If it becomes law, the UK's climate change legislation will be the toughest of its kind in the world, says Lord Puttnam. However, in this week's Green Room, he says the government is still failing to make the most of an untapped resource - local communities.

Ed Miliband's appointment as the first Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change is testament to what has been a monumental shift in political priorities concerning the environment.

As if to prove the point, the new secretary of state did not hesitate in making the strength of his convictions known.

In the immediate aftermath of his appointment, Ed Miliband unveiled plans to raise the current target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from 60% to 80% by 2050 through domestic and international actions.

Assuming the legislation makes it to the statute book, the UK will have the world's toughest legally binding targets for achieving a low carbon economy.

Mr Miliband's move was important in demonstrating the government's green credentials ahead of the final stage of the Climate Change Bill's passage through Parliament.

But if his aim was to impress his intentions on his backbenchers, he still finds himself under considerable pressure to take an even tougher stance.

Such is the political currency of climate change that 57 Labour MPs have put their necks on the line by declaring their intention to rebel against some aspects of the Bill.

The source of their unhappiness stems from the Bill's exclusion of emissions from aviation and shipping.

Not tackling such a fundamental issue, the rebels and the Parliamentary Committee on Climate Change argued, was proof that government would fail the acid test on whether it was serious about meeting its own targets.

Hopefully, the amendments now under discussion will provide a mechanism for ensuring that aviation and shipping will get the attention it deserves.

Unless it does, the UK government will have failed to offer a comprehensive plan to deal with climate change.

Untapped resource

But alongside the multi-lateral agreements, commitment from big business and appropriate fiscal measures, the government needs to do one further thing. It must look to generate what is as yet a rich, untapped force in helping reduce CO2 emissions: that is us.

There is a pressing need to understand how we can draw on the drive of local communities to reduce
CO2 emissions.

This means not just focusing on innovation in science and technology but also on the innovative ways communities can work together and with other partners, to deliver tangible solutions to climate change.

Until now, engaging the whole population in the fight against climate change has been perceived as politically high risk.

Most particularly if it suggests the need for individuals to make sacrifices, such as stop using the car, don't travel overseas, turn down the heating and so on.

As the UK teeters on the edge of recession, and billions of pounds of taxpayers' money are being used to shore up the banking industry, it is easy to understand why politicians would be loathe to ask for much more from the people who keep them in office.

Engaging communities involves a lot more than simply asking for sacrifices.

In the same way that government, industry and investors, need to unleash innovation in science and technology, we need to build the capacity of local communities to exploit the many opportunities that come with tackling climate change.

Denmark is a powerful example of how governments can utilise communities to reduce greenhouse gases.

Community-owned enterprises have been given access to investment that allows them to own half of the country's private wind farms, and 85% of the country's wind generation capacity is made up of small clusters - rather than large developments.

A supportive planning system and the guarantee of a stable, premium price for energy sold back to the grid has given people an incentive to join forces and create renewable energy.

At a time of economic downturn and rising fuel costs, it is hard to imagine that the advantages of this opportunity to develop sustainable income streams would be lost on the general public.

**Local heroes**

Here in the UK, there is no shortage of ideas generated by local communities.

The National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (Nesta) received more than 350 applications to its £1m competition the Big Green Challenge, which was launched to stimulate community-based innovations to tackle climate change.

Ten finalists have now been chosen - the ideas highlight a wide range of opportunities for local action; from building community volunteer networks to the development of community renewables schemes and from the involvement of young people to the production of local food in urban areas.

For example, a community company set up by local people in a deprived area of Nottingham is offering interest free "green loans" to enable households to install energy saving measures in their homes.

The company, called Meadows Ozone, has also secured planning permission for a community-owned wind turbine, which will generate electricity to be sold back to the National Grid.

The aim is to slash emissions while simultaneously cutting fuel bills in an area suffering from acute levels of fuel poverty.

