

Energy use by the public sector

Many people in the public sector are much exercised by climate change ideas. I myself am all in favour of energy efficiency and cutting fuel bills without cutting standards of heating and lighting. The public sector could do much more to offer a lead in these matters.

Highways authorities squander a lot of power on traffic light sets that could be replaced with roundabouts, and on all night street lights in places where they could be safely switched off at midnight owing to a lack of pedestrians after that time. Railway companies keep train engines running for long periods when parked at terminus stations awaiting turnround and scheduled departure. Most trains keep their engines running when stopped at red lights or in intermediate stations. Buses too often keep engines running in stationary traffic, at traffic lights and at bus stops. Most lack the switch off switch on technology enjoyed by many modern cars. Trains and buses are often far too large and heavy for the passenger numbers and route they are travelling, worsening the fuel per passenger figures.

Public sector building managers often keep lights on when outdoors light is sufficient to light the rooms. I remember attending a big conference on overuse of energy in a large room with huge candelabras with many bulbs on, all blazing when the sun was pouring in through all the windows. I was the only one to suggest we find a light switch. There are not enough movement sensors and other controls on the public estate to cut the bills.

Ministers could initiate more studies of energy use by building and function, and see what divergencies there are. Some of the investments needed to cut consumption are low cost with high pay off. Lagging of tanks and pipes, stopping drafts, putting in better controls and installing more efficient boilers may all have good payoffs.