



CLIMATE CHANGE DEBATE

Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South) (Lab): I join other Members who have expressed a preference for the House not to divide on these issues tonight. I feel that it would put us all in a strange position if we were asked to choose between voting for the anodyne or the out-to-lunch. It is difficult to choose between those who advocate some good things or other good things without specifying what they are. We have to move this debate, which is the most important of our lives, on to a whole series of practicalities about how we not only address the challenges of climate change, but learn to live differently and better as a result of meeting them.

I will resist the temptation to go into the details of my new house, which I have turned from a derelict building into a place where we will be able to live and where we will ultimately generate 50 per cent. more energy than the house consumes. I am happy to talk later to the hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Johnson) about how to do that. From my micro-experiences, I have learned a whole series of things about the macro issues that we have to address as a society.

Every stage of this issue is riddled with contradictions. For me, not the least of those is that, as a socialist, I have to acknowledge that perhaps the Prince of Wales has a greater understanding of how to meet the challenges of climate change than does this Parliament. In the next decade, we will face four interconnected crises relating to climate change—crises of food security, water management, energy security and insurability. To emphasise the scale of the latter crisis, it has been calculated that this summer's girls' night out between the hurricanes of Wilma, Rita and Katrina has resulted in higher insurable damage than America has ever known. There has been £56.8 billion-worth of insurable damage as a result of this year's catastrophes in the US.

The cost of that will be borne not only in the US but virtually everywhere. We will have our own experiences of that. When the flash floods hit Boscastle, Carlisle, the Vale of York, Oxford or the Medway towns, they are not going to make the same distinctions between rich and poor. They will sweep everything away and we will find ourselves in a society facing a different divide—that between the unemployable and the uninsurable. When that happens, the Government will be faced with very angry populations asking how we provide security in their lives. We do not have much time to change the way in which we think about meeting those challenges.

We must move on from old to new agendas. In other parts of the world, especially in other parts of Europe, there is a different agenda for markets that will provide sustainable water use and sustainable agricultural systems. However, those markets are post-globalisation in their presumptions. Their frameworks of production and distribution are regionalised. They reduce product miles, urban congestion, the distance of accountability between the producer and the consumer, and they set up fresh lines of sustainable, local accountability as well as sustainable, localised production.

The same will be true of energy. Some hon. Members have criticised the Government's chief scientist, Sir David King, for being a Government spin merchant, but it is much more

appropriate to criticise him for trying to sell lousy science. I want to tackle that head on. Those who try to pretend that the only solution to a secure energy future is to go backwards with a new generation of nuclear power will be proved in the next five years to be conducting a Maginot line debate between sad old men trying to work out how to win the last war.

An American environmental entrepreneur called Amory B. Lovins has tried to set out how we construct different markets around sustainability. He began by doing that in his Rocky Mountains institute, where he reduced the energy requirements to less than the cost of one 100W light bulb. It uses existing technologies to minimise waste and to generate and recycle heat that we are already using. He points out that if one takes the energy inputs from a power station, for every 100 inputs into the energy system, the end user has access to less than 10 per cent. One can stand in front of any power station in this country and see 60 per cent. of energy inputs going up in steam into the atmosphere. That is a colossal waste. We could run the country on the energy that we throw away. That is the biggest challenge but our mentality stands in the way of change.

I found that in my house I could get into net metering. I can have a system that puts more energy back into the grid than I take out of it, but I get paid a pittance in the process. We can change that if we get out of a rigged energy market that tells the energy system, "You have a one price in and a one price out process."

Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I have concerns about my hon. Friend's suggestion that David King advocates bad science. Perhaps a more realistic proposition is that he has no confidence that the necessary investment will go into ensuring that our energy consumption is reduced by investment in energy conservation and the sort of measures that he advocates. Perhaps that is why he advocates nuclear power.

Alan Simpson: I understand that point but I will not budge from my initial contention, which is that nuclear power was never economic. We have not worked out who should pay the £56 billion to £80 billion of clean-up costs from the last generation of nuclear power before we work out who will pick up the costs of another generation of nuclear energy.

Lynne Jones: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend that the Government appear prepared to advocate investment in nuclear technology but not in energy conservation. David King probably finds himself having to deal with that.

Alan Simpson: I understand that point, but let me draw the House's attention to a completely different approach. If we step outside this country, we see that 50 per cent. of Denmark's energy is generated by local energy systems; in the Netherlands, 60 per cent. is generated by decentralised energy systems. When motorways are built in the Netherlands, the hot-road sub-surface of the motorway is harnessed to provide energy and heating for houses. Every kilometre of road that is built provides the energy and heating for 100 houses. In this country, we are not even beginning to look at local energy networks, although they are infinitely more efficient than our national energy system, which leaks like a sieve.

We need to make that shift in thinking, to catch up with what is going on in other countries and

to follow the lead being taken by some of our major cities. I have said before in the House that the Mayor of London has committed the capital city of this country, which currently consumes more energy than the whole of Portugal, to being energy self-sufficient within a decade. The international agreement that he is trying to broker with other major cities is that 20 of the world's biggest cities will all be energy self-sufficient using sustainable and renewable resources by 2020. That draws on the thinking of how to do things differently, which is already practised in other parts of the world.

We need a shift in market rules, a shift to thinking about decentralised energy and a shift in the requirements that we have for our buildings. In Berlin today, 80 per cent. of new buildings are required to generate their own energy. We make no such requirements of our built environment. Some of the architects and property developers here should be in prison for the buildings they are throwing up. Those buildings are the gas guzzlers of the built environment, yet they pass for modern buildings. They are a massive source of carbon consumption and they are profligate in the way in which they are constructed.

Mark Pritchard : We have heard about the Government taking international leadership. Do they not also need to take domestic leadership? Is not the public sector, across the parties, the worst user of energy and the poorest performer from an energy efficiency point of view?

Alan Simpson: I would be happy for the Government to set targets for their own Departments, but Members should also set targets for their own lives. We are dead good at blaming other people for failing to take a lead, but do we take that lead ourselves? Do we heck as like! We are all on the line on this. We need to create new approaches to ethical and sustainable markets in relation to the way we live, treading lightly on the environment of the future. We need to create markets in conservation rather than consumption, markets that reward what we put back rather than what we take out. If we look at what is happening in the world outside this House, we can see a new consensus forming in civil society around the principles of sustainability. The problem is that the House is not part of that consensus.