

SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT CLIMATE DEBATE 24 Nov 2011

United Nations Climate Summit

Here we print extracts we spotted relevant to active travel. For the full debate report, see...
<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=6566>

The number of MSPs raising the question of funding for active travel is very impressive, and shows the impact of the many letters they have been receiving on this from their constituents.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-01406, in the name of Stewart Stevenson, on Scotland's contribution to the United Nations climate summit.

Sarah Boyack (Lothians)(Lab): ... Yes, but the key point is that it is the role of the Scottish Government to lead and to demonstrate that it will do what it expects others to do. Cutting the active and sustainable travel budget by 45 per cent over the next three years sends the wrong message and stands in total contrast to the SNP's election pledge. When we signed up collectively to ambitious targets in the previous session, we did so in the knowledge that they would be challenging but doable. We argued that early action was vital to create new jobs and industries and to help people to survive the recession. Although renewables are vital, the Government must give a much higher priority to energy efficiency. Not enough is being done to make the big lifestyle and economic changes that are needed.

For example, electric vehicles could be transformative, would enable green manufacturing and would be effective not only in our towns but in rural areas that have ready access to renewable electricity, such as the northern isles and the Western Isles. Moreover, if electric vehicles were linked with the car club movement, people on lower incomes could access them, too. It is therefore just plain daft that the money that has been allocated to kick-start the electric car transformation has been taken from the sustainable travel budget, which has been cut. That simply does not make sense.

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We have resisted the temptation to provide a list of potential budget changes because it is not just about this budget; it is about subsequent budgets, too, and all of us signing up. If we were in power, there would be much more on energy efficiency in homes and buildings, low-carbon vehicles and sustainable transport.

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We need action at every level of government—whether at the UK, Scottish or local level—and action in the business community. We need to ensure that, when actions are being predicted and benefits are being stated, they are real. That is vital so that, when the minister is abroad talking up what we are doing in Scotland, there is a reality check and a sense of humility. We know that the emissions reductions that we must make will be challenging. If cuts are being made in the sustainable travel budget while we spend lots of money on major road building, the impact on how we will reduce our carbon emissions must be thought through. We do not believe that enough is being done in that respect.

I move amendment S4M-01406.3, to insert at end:

“but realises that meeting the targets set in the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 will be increasingly challenging, will require the statutory Report on Policies and Proposals to be fully funded to meet the 2022 emissions targets and that therefore there is no room for complacency.”

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): As members have highlighted, the international climate conference in Durban is a seismic event that affects the future of our planet and all living beings. It is our responsibility as humans to be sure to lay the foundations for a legally binding and fair deal for the future. Perhaps I reiterate the obvious, but the complexities of the global negotiations merit the attention of all of us. I will share some thoughts on leadership, community support and global connections.

Scotland has the respect of the world for the vision that has been shown and the action that has been taken in having the first climate change legislation with binding targets. That has been shaped in part by Scottish Labour, with cross-party support, and by the current Administration. As part of the UK delegation to Durban, the Scottish Government can take a significant lead, and I wish ministers well with that. However, it is essential that Scotland lead by example, so I will, in spite of our reputation, highlight one or two areas of concern.

In the vision section of “Low Carbon Scotland: Meeting the Emissions Reduction Targets 2010-2022: The Report on Proposals and Policies” the Scottish Government states:

“Walking or cycling to work or school will become increasingly popular. Changes in travel habits and other actions to tackle climate change go hand in hand with important health, social and environmental benefits: reducing the incidence and economic costs of heart disease, obesity, diabetes, depression, and local pollution.”

However, as has been highlighted by Sarah Boyack, according to WWF Scotland’s calculations,

“motorway and trunk road spending is up by 25%”

but

“active travel equates to less than 1% of the transport budget.”

I have been approached by South Scotland constituents who are alarmed by the cut in the active travel budget. Will the minister please look again at that budget, so that the warm words of the vision are matched by real support for initiatives in communities?

Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP): I, too, have received a great deal of correspondence on that issue. Does the member acknowledge that the £15 million future transport fund over this session of Parliament is a new funding line that is entirely for sustainable travel? That should have been taken into account in the calculations that have been presented to parliamentarians by NGOs.

Claudia Beamish: I acknowledge what Marco Biagi is saying, but the fact remains that there has been a cut of 45 per cent in the actual budget, which is a cause for concern.

