

**CAN WE WAIT FOR  
RENEWABLES?**

**Tuesday, 30 September, 2003**

**Labour Party Conference,  
Bournemouth  
Transcript of Speeches**

## **About the Speakers**

**Brian Wilson** is the Labour Member of Parliament for Cunninghame North. He was founding editor of the West Highland Free Press, and a shadow spokesman for transport, trade and industry and Scottish affairs prior to the 1997 General Election. He held a range of ministerial positions in the Scottish Office, Foreign Office and Department of Trade and Industry before being appointed as the Prime Minister's Special Envoy on Trade and Reconstruction in Iraq in June 2003.

**Stephen Tindale** studied PPE at Oxford, joined the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and worked in the British embassy in Islamabad and the Afghan desk of the British Foreign Office. He left to work as a Special Advisor for Michael Meacher, after which he worked for Green Alliance. He became Director of Greenpeace in 1999.

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**Introduction**

Energy policy has traditionally been the stuff of domestic politics. Governments in the past could pull the levers and decide which energy sources should fuel the economy. They made their decisions for a mixture of scientific, economic and pragmatic reasons – there were unions that needed to be squared, consumers that needed to be kept happy, and jobs that needed to be maintained.

Even the term “energy policy” seems as steeped in the 1970s as smoky boardrooms and the closed shop. Mrs Thatcher downgraded the Department of Energy into an adjunct of the DTI for ideological reasons. The title smacked of economic planning, she felt, whereas our energy needs should be decided by the market. When Labour came into power in 1997 it seemed that this trend would carry on. Apart from a moratorium on gas-fired power stations to give coal a breathing space during a period of low gas prices, there was little market interference. With the reform of electricity trading arrangements, Labour was able to promise that households would see a 10% fall in the costs of energy prices.

But two trends have conspired to give energy policy an unexpected rebirth. The experience of California showed the dangers of governments prioritising low cost energy above all else. In 1996, when California began liberalising its market, legislation was poorly designed in that it forced utilities to buy gas at increasing prices, but didn't allow them to pass on the costs to consumers. As gas prices increased, they began to trade at a loss, and so, since most were relatively small businesses, many went bankrupt rather than continue to accumulate losses. In the summer of 2003, similar trends could be seen across Europe. In Britain, the “dash for gas”, when new generators piled into the market to win spoils under the previous

electricity trading arrangements, led to overcapacity. The government's changes to electricity trading arrangements made energy prices plummet, which in turn removed suppliers from the market as generators closed or mothballed power stations. As in California during the nineties, a situation has been created where there is little incentive to invest in new generation energy, apart from subsidised renewable power. As the BBC dramatically illustrated in their prime-time docu-drama "If", there are real dangers that the lights could go off here too.

The structural problems with liberalisation have been matched by a greater reliance on more unstable regions for our energy. The near exhaustion of Europe's indigenous gas supplies will leave all European states heavily dependent on imported gas from potentially volatile regions – including Russia, the Central Asian Republics and the Middle East. This has given governments added incentive to consider dusting off home-grown forms of energy that are not at the end of a very long and unstable pipe-line. In the doomsday scenario, the bleakest analysts claim, we may end up with fundamentalist regimes that are unwilling to trade with us. As Dan Plesch from the Royal United Services Institute has written: "imagine an Islamic Pol Pot intent on winning the clash of the civilizations. He would have every incentive not to sell us oil".

September 11 led to a reappraisal in the US of their reliance on oil supplies from the Middle East. Risks of instability aside, the price of relying on autocratic regimes for oil supply became apparent. The costs of the Faustian bargain – in which the West tolerated states that repressed their own people as long as the oil taps were kept open – seemed too high when that repression bred terrorism that was directed at the West. The neo-conservatives shared an agenda with human rights campaigners on the left in their determination to wean themselves off a reliance on the Middle East. The economic costs of deploying US troops in the region have also become politically significant. The US Energy Department's Oak Ridge Study in 2000 estimated that the costs of oil dependency were three trillion dollars. And in the Democratic primaries, John Kerry got the loudest cheer of the night when he promised to give America the "security of

energy independence” because “our sons and daughters should never have to fight and die for Mid-East oil”.

