

# Fiona Hall

## Bashful politician keen on green

**An environmental campaigner turned politician, the British MEP has long championed the unglamorous cause of energy efficiency. Charlie Dunmore finds out what makes her tick**

Described by those that know her as “dedicated” and “hard-working”, Fiona Hall is not a politician that naturally seeks out the limelight. If proof is needed, as MEP for north-east England she has spent much of her time working to promote the very worthy but often unglamorous cause of energy efficiency.

Although Ms Hall sits on the European Parliament’s industry committee, the environment has always featured prominently in her politics. “I came into politics via environmental campaigning,” she explains.

In the late 1980s she chaired an ultimately successful campaign against the construction of a nuclear power station on the coast of Northumberland, England’s northernmost county where she has lived for nearly 30 years. “Even in those days energy efficiency was a very significant part of our argument against the need for a nuclear power station,” she remembers.

Having not previously regarded herself as party political, Ms Hall decided then that in order to achieve her environmental goals, as she puts it, “we needed a change of government”.

Following a stint working for the Liberal Democrat councillors in Newcastle, she moved to Westminster in 1997 to work as a press officer for Liberal Democrat MPs Lembit Öpik and Richard Livsey. After missing out as the LibDem’s second candidate for north-east England in the 1999 European elections, she continued working in Westminster until her successful election to Brussels in 2004.

Shortly after the European Commission published its EU energy efficiency action plan in October 2006, Ms Hall was appointed to lead the parliament’s response. The plan contained no legislative proposals and no binding EU target. As a result, the only response the parliament could give was in the form of a non-binding “own initiative report”.

It is not unfair to say some members of the European parliament use these non-binding reports to keep their parliamentary assistants busy. By contrast Ms Hall – according to someone who worked with her on the issue – travelled to eight EU capitals to discuss energy efficiency with national MPs, government officials and local industry representatives.

When the parliament adopted her final report in 2008, it castigated the commission for not only falling behind in implementing the plan, but also for failing to even appoint enough officials to do the work.

“The report reflected the frustration that everyone expressed to me that – despite the good intentions in the plan – nothing was happening on the ground.”

After what Ms Hall describes as “a lot of nagging” by her and her colleagues, the situation has improved markedly during the second half of the current parliamentary term, she says.

Most member states have now adopted national efficiency action plans, and implementing measures agreed under the EU’s ecodesign directive will lead to the least efficient appliances being removed from the EU market.

But obstacles to achieving the bloc’s efficiency goals still remain, according to Ms Hall, not least in the shape of her own national government.

“There is real inconsistency between Westminster and Brussels. Despite all the nice speeches by [UK climate and energy minister] Ed Miliband, I’m constantly amazed by the recalcitrance of the UK’s attitude to energy efficiency in the council of ministers.”

Ms Hall says she was disappointed when MEPs failed to secure €500m for energy-efficiency projects in recent discussions on the EU’s €4bn economic recovery plan.

“The UK government was one of the difficult ones when we were trying to get that money earmarked,” she reveals. Nonetheless, she is happy that the final agreement will see money reinvested in efficiency and renewable energy if it isn’t spent on earmarked carbon capture and storage projects by

2010 – “which it won’t be”, she argues.

The commission’s recent announcement that it will revise the 2006 energy efficiency action plan later this year sees Ms Hall relishing the battle ahead. She believes that the EU’s goal of a 20% improvement in energy efficiency by 2020 should have been made binding the first time around. “The revision gives us the opportunity to press for that binding target again,” she says.

That battle, as Ms Hall points out, will have to be taken up by a new parliament following European elections in June. Asked whether she harbours ambitions to join former MEP and current Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg back in the Westminster limelight, she says: “I’m very happy in the European parliament, and my one ambition is to get re-elected in June.”

It may be the standard response to such questions, but it’s clear that – unlike many in Brussels – she really means it.

