



CLIMATE CHANGE DEBATE

Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South) (Lab): I shall try to be as brisk as possible, partly to allow other Members into the debate, but also because I want to make several points that I hope will upset the applecart in relation to the consensus of free trade assumptions on tackling climate change problems—the consensus that trade liberalisation and a free-for-all are somehow compatible with realising many of the goals that Members have identified today.

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has just returned from a Brussels visit, on which we met a large number of Commissioners who were as passionate as any Member who has spoken today about climate change. Those Commissioners were brilliant—until we talked to other Commissioners with interests in trade, who were clearly running with a completely different agenda. When push came to shove, the environment got the shove. That is the crisis that we must face. It is a crisis of political leadership as much as a crisis of climate change.

Mr. Carmichael: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the same contradiction is at the heart of domestic energy policy? On the one hand, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department of Trade and Industry say that they want to promote renewables development, while on the other, the mad monks at the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets say that we can do that only within the framework of a competition-driven structure that excludes renewables development.

Alan Simpson: I accept that that contradiction exists in government, but I want to widen it—I believe that the contradiction exists in every party represented in Parliament today. We need to examine the contradictions in each of our own houses. I would love us to fight a general election on climate change. I would love us to say that the biggest issue that will affect the whole of our lives, and the entirety of our children's lives, is climate change, and that we want to be in dispute with each other about which of us can tackle it most seriously and rapidly. We will not do that, however. The general election will be fought on which leader is the most ugly, which party's set of policies are the most contradictory, who are the biggest bunch of scoundrels, and who can be toughest on immigrants. That will miss the big challenges.

Bob Dylan once wrote in a song:

"You don't need a weather man

To know which way the wind blows".

In the same way, we do not need a panel of scientists to tell us about climate change. Let us ask Munich Re, the biggest reinsurance company on the planet, which says that, on current trends, the global economy could be bankrupt by 2050 because of the sheer cost of making good the damage done as a result of climate change. That is the warning bell about which each of us needs to think hard. What is required is a paradigm shift. We need to change how we think about the way we live in the world and how we think about economics.

In scientific terms, we are told that we must limit temperature rise to 2°C higher than it was in pre-industrial times. The terminology that scientists use is that we cannot go above 400 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere—we are now at about 380 parts per million. In layperson's terms, the most important fact is that, on current trends, we would exceed the 400 parts per million figure by about 2015. When Professor Sir David King came to talk to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, he was clear about the time scale and said that it was a much bigger threat than terrorism. As for the 2015 timetable, that is not when the world will end but when, scientists tell us, we will be locked into irreversible change. This is the period in which we can do something.

Of course this issue concerns more than ourselves. The consequences of climate change will hit the developing world worst and we shall see a huge increase in drought, disease, environmental devastation and mass migration. Some of those problems will come to our shores second-hand, but others will come to us first-hand. At the recent conference in Exeter, the Hadley centre was quick to point out that one of the contradictions of global warming is that we will also experience global cooling. The prospect of the north Atlantic drift ceasing has now reached 50:50. It is not an immediate prospect, but we know that the north Atlantic drift has been weakening over the decades and the consequences are inevitable cooling. The Hadley centre said that on the north Atlantic coast, there may be winter cooling of 5° C, which means temperatures lower than those in the "little ice age" in the 17th and 18th centuries, when the Thames froze over. We are not well equipped to deal with that change.

In addition, sea levels will be affected by the melting of the Greenland and west Antarctica icecaps—something we once did not believe possible—and may rise by up to 18ft. Some coastal constituencies will be affected by that more imminently than my constituency, but the prospect of representing Nottingham sur mer is not entirely ludicrous.

Dr. Desmond Turner: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Alan Simpson: I am afraid I will not accept any more interventions, as Members are queuing up to make speeches.

