

The environment

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Introduction

In May 2010 David Cameron announced that he wanted the Coalition government to be the 'greenest government ever'. As he and Nick Clegg declared:

'... we need to protect the environment for future generations, make our economy more environmentally sustainable, and improve our quality of life and well-being' (Cabinet Office, 2010: 17).

By the end of 2013 Cameron was reported as telling aides to 'get rid of all the green crap' in order to reduce energy bills (Daily Mail, 2013).

How did we get from there to here? Was the government ever committed to real change? What have its principal successes and failures been? Are we now closer to an alignment of social policies and environmental policies than we were 5 years ago?

The key to answering such questions lies in the extent to which policy has been preventative, strategic and forward-looking rather than reactive and makeshift. And that distinction turns on how the government perceives the relationship between the economy and nature.

Economy, society and nature

There are three possibilities:

- 1 The inherent value of the natural environment and the needs of future generations are regarded as essential to social well-being.
- 2 Ecological issues are seen primarily as a business opportunity.
- 3 Ecological issues are low priority ('we'll spend money on nature when we can afford to').

The more policies are framed by (2) or (3) the more likely decisions will resemble post hoc, 'crisis management' interventions. Of course, governments often invoke (1), but do their actions follow suit? George Osborne (2009) once said:

The global market for green goods and technologies is worth trillions of dollars a year, but with less than a 5% share of that market Britain is failing to take advantage.... I want a Conservative Treasury to lead the development of the low carbon economy.

This and subsequent developments correspond more closely to (2).

Indeed, in 2011-12 (the most recent available statistics) the green economy was employing a million people, with low carbon goods and services worth £128bn, or 8% of GDP – representing one third of Britain's economic growth at that time (Carrington, 2014a). The sector was growing at 4.8% per annum (above the global average) and Britain ranked sixth in the world, in a sector worth £3.4 trillion worldwide (Carrington, 2014a).

Take wind power. The industry attracted £2.6bn of investment in 2013-14, of which £1.1bn stayed in the UK, and full-time jobs in the wind industry rose 8% in the 12 months to June 2014 (Carrington, 2014b). Ironically, these are genuine successes the Coalition has not been interested in publicising. One possible reason is that onshore wind turbines attract the ire of UKIP. With their right-flank vulnerable the Conservatives have felt the need to tack into that particular political storm. With local communities often excluded from the early stages of decision-making processes, failures in planning and consultation may have also stimulated opposition to wind farms.

So, Britain maintains its position close to the top of various environmental league tables. This is

partly because of historical legacies, i.e. the shift from coal to gas and from manufacturing to services. But the government deserves some credit. It vowed to pursue the Labour government's targets for cutting carbon emissions by a third by 2020. More recently, progress has been made on 'Electricity Market Reform' and low-carbon power generation. And the deployment of off-shore wind has been increased, as necessitated by the EU Renewable Energy Directive. It also donated almost £1bn to the Green Climate Fund to help developing countries adapt to global warming (Martin, 2014).

Missed opportunities

But the last five years have largely been ones of missed opportunities, as the country has shifted more towards (3).

- The government has stressed a market-based approach, yet not provided the long-term security that investors in renewables require.
- Labour's plans for more eco-towns were severely scaled back.
- Basing recycling schemes entirely upon incentives (replacing the planned 'pay as you throw' approach) has not been shown to work with the effectiveness and comprehensiveness that is needed.
- Labour's boiler scrappage scheme was discontinued; the Energy Company Obligation has a free boiler scheme but only for those who meet strict eligibility criteria.
- Air quality has been declining since 2010 and the UK faces action from the EU if improvements are not made.
- The progress in domestic solar power which was being made under Labour has halted.
- The Green Deal allows people to borrow money from a private provider to improve boilers and insulation. There has, however, been very little take-up and only the most ideological could regard it as a success.

What accounts for this? The Tories have always been resistant to environmentalism. Cameron's pre-2010 'hug a huskie' approach was an implicit acknowledgement of this as the Tories tried to detoxify and reposition themselves as compassionate conservatives. But austerity and an attempt to shrink the state quickly pushed that emphasis to one side. With the Liberal Democrats trumpeting their social conscience and green credentials, many conservatives have had even more of an excuse to regard the environment as liberal-leftie obsession that a business-minded government should not indulge. The following developments illustrate this.

