

Charities Parliament – 13th September 2011.

Oasis Centre, London.

Our Place, Our Planet, Our Responsibility.

Caroline Spelman.

Secretary of State for Department of Environment, Food & Rural Affairs. (Defra)

Notes compiled by Rev Robert Hill. (Social Responsibility Adviser)

About 50 attended this session of the parliament which, according to the Chairman, was recently described by Tony Benn as 'a new form of Town Hall'.

After the opening comments and welcomes, the first speaker was introduced.

Laura Trevelyan (LT) is the Climate Change Campaign Coordinator for Christian Aid (CA).

Laura started with an over view of the global situation, highlighting that the Global South is feeling the changes more than the Global North, also that the poor are the most affected by it all. Climate change is, she reminded the meeting, happening now, not at some future point. She retold the story of a poor woman suffering from climate change. CA says that it is a voice for Climate Justice, and has joined a pan-African group touring Africa publicizing Climate Change issues ['Caravan of Hope']. Laura outlined CA's challenge to Defra to make standardised Carbon Reporting compulsory for major businesses: There is a need to know the real carbon footprint of the major companies. Laura ended with the note that 'poverty is political'.

Dave Bookless (DB), the second speaker, is the National Director of A Rocha. He spoke of seeking practical, local responses to the environmental issues. He noted that:

- Waste is unnecessary: It is itself a product that we don't need to produce.
- Our society can make us sick by what we eat. We need to return to smaller farming models, away from the USA style bulk methods.
- The Nagoya protocol was a huge step forward, but although the recent government White Paper on biodiversity talks about 'Landscape Scale', it is still set in political climate that has a bias towards development. There is a need for 'pump-priming' money to ensure biodiversity projects are secured.
- The recent report talks about the cost of preserving nature; but can we gauge everything in financial terms? No.
- The underlying issue (Environmental change) is caused by a breakdown of our relationship with the environment, the climate, and each other.
- There is a need for a 'Zero Carbon' aim in all aspects of life, but positive changes in cultural mindset are being seen.

Caroline Spelman opened her presentation by noting that most people are nature-lovers at heart, but that our relationship with nature over the past 200 years has declined. We have taken without thought; forgetting that fertile soil and clean water are finite resources. It is true that the people who have done the least to affect the environment tend to get affected the most. Changing our ways is not an option: It is an imperative. How we do this will need a combination of initiatives; some from individuals, some from government. Government laws cannot change an individual's heart even if it can set boundaries.

Commenting on the challenge from the Christian Aid speaker regarding Carbon reporting by big companies, the Secretary noted that 64% of large companies do that already, but there is a need to change the attitudes of many in the Boardrooms of the country. Countering comments that only a few million pounds was being put into projects to reduce Carbon, Caroline Spelman said that Defra was also drawing a share of £2.9 Billion, which was part of the International Development budget. This was to fund projects such as preventing the deforestation of the Rainforests by seeking alternative employment and strategies for the loggers and farmers. With reference to the recent riots, CS would love to see those identified as 'NEET' engaged with nature, and is working on a project with the Wildlife Trust in London.

Living within sight of green space is important and positive to wellbeing. There is a need to reconnect society with nature, and there are a wide range of nature charities that are willing to help. £7 million is available in set-up grants, whilst project funds can be drawn from a £400 million pool. A project to increase the area of woodland in the UK has seen the planting of 100,000 trees in its first year. Moving British Waterways towards Trust status is another project that is encouraging a more social rather than governmental engagement with the environment, as is assisting in the growth in numbers of Civil Society Groups. A National Civil Society Board has been set up within Defra to advise ministers. This is said to be the first such body within government.

CS said that the protocol signed at Nagoya in October 2010 was wonderful and tangible. She is hoping for good things at the 'Rio plus 20' conference, such as positive moves on the 'Green Economy', 'Green Investment', and 'Zero Waste' agendas. It is planned that NGO's and business people will gather for talks at 'Rio plus 20' days before the politicians arrive. CS hopes that, in preparing for 'Rio plus 20' and in what we do here, "let's make sure we have civil society at it's heart."

Questions, comments and debate.

The presentations were discussed in small groups. I raised concerns regarding the limits and guidelines being given to local people regarding planning applications where the socially powerful might cause injustice to the socially weak and the vulnerable environment.

In the subsequent plenary session, a question was asked (with reference to the White Paper) about encouraging children to engage with nature when so many school trips to the countryside are cancelled due to health and safety concerns. CS said that they are trying to remove the barriers that H&S have caused. Someone from the floor noted that projects within schools (such as vegetable gardens) were good examples of getting around some of this. Budget cuts also mean that there is little money left for field trips after core curriculum costs. CS spoke of the willingness of the "grand-parent generation" to "teach growing". What was needed was a bottom-up approach to engagement.

DB said that A Rocha ran after-school groups to do gardening. He also noted that whilst children are encouraged to love nature at primary school, the secondary school curriculum leaves out nature and can even see nature-study as childish. The thinking being that "the real world works on money, not plants."

CS wanted to encourage secondary schools that have gardening clubs and also a positive attitude to careers in gardening.

