions. We should think not just about social housing but about private housing. Social housing sometimes has to be knocked down and replaced, but we must also deal with fuel poverty in the private sector— [Interruption.]— I see that I am now being asked to finish my speech.

There is a huge agenda to be tackled. I agree that we should keep to the programme that we have set and observe the priorities involved in it, but we should not lose sight of bigger goals. I do not think that the amendment would help us to achieve those goals, on which I am sure we all agree.