



green
party

Tuesday 14th October 2008

Mr. Brian Wilson, MLA North Down addresses Northern Ireland Assembly during a debate which called on all the Ministers ensure their Departments recognise the significance of man-made climate change.

It is important that the Assembly has an opportunity to debate climate change, which, along with the controversial views of the Environment Minister Sammy Wilson, has been in the news during the past few months.

In October 2007, I tabled a motion on this issue which demanded that climate change and sustainability be central to all Executive policy.

Although the current Environment Minister spoke against that motion, the Assembly agreed to it unanimously. However, I must ask what impact that has had on Executive decisions.

As far as I can see, it has had none. It appears that in making decisions, the Executive has ignored sustainability and the threat of climate change.

For example, the amount of money that will be spent on public transport in the next 10 years will not increase. In fact, the Department for Regional Development is obsessed with building more roads, which will in turn create more traffic. Alternative measures, such as public transport, should be examined. There has been no leadership on the matter.

Planners continue to give permission to build houses on flood plains. In the past few months, the Assembly has given £2 million of grants to householders who live near riverbanks and have been flooded out by heavy rain. Again, action should be taken on that matter, but nothing has happened.

Although the Executive has taken some action, it has been negative. Direct rule Ministers introduced Reconnect grants to help householders to create micro-generation systems in their houses. However, the abolition of that initiative was one of the first things that was done under the Budget.

If we want to encourage people to use alternative energy and reduce their carbon footprint, the last thing that we should do is discourage the development of micro-generation systems.

The previous Administration established the Renewable Energy Installer Academy, which was funded by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and provided courses on how to install the new micro-generation systems. However, the people who received the training found that jobs disappeared because the Reconnect grants on which those jobs were dependent were no longer available.

Renewable energy systems have great potential. In Germany, 250,000 people are employed to install and create such systems. Our current figure is around 100, so we have not tapped that potential. The Executive abolished the previous plans to set mandatory targets and to install renewable systems in new housing.

The Executive has totally failed to show any leadership on the issue of sustainability. Instead of putting their money where their mouth is, they pay lip service to the issue. We are one of the windiest places, if not the single windiest place, in Europe, so we should take the initiative and develop energy from our offshore wind — a significant resource that is the envy of many European countries.

We generate approximately 1% of our energy from renewable sources. Denmark, which is a country that is not much bigger than ours, produces 25% of its energy from wind. We could do that if we had the will and if the Executive showed some leadership. We have the advantage of being an island around which there is much potential for wave and tidal power. We have a tidal-turbine prototype that should be developed, and I am sure that the Executive could help to promote that technology. The turbine could be developed at Harland and Wolff, and that technology could be a prototype for the rest of the world.

If the resources that I referred to were developed, thousands of long-term jobs could be created. That could also combat fuel poverty by saving people money on energy bills. In addition, that would increase our energy security, because we are at the end of a long supply line for gas and oil, and we are being hit hardest by increasing fuel prices and shortages.

We are supposed to show that we really believe that climate change is a problem, but the appointment of our new Environment Minister has sent out all the wrong signals to the community. If the Environment Minister does not believe that we are responsible for climate change, why should anyone else?

Perhaps the Minister for the Environment Sammy Wilson needs to get out more; he should attend a meeting of EU environment Ministers, which would give him an opportunity to convince those Ministers that they have all been conned by the green, climate-alarmist scare-mongering that he mentioned in his 'News Letter' article.

Other European environment Ministers would be interested to hear how he worked that out.

Most people who are involved in environmental matters consider the Minister's opinions to be backward, reactionary and irrelevant. He ignores all the scientific evidence, and he gives credibility to a few crank scientists who are sponsored by oil companies, hold extreme views and have a vested interest in promoting the use of fossil fuels.