

SERA Lecture
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Introduction

I want to thank SERA for organising this series of lectures. I have seen what Hilary and Peter have already said and strongly agree with them. But what I want to do is add to this discussion through my own perspective which leads me to focus on environmental questions in a different way.

What I want to argue is that we must build not just from the science down – as Al Gore has so brilliantly done, and I was privileged to see him in the flesh doing his slides – but also from families and communities up – and I do that as a member of Parliament for the last 25 years representing a hard-pressed multi-cultural inner city area and as someone who has always striven to put family issues on the political agenda.

So I'm going to start by looking at the threat to people's environment by pollution which is happening here and now and how we can help empower communities themselves to tackle it. And then I'm going to move on to the question of climate change and global warming.

It is paradoxical that environmental issues are still to some extent seen as a luxury for the middle classes when the people who are first in line to face, and have least resources to withstand, local and international problems caused by the environment are poor people here and abroad. And those are the people who have always been our first concern and why we are in the Labour party.

Not a luxury for those who can afford it – a necessity for those who can't

It is no luxurious extra to be caring about the environment when your own home is menaced or your family abroad faces ruin and poverty.

Tackling pollution

First: tackling pollution.

48,000 members of the public call the Environment Agency every year - complaining about pollution of water supplies, outflows of untreated sewage into people's gardens or homes and toxic clouds blacking out the sky, chemicals dumped and building waste dumped into parks, roads and rivers.

We need to remember the downright criminality, menace to people's quality of life and danger to health of some polluters. Those who fill illegal waste sites with toxic waste – like the homes I saw where the residents were about to be told that their drinking water from the local borehole is not natural rainwater filtered through chalk but instead natural rainwater filtered through used nappies, condoms, batteries and household waste from North London. Or the row of Council cottages I saw which overlook an illegal waste site which by day is filled by lorries and by night sees toxic clouds billow from huge open air fires of tyres chemical and plastics. I thought I was seeing double when two skip lorries roared past me with the same number plate. This is environmental offending which is lucrative organised criminality and which makes people's lives a misery.

When I was Solicitor General between 2001 and 2005 I was proud to be responsible for superintendence of the Environment Agency Prosecutors.

A new environmental justice bill

It was out of an understanding of and admiration for their work and the need for greater protection for local communities that, working with Elliot Morley who was then our excellent “Green” minister at DEFRA, I developed the Environmental Justice Bill.

The Environment Agency prosecutors take cases to court but the law should be strengthened to give local communities a role in getting justice when they are affected and give them protection they need and get from the polluter pay-back to which the community is entitled.

You can see on my website the details of my proposed Environmental Justice Bill – it would work by giving the local community a voice – it's their air and water – and sometimes their jobs which are at stake.

It would provide for

- allowing the local community to join as a party to a case
- special training in environmental issues for local magistrates and crown court judges – and developing a ticketing system for specialist environmental magistrates and judges

- giving the court the power to hear an “Environmental impact statement” from the local community so that they could tell the court how their lives had been effected
- giving the court the power to make an environmental clean up order
- giving the court the power to make an environmental improvement order – such as clearing some local waste land and putting up goal posts – or giving a facelift to a local park.

It attracted the support of many environmental organisations, Southwark’s Environment Forum and the GLA, but has yet to be implemented.

The Government is already bringing forward new powers for a 'Community Call to Action' whereby local residents can make their demands of Government and Local Government. These powers would be even greater backed up by a clear concept of environmental justice.

If I were to be deputy leader I would be in a position to ensure it was on our legislative agenda.

Tackling climate change

Now I want to say something about climate change. It is now common ground that

- It is beyond doubt that human beings are responsible for carbon emissions, that
- Carbon emissions are responsible for climate change and that
- Climate change amounts to a catastrophic threat to the natural conditions of the planet on which human life depends.

But we must remember, though, that there are some who have a financial vested interest in denying that we are causing climate change. They need to be exposed and challenged. And there are some who feel that it’s just too difficult, too huge for them or indeed any of us to do anything about. They need to be supported and enabled.

