

BRIEFING

ENERGY EFFICIENT BRITAIN – BUT WHEN?

Andrew Warren, Director of the Association for the Conservation of Energy, looks at the United Kingdom record on energy efficiency measures.

It is now fifteen years since the Yom Kippur war first made the world aware that fuel supplies could be expensive and finite – and the 'Save It' slogan was launched, to the delight of a thousand second rate comedians.

Since that time, numerous less memorable slogans and campaigns – 'Lift a Finger', 'Make the Most of Your Energy', 'Get More For Your Money' – have been created, all intended to make us just that much more conscious of our continuing profligacy.

But despite all this Britain remains, on EEC figures and at our own admission, way down towards the bottom of the energy efficiency league for Western nations. Even since 1983, when Peter Walker arrived as Energy Secretary, the Government propaganda machine has been pumping out the same objectives: reduce the national annual fuel bill of £38 billion by some 20%; use tried and tested energy saving devices to achieve this; save Britain from wasting £8 billion a year; make Britain the most energy efficient nation in Europe.

Even the Prime Minister has been heard enunciating precisely these figures, throwing in for good measure the way such 'good house-keeping' could create jobs. Certainly the present incumbents at the Department of Energy, Cecil Parkinson and his Minister of State Peter Morrison, can be heard chanting this incantation regularly.

Originally, the objective was to achieve these savings "within the lifetime of the Parliament", although as time moved on and the next election drew ever closer, the choice was open either to abandon the electoral process or to move the goalposts. Unsurprisingly, the latter course was preferred, and at the beginning of last year the Department of Energy's in-house propaganda sheet led with the headline "Number One By 1990".

Are such claims a triumph of hope over expectation? Can they not be dismissed as mere politician's hyperbole, intended to point the noses of the troops in the right direction, whilst recognising that the Holy Grail would remain forever elusive?

The temptation is ever there to respond thus. But it is a temptation to be resisted, largely because the declared objective should be all too easily achievable, with a little careful planning and with very few risks. It is now several years since the head of the Government's Energy Technology Support Unit, Dr Ken Currie, appeared before the Commons Energy Committee, and confirmed that sufficient cost-effective and reliable energy conserving artefacts existed to save not just the 20% objective, but rather 40% of current energy use. Furthermore this could be achieved, the Commons Committee concluded, using primarily indigenous materials and skills – as would be true of any mainly construction industry activity.

But if this is so, why do we still:

- Continue to live in some of the coldest, draughtiest homes?
- Have some of the lowest energy conservation standards for new buildings?
- Have many more households suf-

fering from fuel poverty, and higher death rates per winter from hypothermia, than countries with harsher climates?

- Fail to seize the opportunities for creating jobs via the manufacture and installation of energy saving equipment, particularly in the rundown building stock of the inner cities.
- Permit the public sector, occupying half the building stock, to waste £800 million a year on fuel whilst doing so?
- Refuse to compare the costs of (for instance) the projected £40 billion new power station construction expenditure, with those for reducing the need for these via energy conservation?
- Permit excessive build-ups of atmospheric emissions like sulphur oxides, nitrogen oxides and carbon dioxides, contributing to the Greenhouse Effect, and poisoning our planet.

I suspect that the answer is simple, and it is a legacy of the era when 'Save It' was first around. Energy conservation is still perceived as a negative concept, predominantly of interest only to those committed to 'alternate' life-styles. The concept of having to suffer to save still lingers on – and who wants to wear a hair-shirt for ever?

A house may be built to last 70 (or more) years, but the average occupant will be there for just seven of these – thus reducing interest in the introduction of longer term conservation measures. An inspiring business executive would always prefer to be known as the instigator of the new production line, rather than the improver of the boiler room.

The megaliths who supply our

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fuel, (whilst studiously paying lip service to energy efficiency) will always argue for more consumption of their own commodity – even when it might pay them to forego new power sources. And a politician is always going to be happier to be filmed opening a new oil or gas field than rolling out insulation in a cramped loft.

But it need not be all like this, as the Milton Keynes experience has shown. One undeniable message that has undoubtedly emerged strongly from the experiences at Milton Keynes' Energy Park, is that if a public authority is prepared to hold out with sufficient conviction for energy efficiency, it can succeed in carrying the marketplace with it.

The proof of this assertion is to be found in the positive views put forward by any of the developers who actually got involved with the Energy Park. Not only did their experiences give the lie to any suggestion that it might be difficult technically to achieve the Energy Cost Index, but they also showed conclusively how extremely easy it was to obtain 'ad-

ded value' to your sales price by dint of including measures that cut fuel bills in their customers' homes and made them more comfortable to live in.

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The question still remains, will other towns follow in Milton Keynes' footsteps? Certainly there has been no shortage of representatives of

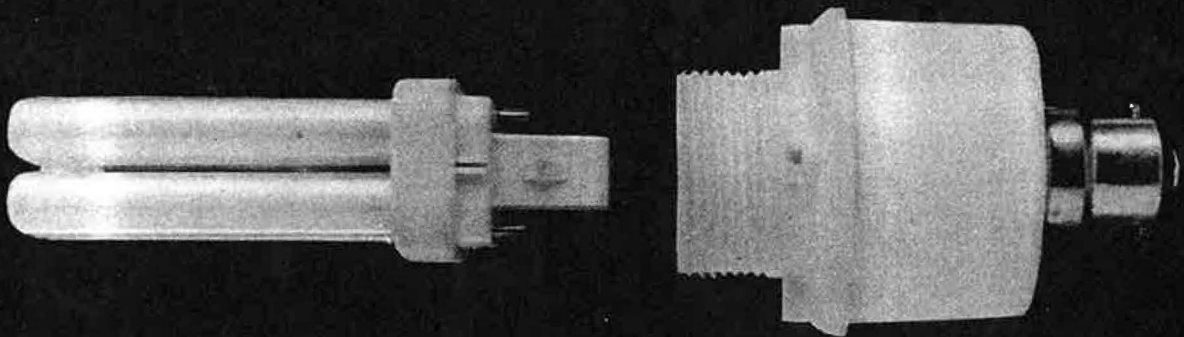
other local authorities and development corporation making the trek up or down the M1 to see how it can be done.

It has all been of particular interest to the planners, developing their county structure plans. If using the Milton Keynes hook, they can incorporate 'energy efficiency' as a strategic objective for the county, it means that the district council asked to approve new housing developments will have just that extra bit of muscle to insist on the job being done with energy saving in mind.

For certainly, in practice, the Fifth Fuel, energy conservation, can be demonstrated to be positive. It can improve comfort, cut costs, reduce waste and pollution, create warmth. But achieving success for what can still be dubbed "the cause" may require rather more intervention into the market place than some would prefer to consider. But if we still retain these laudable objectives to save £8 billion a year waste, we shall have to recognise that slogans alone are unlikely to achieve them this century.

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