Elsewhere, the Three Green Valleys project in the Brecon Beacons, Wales, has been behind the restoration of seven hydroelectric systems, abandoned when coal was abundant, to supply renewable energy to homes in the area not connected to the gas network and have to rely on expensive oil for power.
The group plans to install or re-open hydroelectric plants over the next 20 years, which should provide enough power for residents' own use as well as excess to sell back to the Grid. Any profits will be invested in further carbon reducing measures.

These are exactly the type of responses that need to be harnessed if the UK is going to be transformed into the "low carbon economy" envisioned by Ed Miliband.

The Climate Change Bill offers politicians, business and investors the opportunity to unleash an entrepreneurial spirit capable of reaping financial and environmental returns for both the people and the planet.

Lord David Puttnam is chairman of the Parliamentary Joint Committee on the Draft Climate Change Bill and a judge on Nesta's Big Green Challenge

The Green Room is a series of opinion articles on environmental topics running weekly on the BBC News website

Do you agree with Lord Puttnam? Are local communities an untapped resource in the battle against climate change? Will the UK's Climate Change legislation provide the road map to a low carbon future? Or is it a global problem that needs global action, not just a handful of nations?

Locally generated sustainable power, in particular electricity, not only can help reduce carbon but as it is generated locally reduces the Transmission losses associated with the National Grid. At least 60 % of the energy generated by traditional power stations is wasted in the transmission of the electricity from the power station to the home. By generating the electricity where it is to be consumed immediately reduces the total power required. Is this not therefore a win win situation?

There is a body of evidence to suggest that the most efficient means of micro generation of electricity is by small hydro schemes. This country of ours is dotted with former water mills. There is a lot to be said therefore for small communities to re generate these schemes for the benefit of the local community.

Small local communities can contribute to the global picture. The communities do require help in bringing such schemes to fruition and this is where government and big business can help. Is there a will to set up small local schemes to dilute the profits of large industry and business. Herein lies the global challenge.

Derek Grosvenor, Northampton UK

Over 60% of the population dont believe in climate change anyhow.

too much stick and not enough carrot, coupled with an argument full of holes have made climate change a unpopular cause in my neighborhood

Ray, Soton, uk

It would be good to see a 'grass-roots' movement take up the challenge; local communities actively involved in developing use of renewable resources. But I suspect quite a few people, myself included, would believe that if such activities did yield tangible benefits the UK Government would use them as an excuse to back-pedal on their own involvement. In the UK the Government has a great record for leaving issues to charities and the like, where they should be at the forefront leading the way. So let's see the Government take up the challenge first. Then I'd be happy to make the sacrifices required.

Ironspider, Northampton

Yes of course, it will have to be locally driven. There is a great potential out there for a person or company to invent a very much cheaper solar ( Electrical ) panel. When this has been done, things will really get moving.

John M. Hill, Lincolnshire

Climate change presents three challenges: to limit it by reducing greenhouse gas emissions; to adapt to it, such as by boosting flood defences; and to enjoy life nevertheless. These require action at global,
national and local level. The Climate Change Bill is an important national measure which will help promote effective global and local action.

We in the developed world will need to lead by example by making deep cuts in our emissions and soon. New technologies alone won't deliver big enough cuts soon enough. As individuals we will need to burn less, buy less, throw away less and travel less. We may find as a result that there is less paid work to be done. For people who see life as a competition for wealth and status, things may look grim. The rest of us will find new ways to enjoy life on a tighter budget.

Doing more with our local communities will play a big part. Through local networks we can do useful work and enjoy it, we can share skills, equipment and spaces, we can organise to make best use of them and we can build and maintain the sort of relationships that make life worth living.

Does government have role in promoting community-based action? Local government certainly does, through close working with local voluntary organisations. Central government needs to enable this by introducing a fair voting system and allowing local government to get on with its work.

John Medway, London, UK

People are fed up with being told what to do and not do when it comes to looking after the environment. By actively engaging them at a community level where they will see the local benefits will be a fantastic way of enthusing people to take action to help the environment. Climate change is too big an issue for just a top down, governmental approach. We need to access every resource that we can.

