

Environment, Energy, Economy:
Scottish Solutions to Global Economic and Climate Crises

Event synopsis:

On 9 June, 2010, leading academic and practitioner experts from across the policy spectrum, assembled in David Hume Tower on the University of Edinburgh campus to engage in a half-day forum for public debate on some of Scotland's most pressing environmental, economic and energy issues.

The discussion began with a few words from event chair, Simon Pepper, member of the Scottish Government's 2020 Delivery Group and former director of WWF Scotland. Simon welcomed the near-capacity crowd by emphasizing the importance of community engagement and encouraging thoughtful participation. He also thanked co-sponsors the Public Policy Network and Edinburgh Centre on Climate change for their support, mentioning the latter organization's search for a director.

Panel A: Renewable energy and peak oil

Speakers: Dr. Andy Kerr, Director of the Scottish Alliance for Geosciences, Environment and Society (SAGES) & Paul Tetlaw, Chair, Transform Scotland

Andy's presentation focused on 'policy-making in context of the financial crisis and the low carbon imperative' and served to outline some of the most pressing challenges related to low carbon growth and meeting the Scottish Government's ambitious reduction targets. Of these, Andy highlighted the interim commitment of Scottish Ministers to ensure that the net emissions account for the year 2020 is at least 42% lower than the baseline, with the overall aim of an 80% decrease in carbon emissions by 2050. These cuts will come from a variety of sectors including, but not limited to, rural land use, waste, transport, international shipping and aviation. He pointed to the planned role of renewable sources in helping to meet both domestic and industry demand for energy, while drawing attention to the gaps between current renewable generation and 2020 targets. Andy called upon Scottish policy-makers to commit to a host of approaches to meeting emission targets, including balancing the higher costs associated with renewable energy with creating an attractive and fair environment for investment, addressing skills shortages in the workforce, spurring innovation and inspiring behavioural change.

Paul's presentation followed with a discussion on fossil fuel dependence and transport and served to highlight multiple challenges stemming from climate change and energy security in the context of rapidly depleting resources. Citing multiple examples of the economic, social and environmental costs of oil dependency, Paul drew attention to the heavy reliance of UK transport on fossil fuels totalling 99%. He emphasized difficulties in trying to change embedded cultures of consumption, despite considerable developments in sustainable infrastructure in urban and rural communities throughout Scotland and cited the planned construction of a second Forth Road Bridge as one key example of a project which contradicts Transform Scotland's message to Scottish policy-makers, which calls for a "shift to a sustainable transport system which would reduce our climate emissions, be accessible and affordable to everyone, improve our health and stop our dependence on imported oil." On this point Paul called upon Scottish policy-makers to engage in projects which promote sustainable design, stating that "failing to plan" instead of "planning to fail," is not the optimal

approach to ensuring a clean energy future, free from reliance on fossil fuels.

Panel B: Investment priorities post-crisis

Speakers: MSP Patrick Harvie, Convener, Scottish Parliament Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change & Professor Janette Webb, Dept. of Sociology, University of Edinburgh

Patrick's presentation focused on the continued need for change as historically-embedded in an evolving discourse on climate change and addressed key challenges related to the Scottish transport sector. He began by emphasizing the important relationship between fossil fuel consumption and electricity suppliers. Consumer culture despite its noteworthy perks is ultimately "the consequence of political choices and priorities." Where flying, shopping and hotels have become mainstay, they depend quite heavily on cheap and easy access to traditional energy sources. However, cheap energy "was always a dream" - one which, according to Patrick, cannot last. While much progress has been made in terms of spreading awareness about climate change, cultural reliance on unsustainable modes of transport remains a challenge, not only to the environment, but to future prospects for energy security. Patrick's recommendation to policy-makers was grounded on the premise that "despite climate change rising up the agenda... we're still doing it all wrong, we're still pumping money into the high carbon infrastructure, we're still ignoring cheap solutions." Patrick cited as one example, the planned construction of a second Forth Road Bridge - "one of the most expensive ever built in history." He concluded by stating that the central importance of transport in making decisions about climate change is a multifaceted issue, adding that regardless of "conceptual barriers" to change, there are at least "some voices in all political parties who get this agenda."

Janette's presentation addressed some of the socio-economic and environmental challenges associated with behavioural attitudes toward climate change in the context of consumer culture. She began by explaining that our attitudes and assumptions about the environment are shaped by our lifestyle choices - choices, which at present have largely been made in favour of intensifying energy use and, as a result, carbon emissions. She spoke briefly on the topic of growth inherited from the Reagan/Thatcher area of economic neo-liberalism which served to 'valorize' consumer choices above others. Janette addressed some of the many challenges associated with empowering consumers with an environmental conscience, citing a Scottish Environmental Attitudes Survey in which 39% of respondents listed the environment as an area of concern. The inherent difficulties in attempting to change behaviours were illustrated by the same survey in which respondents made 'limited reference to household contribution to emissions,' cited 'low awareness of energy efficiency,' and 'routine car use.' When asked if they would be happy to pay more for electricity produced in a more environmentally friendly way, over half of all respondents said 'no.' Janette concluded by questioning the efficacy of strictly technocratic solutions designed to prompt shifts in consumer choices, adding that civil society is a key component to political leadership in promoting a more sustainable narrative and questioning the oft-supposed conflict between economic well-being and the environment.

