

ENERGY CONSERVATION



Friday is 'D' day. Des Turner's Energy Conservation Bill comes back to the Commons for its Report Stage with overwhelming parliamentary support, but only a 50-50 chance of getting through.

Des's problems begin and end with the (mis)judgement that Labour's pioneering commitment to end fuel poverty within 15 years would be delivered in deeds as well as words.

It isn't a question of political indifference, for there are Warm Homes programmes in every part of the country. The problem is that there is a gap between current commitments and the scale of the problem.

Des Turner's Bill set out to address the two biggest obstacles to ending fuel poverty. Almost anywhere you look, the most intractable problems of poor housing are to be found in the private rented sector.

This isn't a dig at landlords per se. Many rent properties that are well maintained and energy efficient. But the worst are wretched - ill maintained dives that milk the rent and leave the poorest of families facing the highest heating bills. Des's proposal for a national licensing scheme for houses in multiple occupation was intended to set a standards regime in which the worst could no longer discredit the best.

The second part of the Bill, however, has turned out to be the unexpected stumbling block. In 1995, the first Home Energy Conservation Act gave local authorities a duty to produce annual reports on improvements in the energy efficiency of homes. A 30 per cent savings target was set for this in the Ministerial Guidance notes that followed. The recent PIU Energy Review updated this figure, talking about the need for improving energy efficiency by 20 per cent (by today's standards) by 2010. Des's Bill simply wanted to make this a statutory target, rather than a general wish.

On paper, you can't find anyone who objects. Government advisers say we cannot meet our climate change targets without it. Fuel poverty campaigners know it is essential in the plans to raise health standards and end child poverty. Local authorities and the energy supply industry want it so that there is a clear framework to deliver to. Even the Tories, the Lib Dems, and every government department are on board. But here is the rub about joined-up government - unless the forward projections of cash needed are in someone's budget, no one can give approval for the commitment.

There is a shortfall in current allocations that means government targets will not (currently) be fully met. It isn't a large shortfall, but it exists. And it has thrown Ministers into confusion and disarray. The fact that the Bill has had to secure the agreement of two Departments (DEFRA and DTLR) has left abundant space for civil servants to create mischief...and they have. For civil servants, the advantage of no targets means an easy life. For Ministers and Labour MP's it means the certainty of political denunciations on what should be our own moral high ground.

The solution is technically simple. Put the targets on the face of the Bill as government targets and leave the specific details to be set out by Departments and Downing Street over the decade they have to be

delivered in. Civil servants may then have to take government policy more seriously but, politically, no one would fall out over it.

Will Labour's business managers pull rank over bureaucrats to deliver this solution? By the time you read this you will probably know the answer.

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