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD):

Transport is one of the biggest contributors to the non-traded sector of emissions in Scotland, yet the Government has budgeted, by some fairly generous calculations, just £30 million for low carbon transport measures in 2012-13. Friends of the Earth Scotland estimates that, over the three years that are covered by the latest spending review, funding for sustainable travel is barely a tenth of what is needed to fully fund the RPP and barely 5 per cent of the amount that will be spent on roads.

There seems to be a worrying trend across the spending review: a real-terms cut in support for sustainable and active travel, in support for bus services, in funding for the zero waste initiative, and so on.

There are tough decisions to make, but it is up to the Government to decide what its priorities are. Ensuring that Scotland’s message on climate change to other countries has substance and is not empty rhetoric should be one priority.

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):

Nearly 20 per cent of Scotland’s carbon emissions stem from transport, yet this Government has moved away from funding policies that will help to meet emissions targets and towards policies that actively undermine them. The sustainable and active travel budget line has been reduced from £25 million to £16 million, but spending on trunk roads and motorways is set to increase by 25 per cent.

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There is less investment in transport methods that reduce impact on the environment, and more in those that do not. Similarly, although the RPP identifies that the proposals for eco-driving, travel planning and cycling infrastructure investment require funding of £714 million until 2014, the spending review does not seem to provide even 10 per cent of that. Without adequate funding, those policies turn from genuine mechanisms for reducing demand and achieving emissions targets into empty rhetoric.

I understand the fixed budget of the Scottish Government, but I also understand that it was well aware of the figures before the election, when it was committing to the RPP. The imperative to reduce Scotland's emissions is a legislative commitment that the Government signed up to and has a duty to deliver. It cannot be ignored.

Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP): I begin by putting on the record the intervention that I intended to make earlier. Some claims have been made about funding that cannot really go unchallenged. One was about the active and sustainable travel spend, but the other was about the motorway and trunk roads budget. It is going up, but the level 3 figures show that the main increases come from the Forth replacement crossing, an increase in winter preparedness and rising private finance initiative payments. If the Opposition members would like to say which of those they disagree with in their concluding remarks, I would be most grateful.

Patrick Harvie: I will be happy to do that.

Marco Biagi: I think that I can already guess which one Mr Harvie disagrees with.

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As my colleague Graeme Dey explained, the consequences of not acting would be stark. Friends of the Earth states in its briefing that the RPP, which is a fantastic document,

“cannot afford to sit on a shelf”.

I agree, although I think that we would disagree on the extent to which that is happening. I hope that the Scottish Government will engage with those concerns, perhaps by updating the climate change delivery plan or providing information in some other way to ensure that there is no doubt whatever about the clarity of the Government's intent among the wider public, whether on active and sustainable travel or carbon credits. I certainly have no doubt about its direction of travel.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab):

If Scotland is strong in renewables, transport policy is at the opposite end of the spectrum. I have long regarded transport as the Achilles' heel of our climate change activity. In its budget submission to the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee, Transform Scotland was slightly less polite than I have been, saying that transport is

“the basket case of climate policy”.

There certainly seems to be a contradiction between the rhetoric of the RPP and the budgetary choices that have been made in the transport budget.

Transport is the second largest emissions sector, accounting for just over a quarter of our emissions, and yet recent trends continue upwards. Stop Climate Chaos Scotland tells us that the 2012-13 budget provides not more than 6 per cent of the funding measures required by the RPP. Although I accept what the minister said about the role of the private sector, I do not believe that it can fill such a large gap.

Two thirds of the transport emissions come from road transport, and yet the Government continues to be obsessed with road building. Marco Biagi referred to the road budget. I should tell him that the rising PFI charges are linked not just to roads that have already been commissioned but to the new roads that the Scottish Government is planning.

I had an interesting exchange during an Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee meeting with Alex Neil,

who was trying to argue that building the M74 was helpful for our climate change objectives. People can take whatever view they like about the pros and cons of that project from an economic point of view, but it is a bit absurd to see a road that generates more traffic as helping our climate change objectives.

Active travel was highlighted not only by a report from one of the Parliament's committees in 2009 but by the SNP's manifesto, which promised

“to increase the proportion of transport spending that goes on low-carbon”

and active travel. However, as Sarah Boyack reminded us, the sustainable and active travel budget line is down 45 per cent in next year's budget.

Sustrans has told the Parliament that it will get nothing next year, although one of the five transport milestones in the RPP is that at least 10 per cent of all journeys should be made by bicycle. That will be impossible with the funding cuts.

The freight facilities grant has also been abolished, although the RPP emphasises the modal shift of freight.

