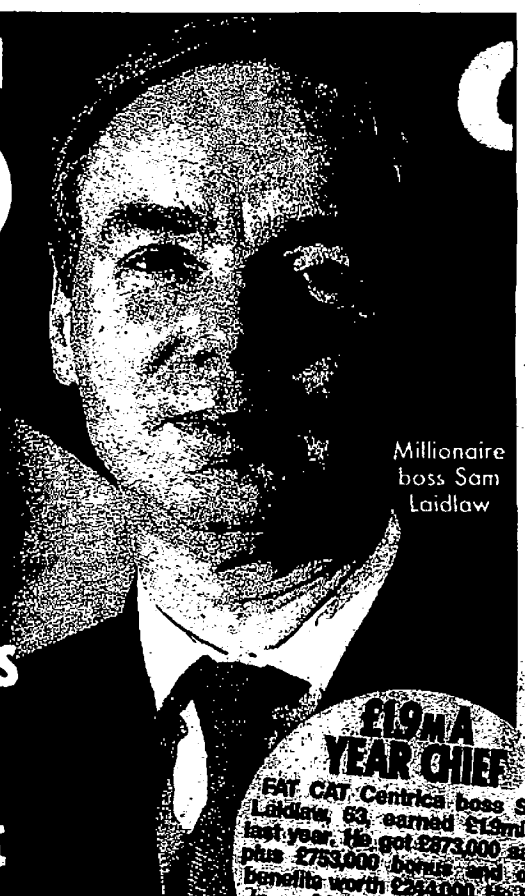


FUEL'S GOLD



Millionaire boss Sam Laidlaw

Centrica announces record £2 billion profits
Gas and electricity bills rise by 43 per cent

£19M A YEAR CHIEF
EAT CAT: Centrica boss Sam Laidlaw, 63, earned £19million last year. He got £873,000 salary plus £753,000 bonus and other benefits worth £24,000. He lives in a £4million townhouse in Chelsea and doesn't believe he's screwing his customers making £25million.

BRITAIN'S biggest power firm is set to unveil record annual profits of £2billion as families struggle to pay their highest-ever winter fuel bills.

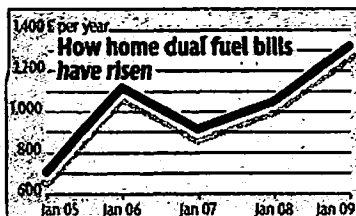
Quarterly bills averaging £413 will be sent to British Gas's 16million customers in the next few weeks - up 43 per cent on last year. And the next bills after that in the spring will soar to an average £502.

Last night MPs and consumer watchdogs slammed the firm's owner Centrica for making the profit - up £100million on last year and the equivalent of £225,000 an hour - while failing to pass on sharp cuts in wholesale gas prices to customers.

David Orr of the National Housing Federation, which represents housing associations across the UK, said: "British Gas has shamelessly ripped off millions of households for years by

overcharging for gas and electricity. Ministers must levy a windfall tax on suppliers, with the proceeds being used to help people in fuel poverty."

British Gas customers are paying £1,322 a year for gas and electricity. But watchdogs believe suppliers could afford to slash bills by a fifth. Labour MP Fabian



EXCLUSIVE

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Hamilton said:

"They were quick to raise prices when the wholesale price of gas was rising. Yet when prices came down, energy bills did not."

Since last January an extra one million households have been pushed into fuel poverty - defined as spending 10 per cent or more of income on heat and light.

Mark Todd, of price comparison service energyhelpline.com, said: "Five-and-a-half million households are now trapped in fuel poverty. It means 12 million people can't afford to heat their homes."

Only Scottish and Southern Energy has pledged to pass on price cuts to customers. Suppliers say they buy gas supplies a year in advance so retail prices lag behind wholesale trends.

● COMMENT: Page 14

Turn up heat on robber barons

AS the chill winds of the economic downturn bite ever deeper, many prices are dropping.

But not the cost of gas and electricity. British consumers are being hit by massively increased bills, even though the wholesale price of fuel has fallen by a record amount. That is reason enough for fury when so many are facing redundancy or lower incomes.

Yet bosses at British Gas owner Centrica don't care. They are about to announce their largest-ever profit of £2billion.

What's more, chief executive Sam Laidlaw will pick up an estimated £900,000 bonus on top of his £1million salary, although 12 million people struggle in fuel poverty.

As Labour MP Fabian Hamilton says, Centrica were quick enough to push up bills when the wholesale price of gas went up, but they don't pass on falls. He wants a windfall tax imposed on this robber company. He is right. Gordon Brown should not tolerate Centrica's callous behaviour.

A one-off raid on their outrageous profits will not only help the Treasury's coffers, it will teach British Gas not to rip off customers.