Rob Court, derby, UK

I am a great believer in energy conservation - oil will run out one day, that's a certainty, and if you read David J.C. MacKay's excellent book - Hot Air - you will see that the "environmentall friendly" alternatives to current energy sources are indeed that - hot air. Without fusion, fission or coal as energy sources we will have to dramatically change our expectations of lifestyle, wind and water wheels are not going to give us a fraction of our current demands.

I am also believing that the low carbon witch-hunt is a neat mask for taxation. I have seen no scientific proof that says increase CO2 raises global temperatures, and a consensus among politicians is not a proof. Have you also noticed how Global Warming has quietly become Climate Change? Could that be something to do with the last 10 years data that shows the earth is actually cooling?

Increased CO2 encourages organic growth, isn't it what plants depend on? To believe that the increase in the atmosphere to 400 ppm is going to completely alter the earth's climate is rather over estimating man's power, does not the giver of all life - the sun - rather dominate our existence? If you believe the historical geological data then we are rather overdue for another ice age, and I for one would rather be warm and wet than cold and dry!

J Collis, plymouth

I completely agree with Lord Puttnam. What are needed now are steps which enable us all to contribute easily to this over-riding problem. For example we should all be able to install energy generating systems such as solar power, in our homes which can be hooked up to the grid, saving us money and reducing our reliance on fossil fuels. I believe that Barack Obama mentioned an "intelligent grid" in some of his speeches which included the above initiative.

ian wrench, sheffield

another useless labour luvvie talking rubbish

marc fenton, plymouth

I can't believe our MPs. they actually believe this green rubbish is popular. There's certainly no global warming where I live. Hopefully some future government will put this green terror to bed.

dp, harrogate

Many countries, Germany for example, have managed to unlock private capital by setting a feed-in tariff for electricity that gives individuals a reasonable pay-back time. A whole industry has been created to develop and install the necessary equipment.
By contrast, in the UK we tried to use capital grants which were centrally-administered, under-resourced and frequently altered. Capital grants either don’t work or are too costly. Where are the firms who should be offering insulation services, solar water heating and photo-voltaic panel installation in the UK? The sector is tiny by comparison with Germany.

Private capital does not add to the national debt, capital grants do. The government is keen on private finance when it involves big firms. If only they had the vision to motivate individuals to invest in conservation and renewable energy.

The really cunning part of the German initiative is that the cost of the feed-in tariff guarantee isn’t actually paid by the Government. As the cost of fossil fuel increases the guarantee becomes smaller. Solar panels last for decades, and they reduce dependence on imported fossil fuel.

So why have we not adopted this proven approach to motivating individuals to constructive and positive action? Search me - perhaps the Government has trusted big business too much and trusted individuals too little?

Roger, Liverpool

I couldn’t agree more with Lord Putnam. The problem is precisely the lack of an effective politics of climate change. In other walks of life we understand the division of personal responsibility and collective (or state) responsibility. This has not been well developed or articulated in relation to climate change. What we have is Activists and campaigners hammering on individual responsibility, and we have a Climate Change Bill and EU watering down of policy. We lack politicians who clearly articulate the relationship between these two aspects so that the individual knows what s/he is meant to do, and is able to also support clear state action. And frankly the scale of change is not being spelt out, nor is the duration of change, both in its urgency and in the requirement for continuous improvement being communicated. We saw in the early days of New Labour 'education, education, education' and a clear statement of the investment of £x hundreds of millions. We don't hear 'environment, environment, environment' and the plan to spend £x trillion over 20 years to re-engineer our society to meet the targets.

Chris Fremantle, Ayr, Scotland

If successful, the Climate Change legislation will provide the road map. As is, this is a sketch on a napkin that needs to be worked out. Across the pond my attention focuses on the aviation emissions and the break-through this legislation offers in terms of taking the responsibility from individual travelers and incorporating the stats as a whole into an integrated policy. Kudos. This is a step in the right direction. Now we just need to see how the UK articulates the policy for locals and visitors. Puttnam's arguments are clear. They just need to be sketched out in a practical manner.