Although there is a ring-fenced cycling, walking and safer streets budget for local authorities, which stands at £7.5 million for this year, there is no guarantee that it will be continued till next year. I urge the Scottish Government to ensure that it is continued.

I never like to ask the Government to spend large sums of money without saying where they should come from. The transport lines that I have mentioned are not large and, with small shifts of resources within the transport budget, it would be easy to ensure that the sustainable and active travel budget was maintained.

Marco Biagi made great play of the future transport fund, saying that it was £50 million. I accept that some of my former colleagues sometimes rolled up three years' budgets into one, but the fact is that the future transport fund budget for next year is £3.25 million. That certainly does not cover the enormous gap in next year's transport budget that Sarah Boyack and others described.

The conclusion is obvious: make small shifts in the transport budget and make sure that it contributes to combating climate change.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):

I refer to Malcolm Chisholm's comments on the transport budget and transport policy. Transport is an ideal example of where actual actions that have been taken for many years—not just under the current Administration but under its predecessor—have been out of kilter with climate change targets. If anybody—minister or not—wants to try to persuade me that the M74 extension is good in climate change terms, they will need to buy me a lot of drinks in the bar to make the effort.

Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab):

Our amendment specifically mentions the statutory report on policies and proposals, which is a requirement of the 2009 act. The report states that the policies and proposals require to be fully funded if we are to reach the 2022 carbon emissions targets and that the EU needs to agree a 30 per cent reduction target. I am not arguing that the Scottish Government must fully fund them all or that that needs to be done within the current spending review period: this is not a funding demand; it is a statement of the Government's own policy.

At the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee, the minister argued, correctly, that there are several partners who are responsible for funding and achieving the RPP: the Scottish Government, the UK Government, the European Union, the public sector, the private sector and—as Claudia Beamish and Annabelle Ewing said—communities and individuals. We need to be clear about who is responsible for what and how things are being funded. That is where the concern about the low-carbon transport budget, which Jenny Marra mentioned, comes in. At the moment, it is not clear how 94 per cent can be brought in from outside in one year or 90 per cent across the spending review cycle.

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There has been a lot of debate about transport. Claudia Beamish, Alison McInnes and Malcolm Chisholm referred to concerns about the active travel budget, which is decreasing while the motorways and trunk roads budget is increasing. Surely money could be transferred from the motorways and trunk roads budget, which does nothing to tackle climate change, to the active travel budget, which does a lot to tackle climate change and to improve people's health and wellbeing.

The Minister for Environment and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson):

[*Spokes note* - This was the Minister's closing speech at the end of the debate. He did not respond to any of the points raised by many MSPs on active travel. His only comments on transport were the following]

I welcome Jenny Marra to the debate. On transport, she should remember that we continue to make substantial investments in the rail network—for example, we have invested around £1 billion in the Edinburgh to Glasgow improvement programme. On the subject of eco driving, that can be funded by the companies and drivers themselves; I recently heard of an example in which the entire cost of an eco driving course for a team of white van men was recovered in six weeks in reduced fuel consumption. We can see that that is happening around Scotland.

Malcolm Chisholm mentioned the freight facilities grant. Alas, we never got enough good projects, although I must say that I constantly banged the drum in my previous ministerial position.

VOTE ON THE MOTION

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 102, Against 0, Abstentions 14.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament notes that Scotland will be participating in the 17th Conference of the Parties on the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change as a member of the UK delegation; encourages active engagement with other delegations to deliver the message that action on climate change is both necessary and urgent, and recognises that Scotland's experience demonstrates that action on climate change can create jobs, investment, trade and economic growth opportunities but realises that meeting the targets set in the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 will be increasingly challenging, will require the statutory Report on Policies and Proposals to be fully funded to meet the 2022 emissions targets and that therefore there is no room for complacency and encourages collaboration with other UK delegates to agree a common policy in advance of the conference.

[*Spokes note* - the motion includes a Labour amendment, accepted by the SNP, that the proposals in the RPP should be fully funded. The government makes clear in the debate that it expects much of the funding to come from the private sector. However, it seems unlikely that the active travel section of the RPP would be funded by the private sector. And yet, despite many MSPs raising the budget cuts to active travel, the Minister did not respond to that in his closing speech. So there appears to remain a huge contradiction between the promises on the RPP and the draft budget. It should also be noted that the RPP suggests that active travel investment begins at a high level, reducing later in the 10-year period (presumably because travel patterns change over a period of time after the construction of new infrastructure, so that needs to begin as early as possible??)].