But the biggest reason for a renewed interest in energy policy is, of course, climate change. Sir David King, the Government’s Chief Scientific Advisor, warned recently that global warming was a greater world threat than international terrorism. Britain has taken an international lead by promising to reduce carbon emissions by 60% by 2050. But these good intentions fail to match the reality of what is happening to our power stations. Over the next twenty years, Britain’s non-carbon generating nuclear power plants will reach the end of their useful life and close, removing at a stroke most of the energy that is produced by clean sources. Currently, nuclear power provides 23% of the UK’s electricity needs. If left to the market, this will all be replaced by cheap fossil fuels.

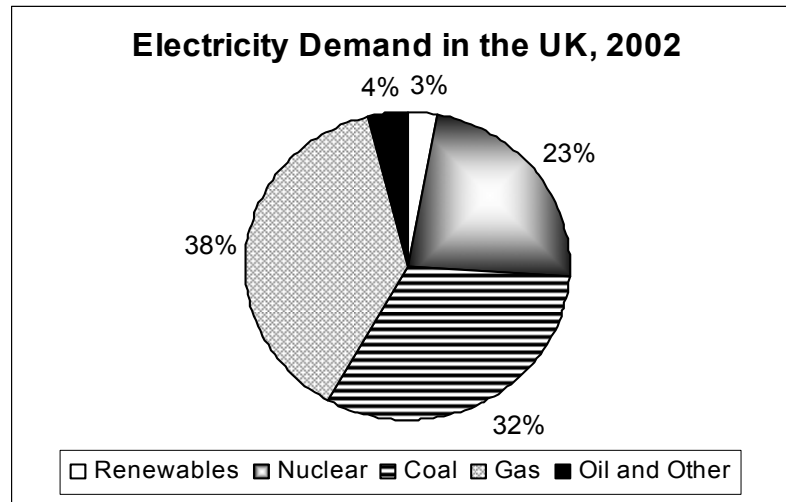
The Royal Society has called for a new generation of nuclear power stations. But the green movement remain staunchly opposed, as Stephen Tindale argues in this exchange. The Government, too, has been lukewarm, given the huge costs and public relations obstacles of any move to nuclear. The 2002 White Paper on Energy suggested that the skill base of the nuclear industry should be maintained, but stressed that they would not push this option. It would be up to the market to decide. Instead, they have placed their faith in a big expansion of renewable energy. This will require a revolution: currently only 2.5 per cent of the UK’s electricity comes from renewable sources – even though there is a target to increase this to 10% by 2010 and 20% by 2020. Though there has been a quickening of progress, it is almost impossible to find an expert who believes this first target can be reached. However, as Stephen Tindale points out, massive increases in renewable capacity are possible. Already in Denmark 18% of energy comes from wind power.

Debates on energy often fail to consider what is happening in the rest of the world. Though nuclear power has an uncertain future in the UK, it is being actively considered in Finland, Brazil, Sweden and Japan and the US. Nuclear energy was the fastest growing source of electricity in the 1990s. But the immediate cost implications, together

with the unresolved issue of how to permanently dispose of nuclear waste, means that few British politicians have been vocal in its support. This may change when Britain decides on a permanent waste facility, as the US has already done in Nevada. But the question of whether Britain can afford to close its nuclear capacity, if it is to reach its environmental targets, cannot be ducked forever.

