

A review of UK
political leadership
on the environment
since the 2010
general election

GREEN STANDARD 2013



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by:

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Preface

This review assesses the environmental leadership demonstrated by senior ministers and shadow ministers from the UK's three main political parties since the last election in May 2010.

Our intention is not to compare and contrast the parties directly, or to repeat the comprehensive policy audits published as *Climate Check* and *Nature Check*, but to look at the performance of the main political leaders in Westminster.

Leadership matters. UK politicians are in a unique position to enlist the support of party members, citizens and organisations, including business, for the UK's environmental and climate change goals.

The UK has cross-party agreement to decarbonise the economy and reduce global emissions of greenhouse gases to avoid the worst impacts of climate change, stop the decline of species and fragmentation of habitats, both in the UK and globally, and protect the world's poorest people from the effects of environmental degradation.

These threats will not wait for the current period of economic difficulty to end but, if our leaders act with purpose, the right political response to these challenges will hasten recovery, rebalance the economy and improve quality of life for UK citizens.

We have assessed the performance of the three largest parties in Westminster because of their dominant role in determining the UK's environmental and economic direction. We recognise that this is an incomplete picture because it does not assess the performance of smaller parties like the Green Party, or the distinct role of parties in delivering environmental policy in Scotland and Wales.

We have identified good performance by Conservative and Liberal Democrat ministers and Labour shadow ministers in committing to specific pro-environment policies, and have named them where possible as they deserve recognition.

Unfortunately, individual good performance is not reflected in visible and consistent leadership. After a promising first few months, the coalition government and the UK's senior politicians have been largely silent about the UK's environmental goals. The prime minister's promise that he would lead "the greenest government ever" has been devalued by the chancellor's framing of high environmental standards as a threat to economic success.

Despite strong statements on the green economy, the Labour Party has not yet made it clear that the environment will be among its priorities going into the next election. The Liberal Democrats have failed to match their early ambition on climate action, showing a patchy performance on the detail of electricity market reform and no clear vision for the natural environment.

The impact of government diffidence and disagreement has been a sharp decline in confidence in the UK's environmental policy, so investment in green infrastructure has not reached its potential. Two decades of incremental but steady environmental policy progress in the UK is threatened. There are now regular assaults on the centre ground consensus that it is in the UK's interest to develop an environmentally sustainable economy, but most of our political leaders have failed to respond.

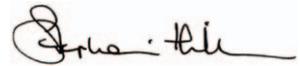
This has contributed to the sense that politics is failing the public interest. The British public has not stopped caring about our green and pleasant land and continues to support renewable energy and action to stabilise the climate. But political leaders have focused on arguing about traditional, short term economic decisions, to the exclusion of many other collective problems, including positive environmental measures that would boost the economy.

The UK's senior politicians have been largely silent about the UK's environmental goals

We set out here how all three parties could provide a positive agenda, which could contribute to rebuilding public confidence in politics as well as creating a richer, more stable and less polluted world to live in. The review charts the highs and lows of the performance of senior politicians over the past three years, and identifies the party-specific challenges that will have to be overcome if they are to provide effective leadership in the future.



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What does effective leadership look like?

2015 will be a vital year politically and environmentally. It heralds a UK general election, with the formation of a new government, the deadline for a new international climate deal and agreement on a new international development framework. Political parties, businesses and NGOs all have responsibilities to ensure that these events secure a better environment, improve the quality of life of UK citizens and meet the needs of the poorest people in the UK and globally.

We have identified four areas where political leadership will be most important, and where we think there are opportunities for significant progress:

1. Economy

The UK can move towards a more productive, resilient and highly skilled economy by investing in new renewable energy and resource recovery infrastructure, building smart transport and energy systems, and improving energy and resource efficiency. By giving clear, long term certainty about the sustainable direction of our economy and properly measuring the value of our natural capital we can ensure businesses make good decisions with their investments.

