

## **Benn ducks pledge to honour targets from his own Climate Change advisor**

It all started so sweetly. But even the cosiest of love-ins can't last.

Friends of the Earth & the 'Big Ask' climate campaign had assembled top UK politicians on a public platform in Euston (22 April 2008), for a public debate in London on the government's world-leading climate change bill.

At first the parties' environment spokespersons wreathed themselves in cross-party bonhomie, slapping on mutual congratulation like beach bums lathering on the Factor 80 sunblock.

Hilary Benn, DEFRA secretary of state & midwife to the bill's delivery as an infant Act this summer, assured the 800-strong audience that the imminent arrival would be a triumph of cross-party politics in its purest form.

Steve Webb, his LibDem opposite number, initially paid tribute to the quality of campaigners' pressure & cross-party scrutiny in Parliament that had formed the bill.

After its expected passage through the Commons, the Climate Change Act will include the world's first binding contract enacted between a government & its people to limit emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> & greenhouse gases.

Peter Ainsworth, Benn's Opposition shadow, joined in the mood, at the same time pointing out how Conservative peers had stiffened the bill, setting targets for different industries, and by guaranteeing publication of technical advice to be exchanged between Ministers and scientists in the Office of Climate Change, their new independent advisory body.

Respecting the mutual warmth of the evening, speakers fought shy of cheap digs about hot air being deployed in Parliament to quash production of more hot air in the environment.

But Webb was first to break the congratulatory chorus. Leading his string of "Buts" was an insistence on stiffening the government's target of a 60% reduction in UK greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. That goal was based on out-dated science, he said, and cuts of at least 80% were essential.

Cranking up his acronym engine, the LibDem spokesman laid into Labour's culture of incontinent target-setting. "If that 80% goal becomes just another performance target, then it won't happen", said Webb. "Without constant monitoring in the court of public opinion, any goal on climate change will be only another NIMTO target for ministers – meaning "Not in my Term of Office".

Just as importantly, said Mr Webb, the Prime Minister himself - and not DEFRA - should be responsible for reporting yearly progress on emissions cuts. In the jungle of Whitehall, DEFRA was “a minnow among wolves” – Mr Webb regretted his mangled zoology – and it lacked authority over other departments in enforcing disclosure.

That squares with recent estimates from Friends of the Earth on how the UK’s GHG emissions are split between their supervising ministries. Activities covered by DEFRA account for only 22% of GHG pollution, according to FoE, as against 37% by the Department of Business & Reducing Regulation, 32% from the Department of Transport and 15% from the Department of Communities & Local Government.

The minister was wrong to boast that UK carbon emissions had dropped 7% since 1997, added Mr Webb. Including the aviation & shipping emissions that are currently excluded from the bill, UK GHG emissions were no better than when Labour took office.

Mr Benn shocked the audience when he failed to bind the government to tough new curbs on CO2 emissions, widely expected to be recommended by the government’s new independent advisors on climate science.

Instead the minister said the government would “wait & see”, before committing itself to probable tougher targets which are expected in December from the Office on Climate Change.

In contrast, Messrs Webb and Ainsworth pledged to enact any guideline recommended by the Office of Climate Change.

The OCC has been set up under the Climate Change bill, and is already running under Lord Adair Turner in “shadow” form. Its remit is to give the government independent high quality advice on the science & economics of combating climate change.

The government’s current target on carbon dioxide emissions is for a 60% cut by 2050. But rapid advances in climate change science make campaigners believe a minimum cut of 80% is necessary, if a catastrophic rise in global temperatures of 4°C is to be avoided.

Mr Benn said the importance of the OCC lay in the independent process it set for new emissions targets, based on science & free from political interference. The bill was the world’s first contractually enforceable legislation on greenhouse gas emissions, and would tie the UK government to transparent carbon budgets for its activities. Under the new law, the government would have to publish its reasons, if it decided not to implement OCC guidelines.

Outside the bill, the government had also secured EU agreement to cap aviation & shipping carbon emissions to 2004 levels, the minister added.

Mr Ainsworth said clear legislation and a clear government commitment to targets helped create wealth & investment in the new carbon-light economy, adding that where Germany had created 250,000 jobs in renewable energy, Britain had created only 25,000.

Friends of the Earth director Tony Juniper believed that rapid public acceptance of the threat from climate change echoed attitudes to the abolition of slavery 200 years ago. Praising the role of religious groups in securing the bill, Mr Juniper said identical economic arguments had been made to defend unsustainable practices in slavery and in climate abuse. Climate change was now recognised as a moral question concerning economic justice, as much as being about science.

Friends of the Earth welcomed the bill, but sought its strengthening through commitments to:

- a minimum target of 80% cut in UK emissions by 2050
- inclusion of targets from the aviation & shipping industries, that are currently outside the bill
- caps on international trading of emissions by UK entities
- annual reporting under the act should be the responsibility of the Prime Minister, because of DEFRA's weakness in government.

The Minister's evasiveness over respecting the OCC's advice struck the evening's sourest note. It was surpassed only by a questioner from the gallery who ranted at Mr Benn over his supposed culpability for the deaths of Bangladeshis, already being drowned by rising ocean levels. Wearing a nice suit and yellow tie, one would have expected better from the questioner. But then, behaviour at love-ins is never predictable.

### Alban Thurston

Alban Thurston is an environmentalist & community activist. He speaks & writes professionally about sustainability in transport, faith, communities, food & public policy