The erratic weather patterns that we have to deal with are a consequence of climate change. Professor King pointed out to the Committee that we must think about how we manage the prospect of flooding and drought in the same month. We are the beneficiaries of an enormously generous piece of over-engineering—the Victorian sewerage system. No one would build drains of that capacity now, yet most of our cities cannot deal with flash flooding. We therefore need a huge rethink on our engineering programme. At the recent Exeter conference, it was said that even a five-year delay could have a critical impact on our ability to tackle the problem.

I have five suggestions about what we should do. The good news is that a fantastic array of sustainable technologies are coming on the market. I am incorporating many of them in a derelict place in the middle of Nottingham that will eventually generate 50 per cent. more energy than it consumes. Such developments are exciting, but in 2001, the Prime Minister set aside £5 million so that renewable energy pilot schemes could be targeted on the poorest housing in the country. Sadly, however, since then, the Department of Trade and Industry has

not been able to get a single pilot off the ground. There are 2 million households living in fuel poverty. I asked the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister how many properties in the UK's housing stock would meet SAP 65, the minimum standard for establishing a framework to address fuel poverty. On 20 January, I was told that

"16 per cent. of the housing stock meets or exceeds SAP 65."—[Official Report , 20 January 2005; Vol. 429, c. 1044W.]

That shows how behind we are in tackling things.

How can we establish a programme that develops the resources and policy changes to address that problem? First, we need a windfall tax on oil and gas producers. Early-day motion 504 explains that they have enjoyed at least £5 billion in excess profits upstream as a result of increased prices, and I am told that it may be as much as £9 billion. The public and the Government should take a scoop of those profits and put them into renewables. Secondly, as some people believe in market solutions, we must change the market rules. I have recently had a number of rows with developers in my own city, as not one of them has put up buildings that self-generate energy or recycle their own water. They are not required to do so, so if we want such initiatives we must change the concept of building in our society. We should set market rules under which people have obligations so that, for example, they cannot put up a building on a flood plain unless they build in a reservoir capacity. There are cities on the planet that are already doing so, and in some countries developers are required to incorporate self-generation in the design of buildings. We do not have such requirements, because we let people build on the cheap. We steal today from the prospects of tomorrow.

Thirdly, we have an absurd approach to energy markets. Not a single energy company in the land will talk about its business plan for selling less. There is a simple way of tackling that: we change the rules to allow companies to sell conservation rather than consumption. They could sell packages of home warmth in long-term supply packages, to stimulate the consumption of less.

Fourthly, on international commitments, the time has come to scrap the World Trade Organisation and replace it with a world environment organisation. The criteria for assessment would be produced by sustainability audits in which we looked at the patterns of global trade. We must ask ourselves how much of today's trade consists of water sequestration by the north from the south. How many food miles result in carbon dumping on the planet? To what extent are long-term food contracts built on assumptions about the intensification of agriculture, whereas we should be looking at localisation and sustainability.

A number of Members have said that we must focus on the USA, but I agree with the hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (Mr. Barrett) that it is more important to look at China. The Chinese Government have guaranteed their population that within the next 10 years every family with one child will have one car, shifting car ownership from 33 per 1,000 to 333 per 1,000. The earth would suffocate under that programme, which is not an unreasonable one. The trouble is that we do not ask what sort of vehicles are being made available in developing world markets.

Finally, to address the problem we need to consider a gift relationship in future, rather than one of exploitation. The history of the last century is one in which we dumped on the developing world the products and practices that we banned in our own land, calling it aid or development. We need a gift relationship—Titmuss talked about it in terms of blood transfusion or the blood donor service in the UK—that is writ large on a global scale and scripted out in environmental terms. If we act selflessly in gifting the technology to others and ourselves, we have a chance of creating an environment fit for our children to live and breathe in. If we do not, the free trade follies that constantly push the environmental agenda to the sidelines of policy will destroy the planet. We will not achieve sustainable economics, and instead will have a world that is driven by no economics at all.

As I said, I would love political parties to fight the next election on the issue of who has the best environmental record and programme. The real question is whether any of the parties in the House have the courage to occupy a platform on which our children's lives depend.

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