2. Communities

Strong communities are founded on people enjoying equal access to high quality environments wherever they live, the provision of energy efficiency and affordable homes, and the availability of basic services within the local area. A sustainable built environment will make communities more resilient to rising energy, fuel and food costs and increase social equity in existing towns and cities.

3. Nature

Nature is threatened in Britain, and pressures on the natural environment continue to grow. Far more species are declining than are increasing, including many of our most treasured plants and animals. The protection and recovery of nature is important in its own right, and it is

fundamental to a healthier and more prosperous society. The public cares passionately about the natural environment and wants to see bold and ambitious action to support its recovery.

4. International leadership

The UK's role globally and its commitment to its international development programme can improve the lives of the poorest people for the long term by helping to secure an equitable and ambitious global climate agreement. The world's poorest are those most dependent on the natural environment for their livelihoods. Policies and programmes should enable communities to build resilience to climate change, control local natural resources and share in the benefits of low carbon energy. The conservation of biodiversity will also require action at an international level and UK leadership, if we are to preserve our ecosystems and retain economic stability.

We consider that the following party-specific challenges need to be addressed, if the parties are to strengthen their capability to respond to these issues:

Conservatives

With 'Vote Blue, Go Green', David Cameron developed a strong centre right case for tackling climate change in opposition. He now needs to rebuild support in the party for a green agenda to reconnect with mainstream public opinion in the UK. The prime minister must restore the traditional respect Conservatives previously had for the natural world and address the growing scepticism about human-induced climate change within his party. Conservative economic policy should not view environmental protection as an obstacle to growth. Instead, it should support the opportunities the UK has to put green growth at the centre of a resilient, resource efficient and balanced recovery.

Labour

As the last government, Labour showed important leadership on climate change in the run up to the Copenhagen summit and created the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC). However, it often treated environmental sustainability as a bolt-on to its main economic and social objectives. Parts of Labour are beginning to rediscover a less technocratic and more community-based approach to politics and this must include the environment and quality of life. At the same time, Labour has to develop a reform programme that fulfils its promise to put green infrastructure at the heart of its strategy to rebalance the economy for the benefit of the nation.

Liberal Democrats

The Liberal Democrats have won some significant battles on climate change. But they need to develop a bolder and more holistic approach to environmental sustainability in government, particularly for the natural environment, if they wish to continue to claim to be a 'green' party. The leadership must defend the fourth carbon budget and deliver an energy framework compatible with decarbonisation. The importance of the environment for ensuring economic renewal should be heard from all senior Liberal Democrat ministers, not just the energy and climate change secretary. Their next election manifesto should show clear support for a post-2020 European renewables target. The party needs to realise its ambition for localism, and address the lack of resources and expert support available for the local councils and local enterprise partnerships that are trying to go green.

The review

Environmental policy is framed as an obstacle to growth, not a route to prosperity

When he became prime minister in 2010, David Cameron said he was ambitious to lead the “greenest government ever”. He declared that there was a fourth minister at DECC, “who cares passionately about this agenda and that is me, the prime minister. I mean that from the bottom of my heart.”

Since then, David Cameron has not given a public speech on the environment or challenged the growth of climate science denial in his party. He appears reluctant to defend his own commendable decision to set the fourth carbon budget. Others in his party have filled the vacuum, and questioned the cross-party consensus that high environmental standards are in the UK's interest. Chancellor George Osborne has said on more than one occasion that environmental standards are a barrier to growth and has championed a gas intensive energy policy which could slow or stop investment in low carbon generation. Some ministers have publicly questioned the science of climate change, while the government's deregulation agenda risks turning back the clock on the protection of nature.

**David Cameron
appears reluctant
to defend his own
commendable
decision to set
the fourth carbon
budget**

“When it comes to clean energy, the UK has one of the clearest investment climates globally.”

David Cameron, July 2013

- ✓ Ministers established the Natural Capital Committee, with a cross-departmental remit, developed from a strong Natural Environment White Paper and also committed to a national pollinator strategy.
- ✓ The prime minister backed a strong fourth carbon budget.
- ✓ A number of Conservative ministers have been effective advocates for better policy in international forums, for example on biodiversity, endangered species and international development, including David Cameron, William Hague, Caroline Spelman, Richard Benyon and Greg Barker.

