

**Lord Hunt of Chesterton:** My Lords, I am pleased to follow the remarks of the noble Lord, Lord Northbourne, about schools and community. I was chairman of governors for a comprehensive school. I am pleased to associate myself also with the remarks of the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, about some comprehensives being very good indeed.

I commend my colleagues in the Government for the intentions expressed in the Queen's Speech to continue their work to improve the national and global environment and for their stated plans regarding the reorganisation of government. I congratulate my noble friend Lord Whitty on his new environmental responsibilities.

I should also like to ask some questions about critical environmental issues facing the Government, particularly issues on which the Government are working, some of which have not been publicly announced. The philosophical and ethical imperative on our generation to bequeath a reasonable environment to our successors was well expressed by the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Salisbury.

The Freedom of Information Act is now on the statute book. So I hope that we can look forward to more public consultation in regard to policy development and the pre-legislative work of government and Parliament. The remarks of the noble and learned Lord the Lord Privy Seal were encouraging.

It should be noted that the Government can contribute to the welfare of the environment in the UK and in the world by co-ordinating, guiding and, where appropriate, supporting public and private non-governmental organisations just as much as by legislating. But this growing facilitation role requires that national and local government should be as clear as possible about their objectives; they should be transparent in their dealings with parliaments, councils and outside organisations.

The noble Earl, Lord Peel, and the noble Earl, Lord Selborne, spoke powerfully about how the farming community can contribute. The noble Baroness, Lady Maddock, rightly cautioned that governments should be more than simply facilitators; that is not why they are elected.

The immediate environmental issue facing tens of thousands of British households is the danger of flood and the likelihood of steeply rising insurance costs following the recent changes announced by the Association of British Insurers. It is essential that all the responsible departments and agencies ensure that the practical and insurance arrangements are in place for next winter and thereafter and that they are well publicised.

The other watery threat to our environment comes from the rising sea level, exacerbated by global warming. This House debated the question in June last year, but there is still no clear policy as regards different coastal areas and how they will be affected. The Minister indicated that in a classic British way each coastal area would be examined on a case-by-case basis--which I understand is effectively a cost-benefit analysis. By contrast, the Government of the Netherlands have an overarching policy of coastal defence which is reasonably transparent. As the debate demonstrated, coastal communities in the UK have good reason to be concerned about the present situation. It will require high-level government leadership to ensure that the issue is handled sensitively and that all the available scientific and engineering resources are deployed to best effect.

Indications were given last year at the Labour Party Conference--I am not sure whether I am allowed to mention that--that the Government would develop an initiative and legislation on ocean policy generally which would also include fisheries, resources and pollution. That is long overdue and will be very welcome to the many UK organisations in this field which could help the Government in their programmes on the environment and international development. But this requires some more open indication of the Government's future plans. Here I declare an interest as chairman of the Advisory Committee on Protection of the Sea which works with several governments and international agencies on the ocean environment around Africa and in the Arctic.

As the noble and learned Lord, Lord Falconer of Thoroton, reaffirmed this afternoon, dealing with global change is one of the priorities of the Government. As the New York Times reported on 10th June, the UK is leading the world, both in climate research and prediction and in international action. In their commitment to sustainable development the Government need to focus on energy conservation, on new sources of power and on reducing pollution. As several government departments will have to deal with these matters, firm arrangements for ministerial leadership and openness will be needed to ensure effective co-ordination, as other noble Lords have commented. The Government should be able to learn something from the United States Government, who have a national oceanic and atmospheric administration that unifies important environmental policies and operational decisions.

In the previous Parliament our government successfully co-ordinated, with a refreshing degree of transparency, the complex issues of food, agriculture and health in the cross-departmental Food Standards Agency. This provides a template for a new approach to co-ordination within DEFRA and beyond on the policies for climate and the environment, especially rivers, coasts and oceans. Such a level of co-ordination should enable the UK to play a strong role in Europe and strengthen Europe's role in working for the world's environmental goals.

As for power and pollution, currently the industrial economies of the world are growing and releasing ever more greenhouse gases. Research indicates that this endangers the whole equilibrium of the world's atmosphere, oceans and biosphere; for example, the great rainforests, as we saw so vividly on a recent "Equinox" television programme. These dangers may well dwarf the much smaller risks associated with nuclear power. Therefore I welcome the Government's announcement that they will study future energy supplies and include consideration of nuclear as well as other practical options for meeting all the world's power needs. This seems to be the view of President Bush and therefore provides an aspect of environmental technology on which the United States and Europe can collaborate effectively, unlike others where collaboration is rather more difficult. This energy study should also seriously consider "green" power supplies, including biofuels, as advocated powerfully by the noble Lord, Lord Palmer, and wind power.

I hope that the Government will continue to push forward the more politically challenging environmental policy of tackling air quality and greenhouse gas emissions in our urban areas which led to political difficulties last year. It is essential that the Government should explain which ministry will campaign on these issues and take the lead in co-ordination now that responsibility for transport is in a separate department to that of the environment. We have great environmental challenges before us. I am confident that our energetic and reforming government will be able to meet them provided they use all the talents that can help them.