

IN THE LAND OF THE BLIND

It was the birth of my older children that originally propelled me to want to change the world from inside parliament. Now it is the birth of my youngest that convinces me that change has to come from elsewhere.

I had no illusions about where I would fit (or not) in parliament. It just seemed that, in the same way that the church contains the occasional Christian, so parliament could put up with the odd socialist.

Being a source of creative but irreverent ideas was more a character defect than an asset within the theology of New Labour. As Downing Street quickly pointed out, had I been the last surviving member of the Parliamentary Labour Party, Tony Blair would still not have offered me a place in his Cabinet. I confess that this has always been a source of great comfort.

It might have been different in a John Smith era of Labour politics; but New Labour was a fan club, not a family. And even the fans would happily tear each other apart in the pursuit of political preferment.

Those who are not natural Labour supporters may feel somewhat smug about such observations. But the longer term implications for British politics have more in them to worry us all. New Labour is essentially an extension of the Thatcherite approach to an economy/society that is largely deregulated, privatised, means-tested, individualistic and short-term. Moreover, when Thatcher turned her back on manufacturing industry in favour of finance capital, she began a process that was to transform (or disfigure) the whole political system in Britain.

My own collisions with the Labour leadership have often been described as personal, when they are nothing of the sort. I have never called for Blair to go. True, I said that he (and other senior Cabinet members) should face charges in the International Criminal Court, but this was because Britain was lied into an illegal war. International law, not domestic patronage, should be the judge of such actions.

We can't turn the clock back on these decisions, but we could stand up more vigorously against the ways in which the war on Iraq has been turned into a war upon ourselves. The 'terrorist threat' has been used to turn Britain into a surveillance society; sweeping away liberties that have taken centuries to fight for. I won't pretend the threat is unreal – even if it does stem directly from our invasion of Iraq. I would just remind us all that we lived through decades of the conflict in Northern Ireland without ever responding to a bombing by wholesale abolition, across the UK, of the right to a trial, the right to a jury, the right to know the charges against you and the right to a legal defence.

The last 25 years have seen a remorseless shift in the balance of rights and responsibilities in Britain. Governments have transferred rights from citizens to corporations at the same time as shifting duties in the opposite direction. No end of laws are now directed at regulating the behaviour of parents, but parent companies can get away with blue murder. They can run off with your pension, close down your post office and dump you and your job in order to shack up with someone cheaper elsewhere.

There are curfew orders that can force your kids to be in of an evening, but just try getting speculative capital back off the streets by 9 o'clock at night. It is our subtle, but inexorable drift from civil democracy towards a form of corporate feudalism. My battles in parliament have never really been with

Blair or Brown, but against this inexorable drift.

The decision to leave parliament at the next election had nothing to do with tiring of these battles. I have always felt I 'almost' had Downing Street surrounded. The tipping point for me was the kids and climate change policies.

I have been banging on about this for so long I can bore myself with it. Climate change is a scary prospect, but also an exciting one. We can't stop the terrible damage already in the pipeline, but I am certain we can 'manage' our way through the worst of it...If we make some big changes now. In the course of doing up my own eco-house I came across tons of inspirational ideas about delivering energy security, water security and food security and that's probably where we need to start.

Lots of people have built brand new eco-houses, and good on them for doing so. My concern was that we have 25 million existing homes in Britain that also have to become part of the solution, rather than part of the problem. Some of these properties present real 'hard to heat' problems in terms of energy efficiency. So I thought I would look for the worst I could find, and take it from there.

In the end, the building found me rather than me finding it. A friend rang, asking if I was serious about looking for a derelict property to renovate. He knew of one that had solid walls, collapsed internal staircases, had been abandoned for 40 years and was knee deep in pigeon poo. Sounded perfect.

The conversion took two years and was full of as many discoveries as frustrations. A full list of recycled materials we were able to use, the imaginative (and inexpensive) ideas that transformed the property, and the energy generating equipment built into it, are all listed on my website (<http://www.alansimpsonmp.co.uk>). What is worth touching on is some of the frustrations.

I was thrilled to have all the internal walls in the house made from compressed straw panels; cheap, environmentally virtuous, fabulous thermal efficiency and no more complicated than straw, wallpaper paste and a big heavy mangle. It was only when the architect pointed out that we had had to import the panels from Germany that some uncomfortable pennies began to drop. When Britain destroyed its manufacturing industry in the 1980s the rest of Europe bought our presses and machinery and used them to produce the environmental products we now have to import.