“I think personally, and I do not think this is particularly a secret, that we were overly dependent for our future energy path on renewable energy.”

George Osborne, March 2013

- ✗ David Cameron has not provided consistent public leadership on the environment or climate change.
- ✗ George Osborne has chosen to make environmental policy a more polarised issue, and has framed it as an obstacle to growth, opposing a decarbonisation target and championing an extensive gas strategy.
- ✗ Conservative ministers have insisted on a review of the fourth carbon budget in 2014, creating uncertainty about the government's low carbon direction.
- ✗ Owen Paterson publicly rejects evidence of human-induced climate change and, in doing so, threatens to undermine evidence-based policy making on this issue.

Economy

In his first year the prime minister approved an ambitious fourth carbon budget and agreed to establish the Green Investment Bank and the Natural Capital Committee. These were very significant achievements. But the impact of the first two actions has been undermined by lack of support from the chancellor, who has taken an unnecessarily negative approach to the greening of the economy. The fourth carbon budget will be reviewed in 2014, a little over two years after it was agreed, causing unnecessary uncertainty about the direction of UK energy policy.

The Conservative leadership has delayed the decision to set a decarbonisation target for the electricity sector, while pursuing a gas intensive electricity strategy, and raising unrealistic expectations that fracking will bring UK energy prices down.

Communities

The Department for Communities and Local Government has sought to weaken environmental protection in the planning system whilst, at the same time, reducing its resources to handle local development issues and involve local communities in decision making.

The minister for climate change, Greg Barker, has continued to be a powerful advocate of energy efficiency and decentralised energy. Unfortunately, the flagship Green Deal programme was introduced without a supporting energy efficiency strategy and replaced existing programmes to insulate the homes of the poorest. High interest rates on Green Deal loans, weak financial incentives and a lack of street-by-street co-ordinated action has resulted in a dramatic fall in the uptake of loft and cavity wall insulation by the public.

Nature

The Natural Environment White Paper showed great ambition and an understanding of the role and value of the environment from former environment secretary, Caroline Spelman. But many of its recommendations are yet to be implemented due to a lack of funding for Local Nature Partnerships, no long term commitment to Nature Improvement Areas and a regressive stance on habitat regulations.

Conservative ministers have not always shown high regard for scientific evidence and enquiry

The government has a prime opportunity to protect and improve our marine biodiversity through a network of Marine Conservation Zones. But, after a decade of work, with cross-party support for a network of protected areas at sea, only 31 zones are being put forward out of the 127 suggested, with no commitment for future tranches.

Conservative ministers have not always shown high regard for scientific evidence and enquiry. A low point was when Owen Paterson questioned the science of climate change on BBC Radio Four, using arguments for which there is no credible scientific support. In other cases insufficient weight has been given to scientific evidence, including the culling of badgers, the proposed destruction of buzzard nests and the reluctance to ban neonicotinoids to protect bee populations.

Chancellor George Osborne used the 2013 Spending Review to announce “the biggest programme of investment since the 1970s in our roads network”. On his first day in office, the prime minister cancelled a proposed third runway at Heathrow, but he has subsequently backed a review of airport capacity, the starting point of which is the need for expansion.

The 2013 *State of Nature* report highlighted the decline of 60 per cent of species in the UK over the past 50 years. The government’s actions will not address that decline, unless the ambitions set out in the Natural Environment White Paper can be turned into action.

International leadership

The High-level Panel on the post-2015 development agenda, of which David Cameron was a co-chair, supported a strong narrative on the importance of integrating the environment into poverty reduction. Richard Benyon’s leadership on some aspects of the Common Fisheries Policy has helped to secure significant and welcome reforms during 2013. Whilst progress has been slower on the Common Agricultural Policy, the UK has played a helpful role in protecting the scheme’s environmental budget, with Owen Paterson pushing for a 15 per cent modulation rate in England. The UK has also continued to promote international co-operation to protect endangered species, preserve biodiversity and stop the illegal trade in wildlife products.

