

COLD-HEARTED

A vital factor that distinguishes civilisation from barbarism is that the elderly are not left to die of cold. By this measure, the United Kingdom is a cruel land. Roughly twice as many people, per capita, die here than in other parts of northern Europe, though our winters are milder. Even Siberia has lower levels of winter deaths than we do. Between 25,000 and 30,000 people a year are hastened to the grave by the cold here.

Fuel poverty is defined as having to spend 10% or more of your income on keeping your home at a decent temperature. Between 2003 and 2008 the number of households in fuel poverty rose from 2 to 4.5 million, afflicting 18% of the UK's population.

The government estimated that 7m households would be fuel-poor by 2016. Fuel poverty has risen so steeply because public control over the energy companies is so weak. In 2002 it was decided to stop regulating consumer prices. The energy companies immediately increased their profit margins: 10 times, in one case. When world energy prices rise, the companies raise tariffs, when they fall, domestic prices often stay where they are.

The price rises are exacerbated by policies which penalise the poor. People who use pre-payment meters to buy gas and electricity (usually the poorest) pay an extra £120 a year. Those who consume the most energy are subsidised by everyone else: they pay a lower tariff beyond a certain level of use. It ought to be the other way round: the first units you consume should be the cheapest. Before the election, both Parties demanded an inquiry into competition in the energy market. They're not demanding it any more.

There should be a perfect synergy between climate change and social justice policies. Improving the energy efficiency of homes is the most effective way of tackling fuel poverty. But green policies are grossly unfair and regressive: everyone pays at an equal rate for reducing energy emissions, yet those who need the most help to reduce their fuel costs don't get more funds. And carbon emissions reduction targets are likely to throw another 1.7m people into fuel poverty by 2022.

The main government scheme for improving the homes of the fuel poor spends only 25% of its revenues to relieve fuel poverty. There's no requirement that the worst homes be treated, nor that they be brought up to an acceptable level of energy efficiency.

Nothing will be done to reduce fuel poverty until governments control profits and prices in energy markets, helping those who need it most. Green policies must be funded by transferring money from richer consumers to poorer ones. But until something is done, the cold will keep killing, at levels which even the Siberians don't have to endure.