Many of the most ecological fixtures and fittings come from Scandinavia, Germany and Italy. In the UK, manufacturers are left to survive as best they can. Elsewhere in Europe, where governments want to promote environmental industries they change market rules to do so.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in Germany. I have a roof full of solar panels and a complementary micro-CHP (combined heat and power) system. This is what delivers my surplus electricity. But when you put this back into the National Grid you get paid buttons for it.

In Germany, families get paid four times the market price for electricity from their solar roofs. It is a price premium guaranteed for 20 years (reducing at 5% a year). The result has been a cavalry charge of citizens wanting to drive Germany's shift into renewable energy... and happy to receive cheques from their energy companies for doing so. No wonder Germany has been walking away with 15% of the world market in renewables.

All across Europe, towns and cities are being encouraged to set ambitious sustainability targets that push building standards ever higher. This includes the right to require new buildings to generate their own energy or harvest and recycle water. In Britain, parliament is considering new planning guidelines that would restrict the ability of towns and cities to independently set the same pace and standards. Citywide sustainability plans would be ruled out. Only small area exceptions will be allowed to set higher standards. So, while Germany now effectively has a Bundesliga of cities, all competing to be more ecological than the next, Britain chases a 'light touch' approach that makes no renewable energy demands on developers. Government policies are more compliant to a construction lobby that wants to build cheaply, pocket the cash and then leave the long term costs to the generations that follow.

It could all be very different. If the Germans, the Dutch, the Danes and the Scandinavians can drive the sustainability agenda, so could we. It's just that we have to dump many of today's Treasury rules and pet projects in order to get there. Nothing in my reading of Gordon Brown's tenure at the Treasury suggests he has the ability to revisit his own ideas and dump them because they don't make sense or don't add up.

Gordon has a habit of coming up with schemes so complicated you lose the will to live before understanding them. On climate change, most don't deliver a fraction of what they claim, and some are just bonkers.

Emissions trading schemes are probably the biggest intellectual scam of our time. Just think about it for a moment. First you create an imaginary good (the Carbon Credit). Then you allocate it to people who pollute, but not those who don't. Then you invite brokers to trade speculatively on what the price of this imaginary good might be in 10 years time. And finally, you allow countries to set loose targets that they may or may not meet.

The only certain winners are the banks and brokers who charge between 8% and 30% just to handle the transactions. No wonder they are happy trousering such profits out of a non-existent product. It is a world of Alice in Wonderland economics.

My real favourite, though, is the duplicitous virtue government now claims in becoming carbon neutral by offsetting its carbon emissions. I won't drag you through the dubious list of 'get outs' this allows, but treat yourself to a visit to a website called 'cheatneutral.com'. It is a spoof website that offers to let you offset your infidelity. For a small fee you are offered a completely clear conscience.

Cheatneutral explains how you can cheat on your partner as much as you like as long as you pay someone else not to. It does nothing to reduce the global amount of cheating going on, or its consequential damage. But it has the ring of spurious moral virtue that Downing St adores. So too with carbon offsetting.

Neither me nor my kids have time to waste on such Mickey Mouse policies for tackling climate change. What's more, there is no need to. In Germany, the introduction of preferential buy-back pricing for renewable energy has delivered carbon savings that are five times greater than the combined set of UK climate change programmes. Significantly, the whole process is now driven more by citizens than by government. German families (and businesses) are putting photovoltaic panels on almost everything

that doesn't move.

This whole process is financed by the German energy sector itself. The taxpayer doesn't pay a penny and the Chancellor doesn't pocket the pounds. Last year it added 1.4 euros a month to the average household energy bill and has created an industry generating €12 billion annual turnover, €6 billion annual investment and 50,000 new jobs. It just requires a government willing to change the market rules. Try running this past the UK Treasury and you'll find they are intellectually out to lunch.

When the Stern Report came out I thought it might be the government's 'wake up' call. He told us all that Britain had to spend 1% of GDP a year, now, to combat climate change damage. Put it off for a decade and we would end up paying around 10% of GDP a year. The silence was deafening.

I looked at the real buzz of initiatives working in Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Italy and chunks of the USA, and realised how much of this is being driven by cities and regions, citizens and social movements. In our case, government itself may be the stumbling block.

So, armed only with a belief that we have perhaps 10 years in which to make visionary and radical changes, I thought I had better act on my beliefs. Stepping out of the comfort zone of parliamentary life, involves taking a risk. But if this makes it possible to be instrumental (elsewhere) in building a comfort zone that future generations might be able to live in, then it's a risk worth taking.

I hope the kids will understand.