The Climate Change Bill completed its consideration at Committee stage in the House of Commons on 8 July 2008.

Amendments at Committee Stage

The only changes made to the Bill in Committee were the 54 amendments proposed by the Government. A number of these are minor technical improvements. The remainder make the changes previously outlined by the Minister for the Environment, Phil Woolas, in the Second Reading debate, responding to amendments made in the House of Lords and adding powers in relation to single-use carrier bags.

Purpose clause

The purpose clause inserted as Clause 1 by the House of Lords has been removed. Members of the committee accepted the Government’s view that this placed unworkable duties on ministers to achieve global, rather than UK, outcomes. The Minister (Phil Woolas) stressed the Government’s continuing commitment to the EU target of limiting climate change to 2°C, and promised to reflect on the suggestion made in debate that it would be helpful to refer directly to that objective somewhere within the Bill.

Responsibilities on the Prime Minister

The Bill was amended to reflect the normal practice of placing all the duties contained in the Bill on ‘the Secretary of State’ (ie on the Government as a whole), reversing an amendment made in the Lords that placed a duty on the Prime Minister to report to Parliament on the Government’s policies and proposals for meeting carbon budgets.

Emissions reductions in the UK

Amendments were agreed removing the quantified limit on the use of internationally traded credits in meeting the UK’s targets and carbon budgets that was inserted by the House of Lords. While re-emphasising the Government’s absolute commitment to move rapidly towards a low-carbon economy, Phil Woolas stressed the need to maintain flexibility as to the right balance over time between action at UK, EU and international levels, and to avoid cutting across the ability of UK companies to participate in the EU Emissions Trading Scheme. A new duty has been inserted (Clause 14 in the new print of the Bill), to have regard to the need for UK domestic action when considering how to meet the UK’s targets and budgets under the Bill.

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Single-use carrier bags

New clauses and a new schedule were added to the Bill, without opposition, giving ministers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland powers to require certain retailers to make a minimum charge for single-use carrier bags. The Minister for Climate Change, Biodiversity and Waste, Joan Ruddock, emphasised that the intention is to use these if retailers cannot achieve radical and swift reductions in the number of bags distributed through voluntary means alone.

Corporate disclosure of carbon emissions

The Bill has been amended to remove the provisions inserted in the House of Lords, requiring those companies that are required to produce a business review under the Companies Act to report on their greenhouse gas emissions. Addressing one of the major concerns raised, a new requirement is now placed on ministers to develop and issue guidance on how companies should report their greenhouse gas emissions, to help create a common standard. Phil Woolas also pledged that the Government will consider the issue of emissions reporting in 2010, in parallel with the anticipated review of the narrative reporting requirements of the Companies Act 2006. He made the point that powers already exist under the Companies Act to require such reporting. The Opposition parties continued to call for the introduction of mandatory reporting through this Bill.

International aviation and shipping

The Government largely accepted the changes made in the House of Lords, requiring the inclusion of international aviation and shipping emissions within five years of Royal Assent, or a report to Parliament on why this had not been done. Amendments were made to improve the legal drafting, and to restore the use of internationally-agreed terminology. Phil Woolas stressed that the issue was not about whether or how to control these emissions – the UK continues to press at international level, and agreement on capping aviation emission through the EU emissions trading scheme is in its final stages. However, there is a practical difficulty, in the absence of an internationally agreed methodology, of how to calculate the figures to include in the UK targets and budgets. It is also essential to avoid undermining the real prize of international agreement, and to avoid locking the UK into an approach that is incompatible with any future international agreement. Debate centred on proposals to require inclusion from 2013 without the option to report instead (a position now supported by the Opposition parties). Another issue raised was whether a deadline of 1 January 2013 would be preferable to one of 5 years from Royal Assent.

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Adaptation

The House of Lords inserted a requirement for a dedicated adaptation sub-committee of the Committee on Climate Change. The Government accepted the principle of this, and some changes were made in committee to ensure that this body operates effectively, and that its role is consistent with that of the Committee on Climate Change as a whole, providing expert advice to Government on the analysis of the impacts of climate change on the UK.

2050 target

No amendments were made on this, but the level of the 2050 target continued to be the subject of debate. Most members of the committee supported the Government’s approach of awaiting the review of the target by the Committee on Climate Change, which is required by 1 December 2008. This will provide a firm analytical basis for a decision on any higher figure. Some MPs asked that the Committee on Climate Change should be asked for an interim report (before it is formally established), allowing the possibility of amendment of the Bill in its final parliamentary stages. In response, Phil Woolas undertook to write to the chairman of the Committee, Lord Turner, drawing his attention to the parliamentary timetable.

Waste Incentives

No substantive amendments were made to the provisions for waste incentive schemes, which were agreed without opposition.

Next steps

We expect the Bill to complete the remaining stages of its parliamentary passage, and to receive Royal Assent, in the Autumn.

Climate Change Bill Team, July 2008

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