

Policy Briefing

Quaker Response to DTI Energy Review, 2006

This Quaker response to the 2006 DTI Energy Review Consultation draws on written contributions from 32 individual Friends and 10 Quaker groups. Our main points:

1. Government policies should be more consistent and vigorous in encouraging energy efficiency and conservation, and developing renewable resources. Government departments and ministers should be leading by example. The potential for change in lifestyles and behaviour is underestimated in the consultation document and in the background studies to which it refers. **Many of us have cut our own energy consumption to 60% or more below the UK average through lifestyle changes and the adoption of best available technology, while improving our quality of life.** We also believe that the studies underestimate the potential for household and community adoption of micro-generation technologies.

2. Reliability and security of supply require that we adjust to levels of demand that could be enjoyed sustainably by everyone, worldwide. We are deeply disturbed by the connection between energy and geopolitics, and especially the West's military involvement in resource-rich regions. Our dependence on those resources has contributed to political and military conflict and exploitation of local people and ecosystems; it is likely to have a continuing destabilising effect in the future.

3. While some of us think that nuclear power may be needed to meet energy demand while reducing CO₂ emissions, we have deep concerns about the environmental, social, economic and political implications, especially internationally. We fear that the location of nuclear waste depositaries may be determined by the willingness of the local population to accept them, rather than by geological and ecological suitability.

4. We also have concerns about the environmental and economic impacts of CO₂ capture and storage. It may be needed as a short term measure but it cannot be seen as a long-term solution.

5. In ensuring affordable warmth for all, the first priority must be to improve the quality of the housing stock. Fuel prices may need to rise further, but ways must be found of having the cost born by high-consuming households – effectively inverting the current price structure where low users pay the highest cost per unit.

Principles underlying this response

In preparing our response, we have started from the Quaker “testimonies”: our endeavour to live our lives according to the principles of truth, peace, equality and simplicity, and to work for a world in which these values prevail.

- Compassion and a sense of that of God in the other, which underpin the Quaker peace testimony, point to a path of non-violence towards other people, other species and the Earth. We seek to understand and reduce the harm and the potential for harm caused directly or indirectly by our lives and actions. This means that we must move as quickly as possible to a way of life that does not cause ecological damage or depend on violence to secure resources.
- Our testimony to equality calls us to find ways of living that are possible for all in a world of 6 to 9 billion people and to work towards fairness in access to resources and opportunities. This is likely to mean finding ways in which a high quality of life can be achieved with much lower final energy consumption.
- Our testimony to simplicity stems partly from the testimony to equality and also from our concern for true spiritual well-being. Simplicity is connected to sufficiency: knowing how much is enough. It may mean eschewing the clutter of fashion and consumerism to listen for what matters. When we ask what we (and the spirit) really need we can find that it is not very much in material terms.

- The testimony to truth and integrity invites us to listen carefully to the science, our emotional responses, and our sense of right action; to acknowledge our role in the situation; to take others' truths seriously and remember that we may be mistaken; and to bring our lives and meetings into accord with the truth as we understand it.

The Quaker understanding of the interaction of individual, community and God underpins all of the testimonies. We can seem individualistic as a religious group, since we seek to ground our spiritual practice in our own experience. At the same time, we test our insights and decisions carefully in our meetings, seeking to discern "God's will" or the "sense of the meeting".

Our approach to energy policy

Energy policy lies at the interface of several competing worldviews. Our response to the challenges of climate change and energy security depend on our understanding of the world around us, of the way society works, of human nature, and our sense of the meaning of life. Some of the dominant worldviews might be summarised as follows:

Some see the world in terms of physical power and strength, conflicting interests and ideologies, "right" and "wrong", and "good" and "evil". This is a world of short-term threats and fears, where other people are dangerous and need to be brought under control. This worldview has little room for long-term issues such as climate change and the problems of nuclear waste, but it is concerned to establish dominance over countries possessing significant energy reserves.

Others see the world in terms of a globalising competitive market. This worldview is concerned with market failures and imperfections and sees environmental issues as externalities to be internalised through market instruments. It seeks strategies for the efficient exploitation and allocation of scarce resources; developing better technologies and techniques for deriving final energy services from those resources; and finding ways to ensure that everybody's basic needs are met, or perhaps to maximise the well-being of society overall.

Another worldview takes the ecological context as primary. From this point of view, natural resources are part of a complex, vulnerable and poorly understood system, rather than commodities to be extracted and traded. But there is a growing clarity that the system is being irreversibly damaged and may be approaching a catastrophic change or "tipping point". The goal of policy here is to change human behaviour to live within the carrying capacity of the Earth, but in this worldview people have shown no sign in the past of making sensible choices when behaviour changes are needed.

Perhaps the most important feature of the dialogue among worldviews is that none of them sees real scope for a conscious change in behaviour.

A Quaker response starts from a different place. We seek to respond to "that of God" in everyone. That means engaging people as moral agents, able to make choices for a better way of living and a better society.

In our own discussions in our meetings and communities, we have found that people are seriously concerned about climate change but do not know what to do about it. They mostly believe that they need to wait for the government to act. They feel that their choices are constrained by their context – the infrastructure, the financial pressures, the goods and services available, the need to conform to social norms. But we have also found that by connecting with others, people can begin to free themselves from these constraints. They are willing to take actions that might seem costly in terms of the conventional economic worldview – in particular to change their lifestyles quite significantly, and to spend large amounts of money on renewable energy sources and energy-efficient technology knowing that it will not be recouped in savings.