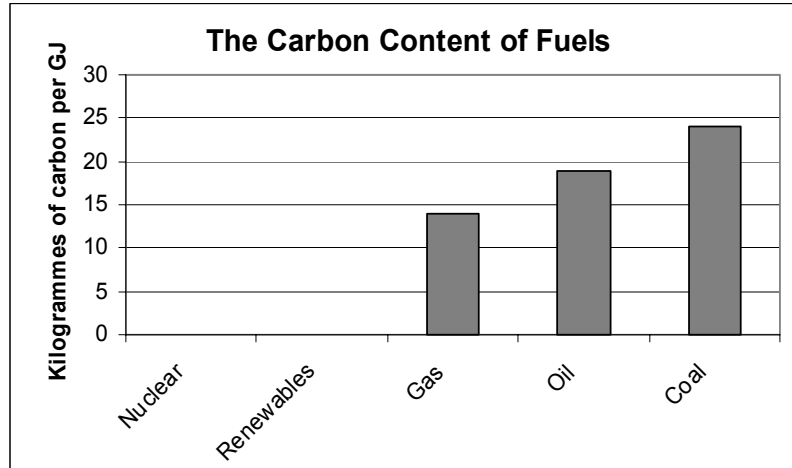
**Rob Blackhurst, Editorial Director, Foreign Policy Centre.**

**Chart 1:**



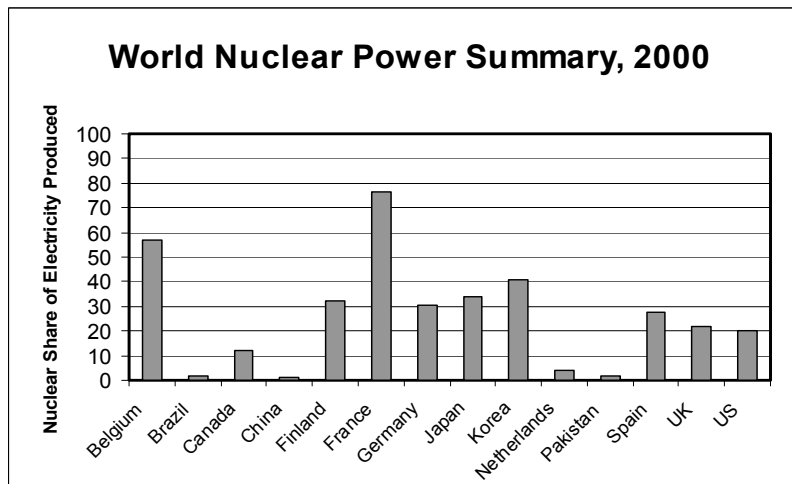
Source: DTI estimates for 2002 on gross supplied basis based on Digest of UK Energy Statistics.

**Chart 2:**



Source: Darmstadt et al (1971) and DTI (2001a).

**Chart 3:**



Source: Nuclear Industry Association.

## **Section 1: Brian Wilson MP**

I was nominally responsible for the energy White Paper. The difference between this energy White Paper and any that might have been published earlier is the emphasis on the environment, and the need to achieve carbon reduction is given primacy right up alongside security of supplies. That is a reflection of how the whole global warming issue has risen up in public awareness, but also of the scientific recognition that it is one of the great challenges of the 21st century. Therefore any responsible energy policy in any responsible country will have to give a great deal of priority to the challenge of carbon reduction. We have to accept the Kyoto targets, and frankly that's the easy bit because the Kyoto targets at present are not very challenging at all for the UK, so we have to go far beyond these.

That was one of the starting points for the energy White Paper, and it explains for instance the emphasis that is placed on renewables. As far as I am concerned it was a stroke of luck that I was in the right place at the right time because I have a very long standing belief in renewables, and the potential this country has missed by doing so little for so long. Wind power for instance in the late 1970's and early 1980's was thrown away because there was no support given to it at government level.

I would say that the target for 10 per cent of our electricity from renewables by 2010 is extremely challenging but obtainable. But it is only obtainable if the whole of government gets behind it. While I can assure you that there is no hidden agenda - no duplicity of any kind about the White Paper's commitment to renewables, - I have my doubts which I expressed when I was a Minister, and some that I didn't, about the commitment of other parts of government to it. We simply will not reach these kinds of targets unless that commitment spreads right across government, through the planning system, through the Ministry of Defence, and into other aviation interests which have legitimate concerns that should not be show-stopping. Most of all it has to spread to the energy regulator, to Ofgem, who have decided to stay lukewarm over all of this. But unless there is rigorous commitment from the regulator, unless the infrastructure is put in place, unless the companies are allowed to spend the money

that is needed to build new infrastructure - all of these have to come together.

