

Fuelling Poverty

The day of reckoning: my annual gas and electricity statements arrived in the post. Bishop's House is a 1920's Dundee property with many noble and quirky attributes of which heating efficiency is not one. Built when coal was cheap and cavity wall insulation unknown it is a challenge to keep warm.

Paying monthly I know that fuel is expensive. Despite a less cold winter than last year my bills are up by quite a percentage even though my usage is down. I suspect that this is an all too common household experience. It's a juggling act, using enough heat to keep us properly warm, while also trying to use less because the cost per unit is rising faster than our real earnings. For some the situation is irritating, others become angry or anxious, but for too many it's a matter of falling further into debt.

Fuel poverty is defined as spending 10% or more of household income on maintaining an adequate level of heating in the home. The Government's own statistics indicate that there are well over 4 million UK households in fuel poverty. Those living on the margins of low wages and reduced state benefits are particularly hard hit. As are people whose houses cannot be made any more energy efficient.

The agencies who work on the front line in local communities with access to people's homes acutely appreciate the detrimental effect that a cold home has on our physical and emotional well-being. The medical and social consequences probably cost even more to address.

Rising bills widen the fuel poverty gap – so who is to blame? Utility retailers, wholesalers and global companies and their shareholders all point to each other. We understand that fuel exploration and technology does not come cheap. However, many question big company profits and bonuses for executives as excessive, putting the end customer very much in last place.

Meantime pension providers argue that company profits are what underpin pension fund performance, another troubling social horizon that keeps us awake at night. At the same time the Government levies an environmental tax on us to subsidise green energy – wind farms and the like. Nuclear power remains controversial and now 'fracking' appears across the UK, Courier country included, with its promise of cheap gas tempered by potential environmental damage. I'm glad I am not an economist because it is all very complicated.

However the bottom line for me is that somehow we must mind the gap for those most vulnerable in our communities, not least children and the elderly, whose shivers aren't always noticed. St Martin, a fourth century Roman soldier and Christian is especially remembered for cutting his cloak in two and sharing it with a destitute beggar during extreme winter weather. A parable for our times perhaps?

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