The task that still lies ahead is to ensure that we move forward. What I want to do is

- to set out how I believe we can, and will, mobilise the action that is needed for tackling climate change
- how it depends on a preparedness of governments to act on behalf of the people and to tackle markets
- how on this, the personal is political

We will make the best progress when all see that each of our actions makes a difference and contributes to the actions that all others are taking. This is the classic example of where we can do more together than we can as individuals.

Environmentalism sets up good politics

This is not the only way environmentalism sets up good politics beyond the necessity of saving the planet. It also does so because

- It sharpens the focus on the question of poverty and inequality. How can people look to the effect on the future of their actions if their life is a struggle just to get through day to day. This is the case both at home and internationally.
- It starkly demonstrates our need to work internationally and the limits of what we can do in our own national interest as a nation alone.
- It challenges conspicuous consumption – conspicuous waste. Like the recent move to challenge the waste of supermarket packaging.
- It springs from and reinforces a focus on the interdependence of the generations. Whatever you feel about your own future. You may not even have many years left yourself. But your concern for the future of your children and grandchildren makes you care about the planet.
- It reinforces the beneficial demand of people for greater transparency – from business as well as from public bodies and political representatives.
- It puts us all under a scrutiny. This is not invasion of privacy – the personal is the political here.

Peckham – the African dimension

My constituency of Peckham is in London. But it is on the frontline of vulnerability to climate change in Africa. Climate change in Africa will be felt with immediate effect in Peckham. My constituency has the largest number of people from Africa living in the UK. A great many of them send money back to their family and their village. As soon as an acre of land yields less, the family depending on it suffers and the demand for help grows and so it is felt in the need for more support from Peckham. And it will be felt by other members of the family giving up their struggle to care for children in Africa and sending them to join other members of the family already in Peckham. As a hard-pressed inner London constituency, Peckham is testimony to how we are now globally interdependent as well as interdependent down the generations.

This is why the Labour Government's energetic work in international meetings has been so important to ensuring that there is shared understanding and the right incentives for cooperation across borders. Isolationism is doomed to fail us and we can learn from others as well as promote change.

Demand for transparency.

Business as well as public services are increasingly expected, as corporate citizens, to account for their carbon footprint as well as their employment practices and service standards. For example Kings College Hospital in my constituency now thinks of its buildings not just in terms of the services they provide but also how they affect the environment. They wrestle with the challenge of how to improve the old buildings and the cost to the environment of new ones.

The personal is political

On the environment, the personal is political. We can't, as councillors, or MPs or ministers or a country, urge others to do more than you are prepared to do yourself. We are all looking over each others' shoulder. The environment is another thing for husbands and wives to argue about. On the basis of transparency and the personal being political – I have to disclose to you that my husband leaves the tap on when he's cleaning his teeth and doesn't turn off his mobile charger. But we both have equal enthusiasm for newspaper recycling, and bottle recycling and I've switched our electricity to ecotricity and all our compostable waste goes to my sister's garden. I know we have more to do.

Help rather than blame

On the basis that we all have more to do, our stance should be helpful rather than blaming. There is no room for the eco-smugs – the most prominent and repellent of which is David Cameron. The science is continuously developing and we need to help families make sense of it all:

- should you throw out perfectly good lightbulbs and buy low energy or is that wasteful?
- Should you use disposable nappies to save the energy of washing and drying fabric nappies and the damage done to the drains by the bleach?

We can't point the finger. Our stance must be to help.

Listen as well as lead

Our stance should be to listen as well as lead. Environmental politics should be built on an understanding of where people are with their lives. This is not just an issue for the political class or scientific experts. Look at what mothers are saying on the website “netmums”. The busiest chat on that website is the daily struggle to combine home and work, to keep the kids on track and to make ends meet. The environmental issues which get most take up are the ones which start from where people’s lives are – ditch the school run and use a “walking bus” and you save on petrol, (as well as save the planet) turn off the lights and turn down the heating and you save on your electricity bill (as well as saving the planet).