The UK currently risks reasserting its addiction to fossil fuels (Bast et al., 2014: 60). Investment in them soared in 2014-15 to £15.2bn; while investment in low-carbon energy fell to £10bn (Carrington, 2014c). This is despite increasing recognition of the fact that a large proportion of remaining fossil fuels have to be left in the ground if global warming is to be limited to 2°C. A recent report suggested that 82% of remaining coal deposits, 49% of available gas and 33% of oil reserves should not be extracted and used (Bast et al., 2014; McGlade and Ekins, 2015).

The hostility to onshore wind power contrasts with the enthusiasm for hydraulic fracturing ('fracking'). The environmentalist objection is well known – that fracking pollutes water tables, releases methane, causes earth tremors and overloads social and natural infrastructures. Yet even the business case is lacking – in 2015 only 11 exploratory wells for shale gas are to be drilled (Vaughan, 2015) – unless you are persuaded by those corporations whose economic self-interests are at stake. The deposits to be released beneath villages, shires and towns (including those in the 'derelict North') may yet turn out to contain electoral poison for the Conservatives. Ironically, the fashion for fracking is a subtle, if unintended, acknowledgement that we are now in the latter stages of the fossil fuel era. A proper 'transition strategy' to clean energy is needed. Yet fracking has not been sold on that basis, not by a government salivating for revenue as the economy continues to stall.

Similarly, since nuclear power counts as low carbon energy support for it has revived. While some environmentalists welcome this commitment, many others worry about waste disposal and the eventual costs of decommissioning plants.

Like so many of its predecessors, the government also regards roads and airports as crucial for British competitiveness. Without a change of direction, this is what will dominate transport spending until 2020. Yet the Department for Transport (2014: 8) concluded that local sustainable transport schemes return £5 for every £1 spent.

Funding for flood protection was immediately slashed by a quarter in 2010 (Carrington, 2014d; see Unison, 2015). This left the government looking both heartless and inept when flooding became a political issue in 2012-13. But although some of the cuts were restored, over the last 5 years average yearly spending on flooding has been 10% lower than during the last Labour spending review period (Friends of the Earth, 2014). Hundreds of projects have been on hold and three-quarters of defences have not been adequately maintained. In 2014 it was announced that £2.3bn in total would be available until 2020 to improve defences, though more than 20% of this is expected to come from local councils, businesses and individuals (Carrington, 2014d). Annual flood damage already costs about £1.1bn and could rise to as much as £27bn by 2080; and even maintaining existing levels of flood defence requires spending to increase to over £1bn per year by 2035 (Bennett and Hartwell-Naguib, 2014; cf Committee on Climate Change, 2014: 37). (However, a new flood insurance scheme for the 350,000 most at risk properties is due to start in the summer of 2015.)

Similarly, the government has wanted a revived housing market to drive economic growth. But the 100,000 new homes announced in 2014 will be exempt from energy efficiency standards – precisely the wrong direction in which to move.

There is, then, little evidence of convergence between the social policy and environmental

policies agendas, though it is only through a synthesis of the two that preventative strategies can be fully developed (Fitzpatrick, 2014). Much more government action needs to occur with respect to health and healthcare, housing retrofit, energy efficiencies (especially in relation to fuel poverty), public transport and air pollution. For instance, fuel and food poverties are ecological problems, not just social ones. From 2008-14 energy costs rose by 60% (Adams et al., 2014: 136) and,

'All food groups have risen in price since 2007...with rises ranging from 22% to 57%' (DEFRA, 2014: 21).

The poorest fifth spend 8% of their budgets on energy and 20% on food, double what the richest fifth spend (Adams and Levell, 2014: 18). Though according to Jenkins (2014), the poorest tenth spend *five times* as much of their budget on energy compared to the richest tenth.

Conclusion

For conservatives, 'environmental issues' continues to imply countryside, conservation and green belts. Abstract issues of 'climate change' find it harder to gain a hearing, especially in an age of austerity economics. The Liberal Democrats have been a restraining influence on some of the climate change deniers who still cluster within elements of the Conservative Party. But, overall, the record of the 2010-15 administration is not one we are likely to revisit with any sense of pride.

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