

From Fossil to Future Fuels

5th Conference of the British-German Environment Forum

Harnack House, Berlin

5 and 6 February 2004

Summary

How to push forward the gradual but critically important switch from ‘fossil fuels’ to ‘future fuels’ was the topic of the fifth British–German Environment Forum, which met in Berlin in February 2004. The 60 participants represented the spectrum of activity in sustainable energy in both countries: politics and policy-making (at local, national and European levels), technological and commercial development, and research, reporting and campaigning. The mix was a stimulating one, for it soon became clear that all these different interests must work together (above all regionally and internationally) to create acceptance of the need for a radical realignment of energy policies, sources and usage.

The conference took place at a fulcrum moment: eighteen months on from the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, which called for the global development of renewable energy, and also in the immediate run-up to the much-anticipated renewables 2004 conference (the International Conference for Renewable Energies organised by the German government in Bonn in June 2004), designed to map the expansion of renewables worldwide. Beyond that lies the major issue of the Kyoto Protocol, in particular ratification by Russia and by other major industrial nations worldwide. And overlying all these is the bleak threat of inescapable climate change – of far greater importance, many participants argued, for the future of the planet than issues of security – and the urgent need for political commitment to develop new energy technologies and increase energy efficiency.

In their opening speeches, Jürgen Trittin and Lord Whitty, the German and British ministers most closely involved with developing policies for sustainable energy, reviewed political and technological advances – the establishment of the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership and the greenhouse gas emissions trading scheme in the UK, the renewables 2004 conference and plans for increased use of more recent forms of renewable energy (e.g. hydrogen, biomass and geothermal) in Germany – and pointed to areas for potential future co-operation. Following their contributions, Professor Robert Worcester, who chairs MORI, the UK market research agency, gave a perhaps surprisingly positive overview of public opinion about environmental issues in the two countries.

Among many other significant indicators, he pointed to increasing awareness of and concern about environmental issues in Germany and the UK and to a strong preference, again in both countries, for protecting the environment even at the expense of slower economic growth.

Participants then debated – in workshop groups and in plenary discussion – three main challenges:

- how to reduce dependence on imports of fossil fuels
- how to promote a more rapid take-up of sustainable and energy-efficient practices and technologies *and*
- how Germany and the UK can more effectively pursue common aims within the international energy system.

Broad (though by no means always unanimous) agreement was reached on a number of important topics. These included:

- The leading role played by both Germany and the UK in taking steps towards a sustainable energy system. This puts these countries in a strong position as advocates of change (to other EU members and to other countries). However, the consensus was that Germany's progress was more substantial on the ground than the UK's. (Delegates joked that 'Britain has all the wind but Germany has all the windfarms.') That said, its EU and G8 presidencies in 2005 will offer the UK a big opportunity to move things forward.
- The need to develop new renewable energy sources and energy efficiency measures – neither is sufficient on its own – and to focus on energy for heat and transport as well as for electricity supply.
- The leading role the EU can play in persuading Russia, and possibly also the USA, to ratify Kyoto. Russia in particular needs to feel that it has a role to play in the worldwide energy economy.
- Political will as the essential ingredient required to fix and implement targets for moving towards a sustainable energy system. Politicians and government must give a lead, using economic, fiscal, political and social tools. Politicians also need to recognise that often the people are ahead of governments in their willingness to embrace change and that the goal is too important to be left to the market alone.
- The crucial significance of alliances at regional level (e.g. the EU) and at sub-national level (e.g. between NGOs) in pressing for Kyoto targets to be implemented.
- The importance of crafting messages that reach people's hearts as well as their heads. Economic influences alone will not be enough – public education and public relations have important roles to play.
- The need to look beyond the Kyoto deadline of 2012 and develop long-term goals that focus on the biggest emitting nations (Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Russia and the USA).

Discussion in the closing plenary session reflected the tensions inherent in the situation. Considerable and sombre concern about the scale, urgency and inevitability of the problems was balanced by optimism about the opportunities for Germany and the UK – individually and (more important still) in co-operation – to demonstrate political and technological leadership and to make a real and beneficial impact on long-term global energy policy.

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