

ADDRESS BY MR TOM BURKE

THE CONSERVATIVE WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

LONDON
12TH NOVEMBER 2007

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak to you this morning on this most important of issues. The environment is already high on the political agenda and as the 21st Century advances it will become even higher.

Let me explain why. In the 20th century we tackled, with some success, the easy politics of the environment. These were predominantly the pollution issues – air and water quality, toxic chemicals, hazardous wastes. These were issues focussed on human health.

In the 21st century we have to tackle the hard politics of the environment. These are the resource issues which focus on our prosperity and security.

These issues are about the four pillars of prosperity – energy security, water security, food security and climate security. These are the pillars which hold up the foundations of our economy.

All are under increasing stress. The International Energy Agency published its latest world energy outlook at the beginning of this month. It forecast that world energy demand would increase by 50% in the next 22 years. And, that the associated carbon dioxide emissions would increase by nearly 60%.

Its main point was that if we go on as we are at present we are not investing anything like enough to meet that demand in any fashion let alone in a climate compatible way.

Throughout this year the media has been full of reports of unprecedented droughts – in Australia, in both the west and south east of the United States. Many of the world's largest rivers no longer reach the sea. Over 2 billion people already live with constant water stress.

One consequence of these droughts has been a rapid rise in food prices. Earlier this year there was a strike by Italian women protesting at the price of pasta. Elsewhere in the world there have been an increasing number of such protests.

Food prices are increasing everywhere as demand explodes and droughts (and floods) constrain supply. Growing competition for land from biofuel crops is intensifying these pressures. So serious have they

become that just this weekend the prime minister asked his strategy unit to carry out an urgent review of Britain's food security.

This means that we may well be at the end of the decades long period of food as a falling share of the family budget.

Climate change stresses all of the other pillars of prosperity. As temperatures rises so dry areas become drier lowering food production. This forces farmers to pump water from ever deeper wells to maintain irrigation and to use more fertiliser to maintain production.

This adds to the demand for energy and causes more fossil fuels to be burnt which accelerates climate change.

About a year ago I did an interview on climate change for Channel 4. It was a long interview by a very good friend I hadn't seen for some years. Right at the end he asked me if the problem really was as bad as I was saying.

I had used all my prepared sound bites and was very relaxed, just talking to an old friend so, almost without thinking about it, I said 'Don't be under forty. That's my advice if we fail to solve this problem.'

Needless to say that got into the film.

When I thought about it later, I realised that this really did sum up my view. Since then the level of alarm within the scientific community has grown even more.

Climate change is a bad problem, that is getting worse and that could get very much worse, even catastrophic. At the moment it remains a manageable problem but soon it will become unmanageable.

But it also a problem that is within the envelope of our technological and economic competence to solve. We know what to do. We know we can afford to do it.

What is lacking, as the international energy agency made clear in its report, is the political will. Frankly, we are still treating this issue as just another environmental issue rather than as a fundamental threat to the prosperity and security of 60 millions Britons as well as everyone else on earth.

Let me put this into perspective. Last year we spent £400 billion as a nation on maintaining the social conditions for prosperity – health, education and social security. We also spent £60 billion on internal and external security – the armed forces and the police. We spent £9.5 billion on the environment.

Do you really think that this is the right balance to ensure the prosperity and security of everyone under forty in this country in the face of climate change and all the other problems that we must tackle as we deal with the hard politics of the environment?

I do not want to suggest that we have accomplished little on the environment over the years. Compared to progress on many other issues, much has been done. But the measure of our success is not the view looking backwards over our shoulder at how far we have come, but whether our efforts are vigorous enough to get us up the ever steeper hill looming in front of us.