If we are going to get to 10 per cent by 2010, far less 20 per cent by 2020, then every cog in the wheel of government has to be working in that direction. It is not going to be easily achieved starting from less than three per cent of electricity coming from renewables. And of course there is a bit of squaring of conscience with intellect to be done by people who say that they are in favour of renewables in a general way, but every time the subject comes up then it is very often the same people who are in the forefront of objecting to it, which is why at least half the projects never actually happen. There is a bit more awareness now that people have to be in favour of them in practice as well in principle.

I've talked about renewables and 10 per cent and how we have got to get there, and the very real obstacles that exist to getting there. Although I don't want to turn this into an entirely nuclear conversation, whatever we do in renewables for a very long time to come, according to current projections, we'll need to replace what we're losing in terms of carbon-free electricity from the nuclear industry. So we have to run extremely hard on renewables and we have to run extremely hard on energy conservation, which is another big winner in the White Paper. We've got to do a great deal on these immediately to compensate for what we are planning to lose in carbon-free electricity from the nuclear industry.

Now I think that people have to look at this from a different perspective, and I think that they will over the next few years, because at some point the question has to be asked: if carbon reduction really is one of our highest national priorities, one of the highest global priorities, at the very same time as it is attaining that status, does it really make sense to be organising the run down of the one source of generation which actually contributes significantly to carbon-free electricity generation at the present time? In that too there has to be squaring of conscience with intellect, and it's not good enough to draw into entrenched positions and say 'we're anti-nuclear because we're environmentalists' - at least the possibility should be considered. We should be saying: 'we're pro-nuclear

because we're environmentalists', and it is much more important to reduce carbon to combat global warming than it is to pursue an obsessive crusade for the run down of the nuclear industry. That should be put not only in a national context, but also in an international context, because the rest of the world is addressing that dilemma in a different way. It is not true that the whole world is turning its back on nuclear power; it is quite the reverse of the truth, from Finland to Japan to North America and many other countries. They see nuclear as part of a future which is not all that far away, and we should maybe take a closer look at what is going on in the rest of the world.

Now there are good reasons for saying that there should not be 'nuclear new build' in the energy White Paper at the present time. One good reason is that nobody is queuing up to do it, and this very day, British Energy, our major nuclear foundation company is teetering on the verge of administration. How did British Energy get into that bad state? It is not because there is something inherently wrong with nuclear energy; it is because the price of electricity became so low that nuclear could not come down to the level at which electricity was being sold. Result: misery through the problems that it has run into. And we could have another very interesting meeting with some of the people who drove the price of electricity to that point, because they did it with a very clear agenda in mind since the biggest victim of that would in fact be the nuclear industry. The story of the fall of British Energy is very interesting. It is a secondary issue, but it increased the climate in which no one writing a government White Paper in 2003 was going to say: 'lets go out and build some nuclear power stations', because no one would actually go out and do that. But another thing that the White Paper said very clearly was to keep the nuclear option open, and the way to do this is twofold:

Firstly, we need to maintain the skills base at every level from the workforce in the plant, right up to the regulatory level, because we need people who know exactly what is going on at the highest levels of technology in the nuclear industry, so if a few years down the road if there is a different policy, then we are in a position to take advantage of it. The other thing we have to do is to keep in very

close touch with what is going on throughout the world, the international collaboration that is going on, in order to produce new and more efficient and ultimately cheaper reactor designs, which will make nuclear power more economic. We don't turn our back on that.