Promising leadership on the low carbon economy, but no programme for government

Ed Miliband was the first leader to commit his party to a decarbonisation target for the power sector. He has placed this in the context of strong support for a greener economy, a position recently strengthened by Ed Balls' public support for green infrastructure investment as an important part of Labour's plan for economic recovery. Shadow ministers, including Caroline Flint, Maria Eagle, Hilary Benn and Mary Creagh, have held the government to account for its performance on electricity market reform, the proposed sale of public forests, planning reforms and cuts to public transport.

However, while environmental issues have been reflected in the work of relevant shadow teams, Labour has yet to show how environment will sit in its emerging One Nation narrative. Labour faces a choice between developing policies for a conventional economy that marginalises environmental value in favour of out-dated high carbon and intrusive projects, or it can develop a programme for government which enriches places and communities and ensures the wider protection of our natural capital.

A number of shadow ministers have been effective at holding the government to account for its performance

"It is not a choice between creating jobs and saving the planet. We have to do both."

Ed Miliband, September 2012

- ✓ Ed Miliband was the first party leader to commit his party to a decarbonisation target for the electricity sector and changed the party's stance on Heathrow.
- ✓ Effective opposition on the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the Energy Bill, the sale of public forests and the badger cull.
- ✓ Ed Balls committed Labour to putting low carbon infrastructure at the heart of its economic recovery plan, including support for ambitious European targets for renewable energy and energy efficiency in 2030.

"We have a ready made need for infrastructure investment in low carbon technologies which can provide the seed bed for the innovation which can then produce export markets for the future."

Ed Balls, July 2013

- ✗ Lack of public leadership on the environment and no real sense that the environment is at the heart of One Nation Labour.
- ✗ Few specific proposals to green the UK economy, while the leadership continues to support costly and intrusive new road building.

Economy

Both Ed Miliband and Ed Balls have made the case for a greener economy. Ed Miliband responded early to strong business and NGO support for a new decarbonisation objective and committed the Labour Party to introducing a near zero target for the electricity sector. Caroline Flint's shadow DECC team has been energetic and effective in its scrutiny of the Energy Bill, which will determine the investment trajectory for much of the UK's new infrastructure.

Ed Balls has said "the green economy and low carbon energy will be central to Labour's plans in government" and he has committed Labour to support European renewable energy and energy efficiency targets for 2030. However, there remain few specific proposals from Labour to green the UK economy.

Communities

Despite the shadow transport team's policies, prioritising sustainable transportation, focusing on road and rail improvements rather than new road building, opposing Heathrow expansion and providing support for the low carbon vehicle sector, the overall position on aviation is less clear and a new road building programme has been supported by Ed Balls.

Labour shadow ministers have intervened to defend strong zero carbon homes regulation but their approach to housing remains somewhat fragmented. There is a strong focus on access to ownership by stimulating new build and regulating the private rented sector. But there has been a lack of innovative proposals on alternative financing models, securing the quality of new homes and sensitive redevelopment of existing housing. Luciana Berger has successfully called on the government to support local councils' plans for climate action. Since housing is likely to be a critical part of Labour's offer in its general election manifesto, there is an urgent need to develop a holistic plan for delivering affordable, high quality, energy efficient and sustainable housing.

The public would benefit from a focused and ambitious energy efficiency programme for homes, with a strong community and local government lead, while better

There remain few specific proposals from Labour to green the UK economy

access to nature would improve quality of life for all. Labour has yet to make its ambitions clear for delivering on these important agendas.

Nature

Clear and targeted opposition was offered by shadow environment secretary Mary Creagh on the sale of forests and the badger cull. Hilary Benn and his shadow team proposed changes to the most environmentally damaging aspects of the NPPF. The party is also pushing for action to avert bee decline.

However, the Labour Party has yet to set out a positive vision of how it will respond to the serious decline of nature generally in the UK, or how it will support local communities in protecting and enhancing their local environments.

