

Scotland: Parliament get power to fine over climate change

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A RAFT of new powers to crack down on wasteful homeowners and businesses were passed yesterday, giving the Scottish Government the tough tools it needs to meet what have been hailed as the world's most ambitious emissions targets.

Measures voted through by Parliament included the power to fine householders and companies if they do not take action to improve the energy efficiency of their houses and buildings.

Charges could be brought in for plastic bags, and businesses may be forced to reduce packaging under the powers granted to ministers in the Climate Change Bill.

MSPs approved tough targets to slash greenhouse gas emissions by 42 per cent by 2020 and 80 per cent by 2050.

The legislation, which comes after months of campaigning, was praised by environmental groups and politicians, who said all eyes would now be on Scotland as other countries set their own climate change targets. However, ministers acknowledged that the difficult job of meeting the new targets must begin immediately.

Among the powers passed by Parliament to help cut emissions were measures meaning Scots who take steps to curb their homes' energy consumption - such as putting in insulation - will be awarded a £50 reduction in council tax. The legislation will pave the way for planning permission to be granted automatically for home energy kits, such as micro-turbines.

Powers were also given to the Scottish Government which, if implemented, could see shops and visitor attractions forced to install recycling bins, and could require businesses to reduce packaging or potentially face a fine.

The bill requires that 80 per cent of the cuts in emissions have to be found in Scotland, with only 20 per cent made up from paying for reductions overseas through international credits.

Mike Robinson, chairman of Stop Climate Chaos Scotland, a coalition representing 60 organisations, said it was "a truly momentous day" and that Scotland was taking a lead that others would follow.

About 200 countries will meet in Copenhagen in December to negotiate a successor to the Kyoto Protocol, and Mr Robinson said Scotland would set an example to other nations.

“The Scottish Parliament has voted for legislation that will be held up as a positive example to the world,” he said. “We hope other developed nations will hear this call for action and follow Scotland’s lead.”

It is believed Scotland’s 42 per cent target for 2020 is the toughest in the world, although some countries have more ambitious aims for 2050. In comparison, the UK government has set a 2020 aim of curbing greenhouse gas emissions by 34 per cent, the EU has agreed a target of 20 per cent, Germany 40 per cent, Japan 8 per cent, and Russia between 10 and 15 per cent.

Climate change minister Stewart Stevenson said: “Scotland can be proud of this bill, the most ambitious and comprehensive piece of climate change legislation anywhere in the world. As a country, we are leading global action and expect others to follow our lead as we look to the international summit in Copenhagen this December.”

However, global warming sceptic Dr James Buckee, from the University of Oxford, who recently gave a talk at Aberdeen University arguing against the need to tackle climate change, said he thought the targets would be “unobtainable”.

He said: “As far as reducing emissions by 80 per cent, banning the internal combustion engine, and coal-fired power stations from Scotland would not get close to doing it. This is clearly unobtainable.

“More energy has been expended on finding ways to infringe on human activity than has gone into understanding the science.”

Ministers made it clear yesterday that they do not plan to make immediate use of powers that could see people fined if they did not improve the efficiency of their homes.

Instead, the government will set out a timetable within 12 months to reveal when it plans to start using the powers. A further round of legislation is needed before they can be enforced.

If the plans were implemented, homes and offices would have to publish energy performance certificates – and could be fined if they did not take steps to improve their building’s performance within an allocated timeframe.

Chas Booth, from the Association for Conservation of Energy, said he was “delighted” that the powers had been adopted and he thought they would need to be used “sooner or later” in order to meet the tough emissions targets set yesterday.

However, he added that before these measures were used, Scots must be helped to improve the energy efficiency of their homes through incentives – such as the £50 council tax rebate passed yesterday.

“The way we should go forward is not to bring in draconian measures tomorrow,” he said. “These powers are effectively a big stick. We have to have the carrot before we have the stick, but at the end of the day, we have to have both to meet the targets.”

The 2020 target of cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 42 per cent was backed by MSPs unanimously during the final stage of voting yesterday. Previously, the SNP had planned a 34 per cent target, which would be increased only if other European Union nations raised

their targets.

Only after a campaign by green groups, and after Labour tabled an amendment pushing for a 40 per cent target earlier this week, did the SNP announce it would support 42 per cent. However, some campaigners and politicians were worried the SNP had left “loopholes” to enable the target to be reduced at a later date. The bill includes an option to curb the targets if no strong global climate deal is reached in six months.

Last night, praise for the bill even came from Arnold Schwarzenegger, the governor of California, which has championed aggressive climate legislation. He said: “Climate change is a global problem that requires a global solution.

“Scotland’s ambitious and comprehensive targets encourage other nations to step up to the plate as we look toward an international agreement in Copenhagen, and it sends a message to the world that we must act now and we must act swiftly.”

Natural fluctuations set off alarm bells when science is unsound
Dr James Buckee

Climate changes: the records from both scientific analysis of ice cores and sediments, and the more human record of grapevine cultivation or paintings show continual variation of temperature and rainfall.

The changes we have experienced in the past few hundred years, up and down, are part of these natural variations and within normal bounds.

Indeed, the Thirties was the hottest recent decade and set many record highs, after which the world cooled until about 1970.

The science is still uncertain, and new research and better measurements are revealing fascinating data.

Surface temperature records are heavily contaminated by the spread of bricks and concrete; the best data, from satellites in the atmosphere, has been available only since 1978, so the portentous phrase “since records began” represents a tiny snapshot of longer cycles.

But then there are the computer models.

These models attempt to linearise the chaotic weather system, and contain a line of code stating that an increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide leads to an increase in surface temperature. There is no scientific evidence of this.