There are very good reasons for not saying 'go for nuclear' at the present time, because it would undermine what we are trying to do on renewables. If there was a perception of a hidden agenda - that really the renewables issue was all lip service, and that what we are going to do is go out and build new nuclear power stations anyway - then this would possibly undermine investment in renewables. And nobody wants to do this: I said right at the start that there was no hidden agenda in the White Paper, and if renewables take off in the intended way, and if energy efficiency takes off in the way it never has done in the domestic sector of this country, and if combined heat and power starts to go up rather than down in the capacity that it contributes - if all these things happen together and we are getting towards our carbon reduction targets in a few years time, then I will be the first to cheer because that is the approach of the White Paper. But what I'm saying is that if we get to 2007-8 and none of these things are quite happening to expectations, and if Cambridge has been flooded, if global warming is somewhere much higher in the political and public perception of very serious issues, at that point are we still going to wish away the one source of significant non-carbon electricity generation in this country? If we have to do so because we haven't kept up with international research, or we carelessly let the skills base fade away, is anyone going to thank us for that?

I will just finish on one other general question and proposition. For decades some people, particularly the environmental movement, have tried to say that if you are for nuclear then you are against renewables - 'we could have been running the entire country on renewables if it hadn't been for all that investment in nuclear'. Of course, there is a very good historic reason for saying that the coal industry's destruction was aided and abetted by the support for the nuclear industry, and there is a lot of truth in that. And latterly, the decimation of the coal industry was made possible because of the dash for gas. All of these are historic truths of playing off one source

against the other. But there is only one sure future, and it is a different kind of division: it is the division between imported gas and everything else. By 2020, based on current projections, 70 per cent of electricity in the UK is going to come from gas, which is a fairly dubious environmental proposition in the first place, and 90 per cent of that gas is going to be imported. This country which has historically been an exporter of energy, and which for a very long time has had a balanced energy policy amongst the various fuels and sources of generation, is going to become massively dependent not only on gas, but on imported gas.

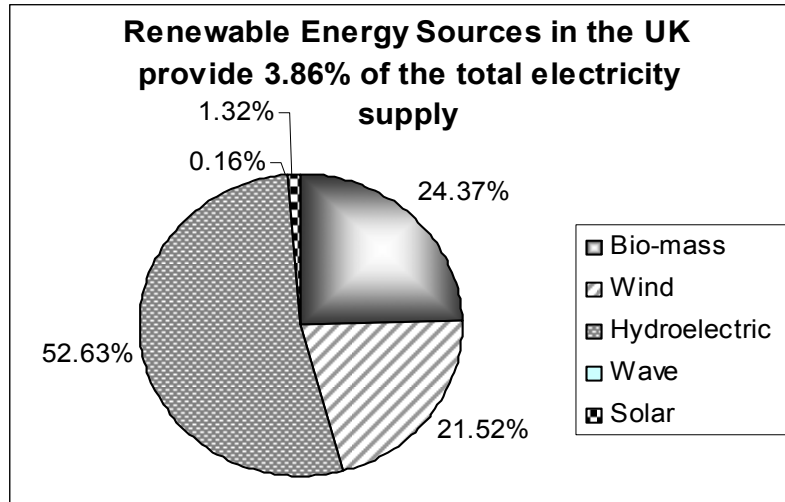
I'm not an alarmist, and the White Paper may well be true in saying that this is not a big deal, and we will get the gas from Algeria, Azerbaijan, Russia and Norway and everything will be alright on the night - but I'm not quite sure that I would stake my children's future on it. And that is what we are being asked to do, is to stake our children's future on the security of energy supplies based on the preponderance of imported gas on a scale that I don't think anybody in the UK yet realises is actually happening. That is what we are being asked to do.

What I would say, and I see welcome signs of this around this conference, is that the coal industry, historic enemy of the nuclear, should actually be arguing not as the enemy of nuclear or renewables, but as three sides of the same triangle. This is a campaign for indigenous British energy generation, as an alternative which will limit, though not replace or even impinge upon in any major way, the import of gas to suppliers of electricity. That is another way of looking at it, and I just think that a few doubtful years down the road it might be the way that people are looking at it. But first we have got to get over this hang-up about nuclear, and recognise that if I was standing where Anthony Wedgewood Benn was in the 1960's, then I probably wouldn't have invented the British nuclear industry as he very largely did, a detail which seems to be omitted from the diaries! But we're not in the 1960's, we're not in the 1970's or the 1980's - we are in 2003.

