

OPINION

Tony Juniper is an independent sustainability adviser and the Green Party's general election candidate for Cambridge. He is one of the UK's best known environmentalists. He joined Friends of the Earth in 1990 and in 1998 he became Policy and Campaigns Director and played a leading role in many campaigns, including on GM crops, world trade policy and climate change. He now works as a special adviser to The Prince of Wales' Rainforest Project and with the Cambridge University Program for Industry, where he is a Senior Associate. He previously worked as a professional ornithologist, and in 1998 co-published *Parrots: A Guide to the Parrots of the World*. Other titles by Tony Juniper include the companion volume to the BBC series *Saving Planet Earth* (2007), *How Many Lightbulbs Does It Take To Change A Planet?* (2007) and *Spix's Macaw: The Race To Save The World's Rarest Bird* (2002).



The science just keeps getting worse, as the data and observations accumulate and as we use more and more sophisticated models, so we realise the ever more urgent situation we are in. Rapidly rising sea level, melting ice, thawing permafrost and the expected large-scale die back of the Amazon rainforests are just some of the cheery stories brought to us recently by the climate science community. On top of this onslaught of terrifying observation and projection, there is the modelling of the emissions reductions pathways needed to avoid disaster. It is now a mainstream view that countries like the UK will need to make cuts of at least 80 per cent by 2050, and this target is now included in the 2008 Climate Change Act.

Achieving that level of reduction is to put it mildly quite a task. But it can be done, if we carefully think through what can be delivered from different sectors. Buildings account for about half our carbon dioxide emissions and will clearly need to be at the front line of our carbon descent plan. So far, however, there has been a rather unbalanced debate on this subject. While there has been an emphasis in headlines, politics and some of the campaigning on eco-towns, new eco-homes and zero carbon construction, there has been much less said about what we will do with the houses and other buildings we already have.

One statistic that sticks in my mind is the estimate that in 2050 some 80 per cent of the homes we are likely to have then are already built now. Victorian, Edwardian, Georgian, Elizabethan, pre-war, inter-war, post war, there

are some 22.5 million households in the England and Wales, and the vast majority of them are far from eco-homes. Many were built in the days before even the most modest energy efficiency standards; they leak heat and burn up power in a huge range of appliances, from play-stations to freezers. It seems to me that this is where we need to urgently ramp up the debate, to set in place some real momentum for the conversion of our ecologically disastrous housing stock into homes fit for the future.

And in planning for the future of our housing, it's not just climate change that we need to worry about. There are clearly some serious energy security challenges in the offing – arising from the impending peak in global oil production, and from the depletion of the gas resources under our direct control. Also, both these issues of climate and energy security are at least temporarily subsumed beneath our main obsession of how to kick-start some form of economic recovery. Future proofing our housing is thus about far more than finely graded arguments on what constitutes best practice eco-design. The challenge is a fundamental one that links deep questions of ecological, economic and social security.

So where to begin? For me we need clear, strong and sustained signals to householders of the need to invest in energy saving, and we need planning decisions to back that up – in for example protecting local services and thereby discouraging car-dependency, as well as in requiring high efficiency standards in buildings themselves. Such a programme of improvement could be backed up with large-scale public

investments to incentivise action. The November 2007 Home Truths report from Friends of the Earth set out a plan to achieve an 80 per cent emissions cut from housing by 2050, and this relied on large scale public investment – in the order of about £12 billion per year.

While at the time that figure sounded absolutely huge, these days perhaps it is more in perspective. For example the 2.5 per cent cut on VAT announced at the end of 2008 in the hope that it would lead to economic recovery, by getting us to go shopping again, will cost the Treasury an estimated £12.5 billion. Perhaps it would have done more good to keep the old VAT rate and instead to spend the money getting the country's housing fit for the mid 21st century.

Investing money there, rather than in shallow attempts to get our consumerist culture back into swing, would be a far better bet – and not just for carbon emissions. A massive public investment programme in housing improvement could create hundreds of thousands of skilled practical jobs, and at a time when the construction sector is especially hard hit by the recession. If the investment was first targeted at the homes of people in fuel poverty, there would be an additional social benefit. And by reducing the need to use energy, we would improve our future energy security.

It seems to me that part of the problem remains in the inability of many leaders to see the need for a joined up approach. So long as we seek to promote economic growth on the one hand, while taking unrelated actions on the environment on the other, we will not achieve what needs to be done. Retrofitting our housing would be one way to signal a new approach, and to show how social and economic benefits can come hand-in-hand with action to protect the climate. ●