A member of 'Groundwork' spoke of that charities work in this area.

A member from the floor (a priest) commented that the countryside is depressingly quiet these days as the lack of biodiversity has caused a drop in bird population. This, he claimed, was from the destruction of hedges etc., under pressure from big supermarkets for economy of scale.

CS spoke of Defra's Stewardship Scheme that promotes the increase of field margins and their planting for birds and other wildlife. She noted that Europe is losing much of its hedges but Great Britain still retains them. We need to produce food at less cost to the environment.

From the floor: What further lessons can be learnt regarding organic farming?

CS said that progress is being made regarding "sustainable intensification", where supply (ie, fertiliser etc) is to the seed rather than to the surrounding soil. It reduces costs, waste and pollution.

From the floor - a member of the Women's Environmental Network: How can environmental groups within civil society groups grow without money: How can they talk to "No. 10"?

CS repeated that much decision making is to shift to the local setting away from 'No. 10'. The idea is to find your local patch that needs sorting and then deal with it.

The questioner pressed the point that "poverty has a woman's face" (as it is often women who suffer more than men) and asked if political lobbying should be at local or national level.

LT (Christian Aid) said that lobbying and campaigning should be done at local, national and international levels.

DB said that it was easy for Christian Aid to talk about global lobbying but it was always difficult for local issues to go up the scale.

CS said that her tip was this: MP's get a lot of mass produced leaflets and letters (such as produced by Christian Aid campaigns) which are mostly ignored: A hand written letter or a personal visit is usually far more effective.

From the floor: Would the Secretary comment on the transport and air quality issues that affect such green practices as cycling to school?

CS said that all children get the chance to learn to cycle safely, but the congestion on the roads is the issue. The number of cycle lanes is growing. Regarding air pollution, the key is to clean up the internal combustion engine and looking at alternatives. Greater London has been given funding to adapt its transport systems to be geared for fewer emissions.

Steve Chalk (Director of Oasis Centre) noted that "we are a rarefied group" at this event, with far less people than normal. Why are we smaller in number than usual, and what can we do to raise the profile of the issues such that it is not just an academic debate?

LT noted that scientific language is often used when talking about reductions (eg: 80 "percent") and that we can do more than just change our light bulbs. Christian Aid promotes things that can be done to make a difference, often using personal stories of those affected rather than using scientific argument.

Comments from the floor:-

- Constant (economic) pressure to grow GDP and produce more is not good, but (eating) less is better for you. Therefore we need to encourage less 'growth', not more.
- Do simple things like bake up apple pies from fallen apples, for Halloween. Keep a check on your unwanted items and general waste levels.
- Re-engineer society by putting climate change at the heart of our society. For example; putting photovoltaic units on all roofs.
- The national debate is too academic for people at grass-roots level. If the debate is aimed at grass-roots level it will engage with the heart. Also local projects such as community and small-group gardens etc., should be encouraged.
- Stories of small groups are good, but they are the lucky ones. Government can do big schemes where locals can often only do projects for small numbers of people to join.
- Big business is trying to go Green, but government must push big business to get greener.
- Legislation must come into play. Don't rely on big business. We don't trust them to pay their taxes so why should we trust them to go Green?

This final comment triggered a robust reaction from the Secretary of State who noted that 80% of the legislation comes from the EU. 70% of the FTSE 100 businesses declare their carbon figures each year. She questioned whether yet more legislation would be appropriate to get the remaining 30% engaged – as more legislation would also affect the 70% who are currently conforming. The key was to “bust the myth” that going Green will always cost more money. She encouraged everyone to lobby their local council if change is wanted at local level – and to use the ballot box if nothing happens: Sceptics and cynics abound in this area.

LT agreed that there is a need to “get our act together” on the global stage and legislation is a good thing at national level. However, those 70% of FTSE companies reporting their carbon figures did not use a standard format, so comparisons are very difficult to show. An agreed standard format for reporting is required.

DB said that he did not deny the passion that CS has for this subject, but that she is not representative of the parliament where each person has their own agenda. There is a need to get away from the party political issues and treat this subject as if it were a war – with cross-party attitudes. Selfish, short-term issues will always win votes when set aside difficult, long-term actions. He also raised the question regarding that desire for continuous growth when we know that world resources are finite.

DB went on to say that what will transform the population at the local level are inspirational people. We have got to live our Green politics and so inspire others. “It only takes a small number of people to change a culture”, he said.

CS noted that we have the most centralised system in the Western World but the present government’s policy is to change that. Every major decision made by the government must now be signed off by all ministers in Cabinet, therefore all government departments have signed up to the 80% Carbon reductions.

Ben (?) from Groundwork was invited to outline what that charity did – especially in London. (see their website for details: www.groundwork.org.uk)

He was asked to say what one small thing the average person could do to help with climate change. His response was to highlight Groundwork’ survey of 400 organisations; which gives many options. The survey report is called ‘Changing the Way We Work.’ available from their website.

Returning to the question of the lower attendance at this meeting, it was suggested that charities with limited funding may only be able to send representatives to events where they have specific interest rather than the more overarching interest of this subject – unless the charity has a particular Green agenda.