Even then the models must hypothesise “positive feedback loops” to show enough effect. Nobody knows if this is right: there may easily be a negative feedback. It is projections of these theoretically untenable models that predict doom and alarm.

Perhaps fortunately, the projections are wrong. The world has been cooling since about 2000; the oceans are not warming.

Prolonged cold spring periods in Hudson Bay are expected to obliterate the breeding period for migratory birds, Arctic ice extent is setting a nine-year record high. Snow in Europe has been the best for decades. Glaciers are growing again. Some projections show the cooling

continuing, with a repeat of last century's little ice age. Whether this is a preferred outlook or not depends on your viewpoint.

In general, the world has flourished in warm periods and not in cold periods, so to base economic decisions on this very uncertain outlook and developing science is folly.

There is a strong correlation between energy use and gross domestic product.

Cutting energy use cuts economic activity, and there is no practical alternative to "bottled sunshine" (ie fossil fuels) other than nuclear power to provide a cheap and reliable supply of warmth, light and transport to the people of Scotland.

As far as reducing emissions by 80 per cent goes, banning the internal combustion engine - cars and lorries - and coal-fired power stations from Scotland would not get close to doing it. This goal is clearly unobtainable.

More energy has been expended on finding ways to infringe on human activity than has gone into understanding the science.

The tone of the alarmists has grown more shrill as they recognise that the evidence is moving away from them.

The fervour with which they want to better the human race is commendable, but the same effort could be much better use in areas such as providing clean water or the prevention of malaria.

- Dr James Buckee has a PhD in astrophysics from Oxford University, and is a former chief executive of Talisman Energy.

Scotland shifts from vague contributor to world leader
Dr Richard Dixon

WHEN the Scottish Parliament came into being in 1999, we environment groups were straight in there, talking about how it would be nice to have some Scottish targets on climate change. At first, there was only a vague commitment to make an "equitable" contribution to UK targets.

Ministers and civil servants came up with lots of arguments about why it would be difficult to set targets for Scotland.

In the 2007 Scottish election, many manifestos promised tough action on climate change, including the SNP's commitment to a bill and 3 per cent year-on-year reductions.

Once in power, the SNP asked what we would all like in a climate bill.

More than 20,000 responses, from farmers' markets and street stalls, and e-mails from all over the world, told ministers loudly that we wanted them to deliver on the 3 per cent a year promise.

Talking to civil servants a year ago, it seemed it was no-go on many of our key issues, from annual targets to the inclusion of aviation.

While we have disagreed on some important issues, I have no doubt that finance secretary

John Swinney and climate change minister Stewart Stevenson have pushed things hard in government to get a credible bill for Scotland.

The Lib Dems and Greens have also done tremendous work, making sure the key issues were aired and suitable solutions proposed. You would expect this of the Greens, but the Lib Dems have also been great at really pushing the boundaries.

Labour took a while to get there with its thinking on the 2020 target but, in the end, made it possible for yesterday's historic vote.

We now have a Scottish Climate Change Bill with a 42 per cent target, including the full emissions from aviation and shipping, and setting a limit on the amount of carbon credits ministers can buy to meet their targets. We also have a duty on all of Scotland's public bodies to show leadership and help deliver on these targets.

It is not perfect, but this is a bill that sends a very important message out to the rest of the world. China and other developing countries have been calling on developed countries to set targets of 40 per cent or more for 2020.

This is their challenge to us before they will take on serious targets of their own. The US and Japan have failed to promise anything like this level. Our bill shows that some countries can rise to this challenge, and doing this in legislation is the strongest promise possible.

Our 2020 target, the inclusion of aviation emissions and the limit on the use of carbon credits should be the talk of those preparing for the Copenhagen summit. Scotland's example is now the benchmark against which all European nations' plans will be measured. Scotland has gone from vaguely contributing to leading the world on climate ambition.

- Dr Richard Dixon is director of WWF Scotland and on the board of Stop Climate Chaos

Bill's key points

EMISSIONS: Cut by 42% by 2020; 80% by 2050

FLIGHTS: Included in targets on emissions, plus shipping

FINES: For families and firms who flout regulations

HANDOUTS: £50 off council tax bills for going green

PLANNING: Automatic permission for DIY energy

BAGS: Power granted to charge for carrier bags

PACKAGING: Power granted to force shops to cut down

BINS: Power granted to force firms to provide recycling bins

ALL IN THE BAG

TWO of Britain's biggest supermarket chains have been criticised by consumer watchdogs for using too many plastic bags to deliver online shopping orders.

Tesco and Sainsbury's have been criticised for each using 14 separate bags to deliver 29 items – or putting just two products in every bag.

But exactly the same shopping order was completed by Waitrose using half the number of bags, according to consumer magazine Which?

As high-street chains claim to be succeeding in slashing the number of plastic carrier bags they hand out to shoppers, researchers from Which? checked out the online services to carry out a bag count.

Which? claims its researchers ordered the same 29 items from all five online supermarkets – Asda.com, Ocado.com, Sainsbury's.co.uk, Tesco.com and Waitrosedeliver.com.

They found Tesco and Sainsbury's delivered the shopping in 14 bags each – twice the number that Waitrose used – while Ocado used ten bags and Asda nine.

Which? said: "If you bought a pack of sausages and a packet of mince from a supermarket, you probably wouldn't put them in separate bags – but this is just one example of what we found.

Sainsbury's said that drivers were trained to use minimal numbers of bags and to take back bags for reuse or recycling.

Tesco said online shopping can be delivered in crates that are taken away and its drivers are able to take away used bags for recycling.

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