This brings me right back to my original point: for the first time, the drive to combat climate change is right up there at the top of the

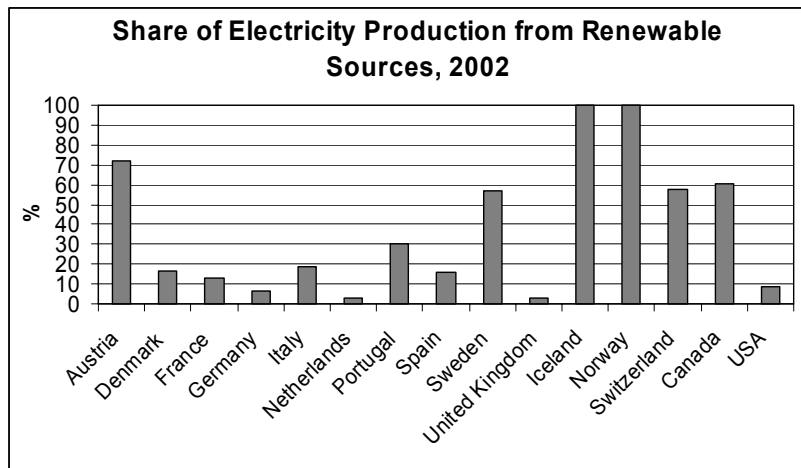
political and the energy agenda. In that context, clean coal (which can do more incidentally to reduce carbon emissions than renewables are ever going to do), renewables themselves, and nuclear energy, will limit reliance on imported gas to generate electricity. There again we would have a balanced energy policy which would also be an environmentally friendly energy policy.

**Chart 4:**



Source: DTI.

**Chart 5:**



\* Renewable sources include hydro, geothermal, solar thermal, solar photovoltaic, tide, wind, renewable municipal solid waste, solid biomass and gases from biomass.

Source: Renewables information 2002, IEA Statistics, OECD.

## **Section 2: Stephen Tindale**

I would like to start by saying that it's good to be having a debate, and looking through the fringe guide you see so many meetings where there is just one side of the argument delivered to people who agree with it. It is good that we are here because there is a genuine debate to be had, as Brian has suggested.

The common ground is quite striking in this area: Greenpeace welcomed the White Paper which is a message that I hope got through, since we were quite vociferous in our welcome of it on the day. The fact that climate is the driver of British energy policy is fantastic news, and I think the UK government can legitimately say that it is the world leader on that issue at the moment with its 60 per cent target. I could talk at great length about climate, but just to give you one reason why we're concerned about climate change as an issue, the latest science emerging from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) suggests that a two degree warming over the next century will leave 3 billion extra people at risk from water shortages. Competition for the scarce resource of water is likely to be a major source of conflict and human suffering over the next decades, and the more we allow climate change to run away, the more that will be the case. So climate change at the centre of policy is excellent, and the priority given to energy efficiency, as Brian said, is very good, and we welcome the Chancellor's decision to raise fuel duty prices today, because we need to begin looking at demand management and transport as well as domestic energy and commercial energy. There is a lot more that can be done on energy efficiency. We still build to a lower standard of energy efficiency than Denmark, for example. Although 'catching up with Denmark' might not be the most striking of political slogans, it is a start.

The third point of common agreement is about the renewables area. It is not an add-on or a Cinderella option, nor is it a nice and decorative marginal issue. It is a serious contributor and a serious factor in energy policy. Brian is to be congratulated for his championing of renewables whilst he was in office, and I think that the work the DTI and Patricia Hewitt have done since the White Paper shows that they are serious about that agenda.

