

---

## earth rights

We need to focus more on the skills required in a low-carbon economy, says Martin Stott

---

# skilling a low-carbon economy



The last few months have seen a real step-change in thinking about what a low-carbon society might look like and how we might get there. The Government's Low Carbon Transition Plan (LCTP) has acted as a framework focusing on five key areas: the power sector; homes and communities; workplaces and jobs; transport; and the sustainable management of farming land and waste. A Carbon Reduction Strategy for Transport, a Renewable Energy Strategy, and a Low Carbon Industrial Strategy have also been published in support of the LCTP.

One area that has received very little attention up to now, though, has been the skills agenda. We all know that in moving to a low-carbon economy technologies are important, that investment strategies are essential, and that it all has to be underpinned by political will and vision – but who is going to actually *do* the work in a green economy, and how?

One of the most powerful books I've read this year is Van Jones' *The Green Collar Economy: How One Solution Can Fix our Two Biggest Problems*.<sup>1</sup> Jones is a charismatic figure from Oakland, California, and was appointed to the Obama administration as special adviser for 'Green jobs'. Clever, passionate, experienced – and black with a radical agenda – he became a lightning rod for the right-wing 'shock jocks' of Fox News, most notably Glenn Beck, as an example of all that was 'dangerous' about the 'socialist take-over' of the White House. The campaign against him was so vitriolic that he lasted less than six months in the job. Nevertheless, this agenda remains just as important and continues to be acted upon both in the USA and elsewhere.

Jones' key point is that the 'two biggest problems' facing the USA are environmental

degradation and poverty, and that green jobs address both of these – or should do.

This resonates with the issues addressed in the *Green New Deal*<sup>2</sup> published in the UK last year. Jones, though, focuses on the social equity and environmental justice dimensions of a green collar economy to be delivered through skills to a greater extent than the *Green New Deal* work does. One of his most striking arguments is that many of the most innovative ideas and the skilled workers to carry them through are to be found in the American prison system – victims of the ‘incarceration industry’ as he calls it.

Here in the UK the skills dimension to this debate has been picked up in a number of new reports. Three are of significance. *Mind the Gap – Skills for the Transition to a Low Carbon Economy*,<sup>3</sup> published by the Aldersgate Group, *The Future’s Green: Jobs in the UK Low Carbon Transition*,<sup>4</sup> published by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), and *Stimulating Green Jobs*,<sup>5</sup> published by the Environmental Industries Commission (EIC). Former TUC President John Edmonds summarised the issue succinctly at the launch of the Aldersgate report, saying: ‘Without a skills strategy attached to environmental goods you have no policy, only rhetoric.’

These reports make a number of common points, perhaps the most important being that in the forthcoming transition almost every job in the UK will have to change to some extent, and that low-carbon skills will need to be embedded in the mainstream UK workforce in the next ten years. The IPPR report basically says that wholly new skills sets won’t be required but identifies four areas where skills shortages are likely:

- specific skills needing substantial investment in training and development, such as civil engineering;
- skills that can be ‘topped up’, such as training electricians to install solar panels;
- generic skills such as management and leadership skills; and
- generic ‘green skills’, such as an understanding of the changes required.

The EIC document makes the important point that a focus on low carbon risks obscuring other environmental issues and associated economic opportunities, and waves the flag for investment in water management, air pollution, and waste and resource efficiency skills.

Nick Eyre, from Oxford University’s Environmental Change Institute, and I tried to pick all these points up in a report, *Skills for a Low Carbon Economy*,<sup>6</sup>

commissioned by the Department of Energy and Climate Change earlier this year and published on my website (<http://martin-stott.com>). It calls for clarity in setting our goals and argues that there is an urgent need to create a demand for these new skills, as there is already evidence that skills training is not occurring at the required pace. In the context of the commitment that all new houses should be carbon-neutral by 2016, the construction sector is one of particular concern.

Let me conclude with some of the Van Jones oratory that so infuriates his neo-con critics: ‘*Let us all say together we want to build a green economy strong enough to lift people out of poverty. We want to create green pathways out of poverty and into great careers for America’s children. We want this ‘green wave’ to lift all boats. This country can save the polar bears, and poor kids too.*’

If we could achieve that in the UK with our Low Carbon Industrial Strategy and an approach to skills that that gave everybody, including the much fretted-over NEETs (‘not in employment, education or training’), a stake in the future, the transition to a low-carbon economy might look like a much more achievable proposition.

● **Martin Stott** is Head of Environment & Resources at Warwickshire County Council. The views expressed here are personal. His newly launched website is at <http://martin-stott.com/>

### Notes

- 1 Van Jones: *The Green Collar Economy: How One Solution Can Fix our Two Biggest Problems*. HarperOne, 2008
- 2 *Green New Deal: Joined-up Policies to Solve the Triple Crunch of the Credit Crisis, Climate Change and High Oil Prices*. New Economics Foundation, for the Green New Deal Group, 2008. [www.neweconomics.org/sites/neweconomics.org/files/A\\_Green\\_New\\_Deal\\_1.pdf](http://www.neweconomics.org/sites/neweconomics.org/files/A_Green_New_Deal_1.pdf)
- 3 *Mind the Gap – Skills for the Transition to a Low Carbon Economy*. Aldersgate Group. Nov. 2009. [www.aldersgategroup.org.uk/reports](http://www.aldersgategroup.org.uk/reports)
- 4 Jenny Bird and Kayte Lawton: *The Future’s Green: Jobs in the UK Low Carbon Transition*. IPPR, Nov. 2009. [www.ippr.org/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=712](http://www.ippr.org/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=712)
- 5 *Stimulating Green Jobs*. Recommendations for Supporting the UK’s Environmental Industry in the 2009 Pre-Budget Report. Environmental Industries Commission, Oct. 2009. [www.endsreport.com/docs/ER418\\_1.pdf](http://www.endsreport.com/docs/ER418_1.pdf)
- 6 Nick Eyre and Martin Stott: *Skills for a Low Carbon Economy*. Apr. 2009. <http://martin-stott.com/writings/reports/skills-for-a-low-carbon-economy/>