

Notes of a meeting with Anne McKechin MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Scotland Office.

29th January, 2009, 3.00pm in the Scotland Office, Melville Crescent, Edinburgh

Present: Anne McKechin MP, Alisdair Smith (Private Secretary), John Mayhew (LINK Chair), Andy Myles (LINK Parliamentary Officer).

Background

The meeting had been requested by the Scotland Office with no fixed agenda.

Introductions

Introductions were made and JHM gave a background briefing on LINK and presented a number of recent publications to the Minister.

Discussion:

- 1. International Obligations:** AMcK gave an explanation of the reserved power of the UK Government to make international treaties and to ensure the UK's compliance, including that of the devolved administrations within the areas of their competence. JHM and ABM assured her that LINK understood the distribution of powers and noted that the devolved administrations were consulted before treaties covering devolved matters were signed. The development of these relationships and the transposition of EU Directives into Scots law were briefly discussed.
- 2. The Marine Bill:** The problems that had successfully been tackled during the development of the UK and Scottish Marine Bills were discussed, with particular regard to the emphasis on the practicalities of delivering marine environmental protection in Scottish waters from LINK and the learning process that had taken place in Westminster and Whitehall with regard to the delivery of policy in an area of mixed reserved and devolved responsibilities.
- 3. The Climate Change Bill:** It was noted that the work of the last Scottish Administration in defining the "Scottish Share" of emissions had paved the way for a measured discussion of the delivery of UK targets under international agreements, and for Westminster and Holyrood to work together on Climate Change Bills. The progress of the Bills was briefly discussed.
- 4. Energy Policy:**
 - (a) AMcK outlined the UK Government view on energy security and the need for an adequate and balanced electricity supply. JHM outlined the LINK position and, in response to questions, described the LINK discussions on nuclear power, as set out in 'Time to Act on Climate Change'.
 - (b) The development of renewables was discussed and AMcK expressed regrets that LINK members had opposed the Lewis wind farm application. JH and ABM presented the general arguments for the protection of protected areas, and the previous Scottish Administration's research demonstrating that wind power targets could be easily met without developments on protected areas. ABM stressed the large scale of the work carried through by of some LINK members to avoid planning conflicts over wind farm developments and the strong support of the movement for renewables in general.

- (c) The meeting discussed the capacity of the National Grid, methods of transmission of renewables to markets and, in particular the Beaulieu/Denny line planning application. AMcK stressed the UK Government's view of the vital importance of increasing the capacity of the line. JH described the range of views amongst the LINK membership.
- (d) Energy saving and, in particular, the constraints on energy savings methods in historic buildings were discussed. The Minister expressed some frustration that conservationists might be a severe constraint on the Government's policies for energy saving and production. JH stressed the LINK view that conservation and fighting climate change were not incompatible and that they could, and indeed must, be achieved together.

In the course of the discussion of energy, AMcK expressed the view that the eNGOs were perceived in some quarters to be led by self-appointed activists who did not represent the views of her electors, with particular regard to the issues of poverty and jobs. JH and ABM suggested that LINK was given a mandate by its 500k members and that the perceptions she had described were demonstrably wrong if consideration was given to LINK views on sustainable development. This was illustrated by reference to LINK co-operation with the trade unions and international aid organisations within Stop Climate Chaos Scotland.

- 5. Offer to host a Dover House Seminar:** AMcK offered to host a seminar in Dover House to facilitate the exchange of views between UK level decision-makers and LINK members. JH thanked her for the offer and the opportunity and promised that it would be given consideration.

Summary

The meeting might best be described as combative. There was a sense that LINK was considered to be an obstacle to some of the aims of UK Government and a quality of reprimand was apparent. This was countered by a polite assurance of LINK's non-partisan autonomy and positive examples of LINK's work. The Dover House invitation might be a useful opportunity to develop the understanding of LINK's place inside the Scottish and UK policy communities – but would need to stress our non-partisan role and the consequent need to invite representatives of all the parties.