The question of whether renewables deliver to the extent that we at Greenpeace say that they should is obviously at the heart of this. Looking at the UK context, the renewable resource is immense. The figures are available from the background analysis done for the White Paper, which shows that the on-shore and off-shore wind resource, if you look at the bio-mass resource, and if you look at the wave and the tidal stream resource (where admittedly the technology is less developed and therefore less certain), these are major contributors. Particularly, off-shore wind, where the overall resource for already accepted technology in Denmark again, is greater than the total UK current electricity demand.

Even in our Northern climes, solar is a potentially major contributor. If we had solar panels on all of our roofs, we would generate electricity roughly equivalent to 85 per cent of the current UK electricity demand. Of course the challenge is much greater than just looking at electricity because it is just one part of our energy use. We have to look at space heating, we have to look at transport and we have to look at primary energy use in industry as well, and there we need to look at new energy carriers such as hydrogen (which is not a primary energy source, but like electricity is a means of moving energy and getting it into a usable form). The hydrogen economy, much talked about and much hyped, is nevertheless genuinely very exciting, offers a means both of capturing more of this immense renewable resource, and crucially of storing it.

The White Paper goes a long way in all of these areas. The questions that are legitimately put are: can renewables deliver fast enough, and will they deliver. In terms of can they deliver, the answer is yes, given sufficient political backing and the right policy framework. We published a paper in the run up to the energy White Paper called 'Sea Wind East' which was written for us by AEA Technology, and looked at the potential for off-shore wind farms off the coast of East Anglia to deliver up to 25 per cent of the current UK electricity demand by 2020. It looked at issues such as build rates, the economics, and the local environmental impact – it was a rigorous and I think convincing piece of work, and showed that it was a technical possibility. We managed to assemble a good coalition of

industry figures, commentators and others who were supporting us in this demand.

The solar contribution could be ramped up very rapidly if the building regulations were changed. It would be a very simple measure to say that all new buildings should have solar panels on them. Why not – if buildings are going to be standing for hundreds of years then what is the point of putting roofing tiles on them which don't generate electricity, when for not very much greater cost you could place solar panels on the roof which would? Bio-mass is a complex area, and not a particularly happy story in the UK for very many reasons to do with agriculture policy and so on. There is the potential for a very rapid ramping up of bio-mass in the UK, given the right policy frameworks, and given government commitments and some money.

Over the horizon, but not very far over the horizon, we have the possibility of immense contributions from wave and from tidal stream, and the first technologies are beginning to move off the drawing board and laboratories, and into the marine environment. Government has set up a testing site in Orkney which is very much the way to go if we want to capture this world lead on wave, in the way that we failed to do on wind. The question that we need to look at is largely a planning issue, as Brian has said and used to make to the environmental movement when he was a minister: far too often you get environmentalists talking out in favour of renewables in general, then opposing renewables in particular projects. I am pleased to say that this is not something that Greenpeace is guilty of, and we haven't opposed any specific projects. There is one off-shore wind farm that we are looking at very carefully because for local environmental reasons, it might be inappropriate for sea mammals or birds, but if we do decide that we cannot follow the project to its conclusion, then this will be the first case in the history of Greenpeace that we haven't supported a specific local project. We've gone further than just being in favour in a passive way, we've been campaigning very actively in South Wales, in Porthcawl over the summer, in support of the off-shore wind farm which is one of the 18 that has run into the most local opposition. This has largely been on the grounds of visual impact, but we've been saying that the arguments about tourists being scared away are simply not true –

we took a poll of tourists on the beach on a bank holiday weekend in August, and found that 84 per cent said that they would be just as likely or more likely to return to Porthcawl if there was an off-shore wind farm there. We've also looked at some of the scare stories about heavy metals being released from the sediment, about surf being interfered with, but that's not true. It really does come down to an issue of visual impact, and I'm sad to say the local group has misrepresented the position both on their website and on their postcard, where they have shown the turbines to be a couple of hundred meters off shore, when they are in fact two kilometres away.