The left offers the way forward

It is the left which offers the best hope for progressing the environmental agenda.

Because

- It requires the power of government – national, local and acting internationally to tackle the challenge of climate change;
- It emphasises our interdependence as well as our individualism;
- It requires internationalism as well as a focus on our own nation;
- It requires social justice and equality.

And we should not forget our own history on international action and global change. In the 1970s and 80s, it was Labour people and the left who campaigned for justice in Africa, and to write off third world debt. Where were the Tories then? Today, those international campaigns have developed into concerns about global poverty and climate change.

David Cameron is, on this as on everything else, saying what he wants people to hear, trying to show a break with “the nasty party’s” identity, but the right will never effectively lead on this. Fundamentally the Tories remain a party which turns its face away from the need to work internationally, the need to work collectively through the community and the need for government action where individual action and free markets pose a problem.

Climate change is testament to the limits of the free market, something that even the Cameron Tories find difficult to square.

Surely if David Cameron was serious about environmental progress, such a sceptic as John Redwood would not be in charge of setting out economic policy? And the Tories would be embracing European action, rather than signing up their MEPs to a new extreme right-wing grouping.

Government action in and by every department

The environment is classically an issue for each and every government department – not just for DEFRA alone.

Since 2005, I've been Minister of State in the Department of Constitutional Affairs as Estates Minister and responsible for court buildings – including their effect on the environment. Energy use and environmental impact of government departments and agencies is one of the things that has been looked at by the Sustainable Development Commission which we set up and I would like to pay tribute to their work. The Department of Constitutional Affairs main HQ in Victoria Street is now in darkness at night. And when we look at how we need to change the ancient buildings which make up the court estate to make them fit for disabled access and to provide separate waiting rooms and separate entrances to protect vulnerable victims and witnesses, we look at how any change would affect travelling for those attending at and those working in court.

Local action – global impact

As Member of Parliament for Camberwell and Peckham for the last 25 years, I have seen the progress of concern about the environment go from barely perceptible outside specialist lobby groups to where we are now where over the last 10 months over 400 constituents contacted me by email or post about the environment.

This is classically an issue for each and every constituency. It cannot and should not be done top down. We each, in our own area, each MP in our own constituency, need to look at how we can involve and work with those who live and work in our constituency.

Southwark Climate Change Summit – 2006

It is because the environment must be a bottom up as well as a top down exercise that I convened last June, with the help of Southwark Friends of the Earth and with SERA's Andrew Pakes, the Southwark Climate Change Summit. I called it a summit purposely to challenge the notion that decisions that matter are made only in places that most people have never visited, like Rio, or most people have never heard of before – like Kyoto. That the decisions that matter are by ordinary people as well as government ministers. Decisions that matter are made in people's everyday lives, in their communities, by their local Council as well as their Government. The June 2006 Southwark Climate Change Summit brought together

- Individuals who live in Southwark - including those from Africa;
- Local business – and the Southwark Chamber of Commerce;
- Local public services – notably Kings College Hospital which is a massive employer and service provider under its able leadership of Michael Parker, who is here today;
- Local tenants and residents associations;
- Local heritage societies – such as the Peckham Society and the Dulwich Society;
- Local councillors from all parties in the London Borough of Southwark;
- Our Greater London Authority Member, Val Shawcross; and
- Myself and our two other Southwark local MPs – Simon Hughes and Tessa Jowell, who focussed on the issue of the environmental impact of the Olympics as well as her role as local MP

This is the best way to make progress. It is not something that government does to people. It is not something where the public drives a reluctant national or local government. Instead it is individuals and families doing what they can, demanding Government support for what they do and calling for the Government to do more. And it is Government looking to how it can support people, how it can do what it does with less damage to the planet and looking to how it can work internationally to ensure that we all work together to take the action that the planet we all inhabit requires.

Finally,

All of us in the Government now believe the physical science is clear. I hope that my contribution today has pointed to how the political science can move ahead in step.