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BEDFORDSHIRE CLIMATE CHANGE FORUM

Meeting with Patrick Hall, MP, member of the Parliamentary Select Committee

In Bedford on 4/7/08

BCCF Team – TM, HM, PT, MM

Patrick was thanked at the start of the meeting at 11.30 am for meeting us. We contrasted this with the fact that MPs N Dorries and A Burt had completely ignored our request for a similar meeting. He was informed that MM was an officer of S Beds Council but was attending as a member of our EC, not as a representative of the Council.

The first topic on the agenda agreed early in June was the Government's Planning Bill. We ascertained that this has not yet completed the Parliamentary process and discussed the implications of reducing the time spent on planning issues compared with people's right to be fully consulted. The point was made that it is difficult for voluntary bodies to do the necessary preparation for arguing a case when up against civil servants whose job it is. We particularly raised the issue in a newspaper report that MPs had been given the right to veto plans for nuclear power stations or airports in their patch, as a consequence of a back bench rebellion. Patrick did not know what this involved and promised to check it out and get back to us.

We then moved on to the Climate Change Bill, which had been discussed at our earlier meeting in November. We wanted to know what stage of the Parliamentary process this had reached, how it was developing in the light of PH's comment last October that he wanted a "robust" Bill and what significant changes had occurred. Patrick reiterated his hope that aviation and shipping would be included in the provisions of the Bill, while believing that that could be achieved as part of the ongoing process, without specific amendments. He was not sure what stage the Bill was at and could not remember any significant changes which had been made. He also made the point that unpopular decisions could be made but those who made them were often not re-elected. Thus most queries this week had been for the Government to reduce fuel prices; there had been little interest in the "green" implications.

Eco and Transition towns were next. PT explained that the former were new developments built to high environmental standards; the latter were ways of improving the environmental performance of older, already developed areas. The Castle project is an embryo example of the latter. MM informed PH that, while a decision on Eco towns was likely in October, there would first be a shortlist of 15, which would be reduced to 10 and finally to 5. The M Vale proposal could be one of the 5. PH felt that it was a matter of regret that they were called "Eco" towns, that it

should be made clearer that they were not in addition to the already allocated new housing for Bedfordshire and that much of the controversy was politically motivated.

HM drew attention to Forum for the Future's special publication entitled "The Future is Retro-Fit", emphasising the huge proportion of existing properties which needed upgrading, and how this could offer huge opportunities for industry and therefore employment within the UK. She also expressed a need for real leadership from the Parliamentary Select Committee, plus any other relevant bodies to bring about a real impact in order to fight climate change.

The debate then moved on to the Government's recently announced Renewable Energy consultation. We had asked for PH to find out some information for us on government grants to encourage folk to invest in renewables, especially via feed-in tariffs. PT developed the issue by outlining how Germany had increased its renewable energy resources phenomenally by a system of feed-in tariffs 4x higher than ours and guaranteed for 15 years. This was a way to progress, especially if allied to smart metering and a decent grant scheme. It was consistent with the important need to encourage people to make their own efforts and not just leave it to the "authorities" or "other people" to do it for them. Wind farms provided another example; if they involved the community and enabled individuals to invest in the development then a project was much more likely to be successful than if it was just to make money for shareholders. We asked PH to press for an improvement in government encouragement of such initiatives with extra funding, to avoid a repetition of the recent problems where an initial flood of applications had been disappointed because insufficient funds had been provided. He was also asked to report back to us on this issue as requested earlier.

We finally, before departing, drew to his attention the Desertec Concept and told him how those involved in this scheme to set up solar power stations in the Sahara to power Europe and the Middle East had met Energy Minister Malcolm Wicks last week, to persuade the UK to support the scheme. We asked him to familiarise himself with this project and, if convinced, support it.

An hour had passed and others were waiting for the MP's attentions.

Tony Mitchell. 4/7/08