Ron Mader, Oaxaca, Mexico

A great example of the political elite mistakenly assuming that because they would do something and want something, everyone else will too. Most people are still far too selfish; although, I accept that a minority have good hearts.

Raise petrol duty and give proceeds to eliminating stamp duty for those moving within walking distance of their place of work. It's the carrot and stick that most non-Lords understand.

Leo Derevonko, York, England

I am all for us playing our part in combating global arming.I am very please to see that the airline and shipping industries will be exempt as passengers do not create global warming only the mode of transport they use .Therefore the Gov should be encouraging these industries to invest in which I am sure they are in new technology to create better environmentally friendly engines.We tend to omit technology,what we have today will be totally different in years to come/

K Dodson, Scotland

I personally beleive its in the hands of the local population, they need to demand change.

I own and operate the most advanced waterborne bulk transport systems available.
which is being blocked by public bodies that are entrenched in their processes.

If the local community in East London demand change they will get it.

Ian Wallace

Director Smartbarge Ltd

ian wallace, london

I do agree with Lord Puttnam a number of points were not mentioned; community power development takes a strain off the national power grid, It reduces terrorism threats, minimizes inflationary pressures of big unions and provides construction and maintenance work for job creating small businesses.

Steve, Derby UK

if they would like these green targets hit how about an incentive to achieve it. give me my tax back and I'm pretty sure I can achieve a 60% cut within 3 years probably 80% within 5.

So how about less of the 'more sacrifice' and more 'reward for achieving'.

The big problem is that 'green' is just another money grab by a bloated government to support a bloated public sector and now a bloated quasi-public sector (banking) in this country.

If we want people power to achieve things then we have to give people the power, not rob them blind under false pretences.

thomas, aberdeen

I do agree to an extent but it is hard to feel motivated to do much more than the basics when the large companies that fund political parties seem to be allowed to waste as much as they want. Supermarkets should not be allowed to sell fruit and veg in prepacked plastic packaging, retailers should be forced to use only recycled packaging and to convert x amount of their delivery vans to electric etc. If the major players were seen to do their fair share perhaps the rest of us would feel like doing more - what is the point of me taking my own cloth bag to the supermarket if i can only buy apples wrapped in plastic?

katy, london

I applaud Lord Puttnam's suggestions. I am involved with Helen Goodman, our local M.P. in discovering what measures are being taken locally, but I believe the government could make ALL public buildings - hospitals, prisons, schools etc - completely carbon-neutral.

Jo Angell, Barnard Castle, Co. Durham

The government certainly needs to be more supportive of the individual when it comes to setting up microgeneration, I would love to go the whole hog and install wind and solar (both for heating and photovoltaic) technology but from what I have found out the governments grants would only cover a small fraction of this and I certainly applaud nottinghams community company offering interest free loans as this is what I would like to see the government offering to everyone nationwide

Mark, Colchester

Absolutely I agree with Lord Puttnam - in fact people power is what got us the Climate Change bill in the first place. I've been one of tens of thousands of people who made sure I wrote, visited and lobbied my MP to back the Bill. I'm certain it would never have happened without this.

Martyn, London, UK

An interesting article. Global warming and CO2 are complete rubbish, but assisting local communities is an integral part of an society.

Re-commissioning old hydro-plants is a great idea to bring affordable power to people at a time when energy prices will continue to rise. The old cotton will of Lancashire (my home) and Yorkshire could provide lots of affordable energy.

Hopefully the funding for these projects will continue in a time of recession (or will the money be diverted to the idiocy of carbon capture!)
Mark, Coventry / UK

A weekly series of thought-provoking opinion pieces on environmental topics

Story from BBC NEWS:

Published: 2008/10/28 10:29:40 GMT

© BBC MMVIII