Panel C: Sustainability vs growth?

Speakers: Phil Matthews, Senior Policy Advisor, Sustainable Development Commission Scotland & Dr. Justin Kenrick, Sustainable Development, University of St. Andrews

Phil's presentation focused on the question of how to achieve 'prosperity without growth,' offering insights into the SDC's report by the same name within the context of world happiness indicators. He began by drawing attention to the UK and Scottish government's five principles for sustainable development: 'living within environmental limits,' 'ensuring a strong, healthy and just society,' 'achieving a sustainable economy,' 'promoting good governance' and 'using sound science responsibly.' Phil continued with an open question, "Is material wealth the same as true wealth?" To help answer that question he highlighted the lack of a feasible model for 'de-growth,' arguing that poorer countries require it in order to flourish and pointing out a lack of correlation in the relationship between GDP and happiness. In the global north, Phil emphasized the negative environmental impacts of Western development models in the form of degraded ecosystems and global climate change, as well as wealth inequality and a lack of psychological well-being for poorer populations in industrialized countries. Moreover, in the global south, there exist a number of countries with low GDP and high levels of life expectancy (i.e. good health). For example, life expectancy in Cuba, Costa Rica and Chile rival those of the UK, the US and Norway. At the same time, 'common conclusions' indicate a more complicated relationship between income, health and GDP. Meanwhile, with the global population set to increase to 9 billion by 2050, Phil called upon policy-makers to focus on the additional problem of encroaching limits in fossil fuel and metal/mineral supplies. He stated that "technology is the only thing that can lessen impact in a growing world" and cited the New Economics Foundation's 'Green New Deal' as containing essential recommendations for challenging current consumption patterns and encouraging better fiscal management. Phil concluded by calling for new development models which emphasize fairness in wealth distribution, impose caps on carbon emissions, respect ecological limits and can facilitate knowledge transfer between industrialized and industrializing countries.

Justin wrapped up this third and final panel, by discussing how to build sustainable communities in the context of a faltering global economy, proclaiming that it is actually the ecology and not the economy, which policy-makers ought to render as primary in future planning. He posited several key questions pertaining to the relationship between communities and global challenges ranging from climate change to the economic crisis, asking "How can communities survive by cutting fossil fuel use and CO2 emissions to zero?" His response drew attention to the importance of community-owned energy, local skills and locally-produced food and goods. He argued that systematic restructuring is required foremost, by contrast to focusing on behavioural change, highlighting the role of local-to-local support networks for economic development, knowledge sharing and trade. Market-based solutions to climate change merely serve to worsen the illusion of exponential growth in a system of finite resources, according to Justin, who added, "we would do well with having less." He recommended policy-makers also focus more on sufficiency as opposed to growth, arguing that resources if treated as finite "become infinite." A bottom-up, rather than a top-down solution is thus required in order to ensure a more equitable distribution of resources at the community-level in addition to reinventing local systems to include carbon in the cost of consumer goods and to encourage the further development of 'resilient' communities which recognize the supremacy of ecology in modelling 21st century societies.

Simon offered some final thoughts in order to bring the event to a close. He thanked panel speakers for their engaging and highly informative presentations and complimented the audience on their many astute observations, articulate feedback and tough questions. As a member of the Scottish

Government's 2020 Delivery Group, Simon spoke to the merits of one of several devices which the Scottish Government has created to address many of the aforementioned issues. He emphasized the important role that businesses can play in promoting economic and environmental responsibility. On a more personal note, he also spoke to other crises such as global water shortages, which also stand to complicate, already complex dilemmas. However, he also reminded us all that "change is positive," using Alexander Bell's invention of the telephone as one example in which innovation can spur unprecedented alterations in the conduct of whole societies. "When we're offered change which is an advantage," he said, "we're quick to it." He added that, in addition, if we don't change, times could get difficult. However, "we can and do adapt quickly," for if we don't "history will judge us as outrageously profligate with resources." He reasserted the common thread throughout the forum that "community change" sponsored by government or otherwise is essential, particularly given the term limits of elected officials. Simon reiterated the importance of people-guided solutions to complex economic, energy and environmental challenges, remarking that "change is good, so come on, let's get on with it!"

The session ended there and was followed by an hour-long wine reception in which audience members and panel speakers continued sharing thoughts on the days events, exchanged contact information and explored ideas for a follow-up forum, which will hopefully be coming soon!