There is definitely a challenge to get local communities to accept the need for renewable energy, and that is something I think we all need to work together on. That covers all the areas of common interest and analysis. The issue that does still divide is the issue of nuclear power, and I would like to say a little bit about that, for I suspect that it will come up anyway. Brian talked about an 'oppressive crusade' against nuclear. It is true that environmentalists have had to ask themselves some very hard and searching questions because climate change is now rightly seen as the number one issue, and because we are increasingly alarmed about the bleak picture painted by the science, unfortunately. There are some environmentalists, notably James Lovelock for example, who argue that we should be in favour of nuclear power. The Greenpeace position on this is that we should not support it and this is for a number of reasons which I will now run through quickly.

It is essentially because although carbon is the main problem, it is not the only problem. Nuclear power still has unresolved, and we believe irresolvable issues, of nuclear waste. There are various solutions being talked about, and the Finnish example is often cited where they have found a site to do some research, similar to what was being proposed at Sellafield. They haven't decided that it is definitely the right site, much less actually built the depository. It is not a solution therefore, it is a proposal. And the British government is now saying that whatever happens the waste must be monitored, manageable and treatable. In practical terms that means the burden of looking after nuclear waste is going to continue, generation after

generation and into the future. There are many definitions of sustainable development, but doing that to future generations is not consistent with any of them. Nuclear waste is the main reason why we continue to be opposed to nuclear.

The issue of radioactive discharge, I accept, from nuclear power stations, and particularly from modern nuclear power stations, is relatively low, but it is not zero. Since BNFL is one of the sponsors of this meeting, I should say that the main discharges are coming from reprocessing. If I was in favour of a new generation of nuclear power plants, the first thing I would be arguing for would be the shutting down of reprocessing – it would improve the economics, and it would improve the environmental performance of the nuclear industry. This hasn't happened yet for reasons that I can't quite fathom.

The third reason as to why we are against nuclear power: there is always a risk of accidents. It is not high perhaps, but it is not minimal, and the consequences of an accident would be catastrophic. This is the reason why the private sector won't insure the nuclear industry, and why in both Britain and the United States, the government has underlined nuclear liabilities. Then there is the risk of attack, and we know that Al-Qaeda have been looking at nuclear facilities as a possible focus for their attacks. Brian Fletcher has written a very good article on this in the BNFL-sponsored supplement in the New Statesmen this week, so I don't need to say any more than that. Finally, onto nuclear proliferation, an issue that has dominated the international news agenda. It has traditionally been argued that you can draw a distinction between civil nuclear power and military nuclear power, but Greenpeace has always argued that this a false distinction, and surely by looking at what is happening in Iran and North Korea, and what was happening in Iraq, people must now wake up to the fact that if you have civil nuclear programmes, they are likely to develop, if the government is so minded, into nuclear bombs. It was mentioned that I worked in the Foreign Office, and I was actually based in Islamabad for a year, and I was closely involved in monitoring the development of the Pakistani bomb which we were powerless to do anything about, partly because they had a civil nuclear programme and it was only a matter of time before they developed it into a bomb.

For all of those reasons, which I don't believe are irrational or ideological but are actually based on pragmatic reasons, we are opposed to nuclear power. So does this mean, and this is my final point, that we have to accept higher carbon dioxide emissions to avoid all of these problems? Our view on that is no, or at least only in the short term. Both nuclear power and renewables need subsidies, and subsidies are a scarce resource as we know. Public money, even under spending reviews, is finite, and under the next spending review it will be even more finite. And even if you dress it up as a burden that falls more on the consumers rather than taxpayers money, I think that it is still a form of public subsidy. Money that is spent in the nuclear industry, either for new build or for keeping open reactors which are not economic to run (particularly when you factor in the waste), is money that is not available for renewable energy. The clearest example of how this has distorted energy policy in recent years was the fossil fuel levy during the 1990's, when £9bn was collected by the government: £8bn went to the nuclear industry, and only £1bn went to renewables. In our view closing down the nuclear option, not just the moratorium suggested by the White Paper but ruling it out once and for all, would focus our efforts and our political will on the renewable alternative.

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