International leadership

Labour's shadow team in the Department for International Development has recognised the centrality of the environment to effective and secure development. Environmental sustainability and climate change are included in Labour's position for the post-2015 development framework.

Ed Balls has pledged Labour's support for EU 2030 renewable and energy efficiency targets.

However, none of these positive developments has yet had a significant impact on Labour's vision for the UK's role in the world. If the Labour Party were to form a government in 2015, it would immediately face two major challenges in securing an ambitious post-2015 development framework and contributing to a new global deal on climate change under the UN. The party must be in a position to respond to these challenges immediately after an election, which means developing strong policies and relationships now.

Good early political impact on climate, but significant gaps in delivery and environmental leadership

At the 2012 Liberal Democrat Party conference, Nick Clegg told his party that “we will hold [the Conservatives] to their promises on the environment.” The conference itself had a strong focus on green economy issues, following a relatively low profile during the first two years of the coalition government.

Climate concerns have frequently been high on the party’s agenda in the coalition, and Liberal Democrat ministers have made an impact, most notably in negotiating for a Green Investment Bank, and securing funding for a low carbon energy supply and green transport.

However, Liberal Democrats have not found a strong voice on the natural environment or demonstrated an impact from within the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). Crucially, strong rhetoric on energy has not been replicated in policy detail, with Ed Davey overseeing an energy policy framework that risks a high carbon lock-in incompatible with carbon budgets.

The leadership of the party has failed to make it clear that the environment is central to its governing project. Liberal Democrat ministers can point to the reality of coalition negotiations as an explanation for some of their policy disappointments, but they have also been weakened, both by internal disagreement, eg Vince Cable’s initial opposition to the fourth carbon budget, and by a willingness to whip their MPs to vote against the party’s own policy of decarbonising electricity by 2030 in the Energy Bill.

Liberal Democrats have not found a strong voice on the natural environment or demonstrated an impact from within Defra

"I say that lean times can be green times too."

Nick Clegg, April 2011

- ✓ Ministers negotiated hard for the Green Investment Bank and successfully secured low carbon power funding.
- ✓ Ed Davey and, before him, Chris Huhne, each provided strong leadership on climate change nationally and internationally.
- ✓ Consistent commitment to sustainable transport and alternatives to car travel by Norman Baker.

"Green investment is one of the fastest routes to getting investment, growth and jobs going in this country...I don't think as a government we can afford to send mixed messages on that point."

Danny Alexander, September 2012

- ✗ Whipped vote against decarbonisation target, contrary to party policy, and a continued willingness to tolerate, and even promote, subsidies for nuclear power.
- ✗ No clarity on the party's position on European targets for renewable energy and energy efficiency.
- ✗ No leadership on the natural environment agenda, and worrying support for policies that damage wildlife.

Economy

Liberal Democrat ministers have made a positive impact on low carbon decisions in government, particularly at the time the Green Investment Bank was set up and the Levy Control Framework was agreed for the low carbon power sector. Unfortunately, despite being Liberal Democrat policy and having the strong support of both environmental groups and business, the party whipped against a target which would ensure decarbonisation of the UK's electricity grid by 2030. This is notable, as other party, but not coalition, policy issues have been allowed a free vote. Ed Davey has also failed to respond to concerns that the Energy Bill will enable renewed use of coal-fired power stations up to and beyond the 2020s.

Vince Cable played a strong role in setting up the Green Investment Bank. Unfortunately, he did not initially support the setting of the fourth carbon budget and his department has not been an effective champion of the low carbon and environmental goods and services sector.

Communities

Norman Baker has pushed sustainable policies within his transport brief, seeking to promote spending on rail over roads and advocating stronger cycling policies in government, backed by a sustainable local transport fund.

Liberal Democrat ministers have defended high standards in building regulations, though this has not addressed the weakening of environmental standards in national planning policies.

Nature

The Liberal Democrats spoke out strongly in parliament in defence of the independence of existing environmental agencies, and Nick Clegg is reported to have pushed the case for green outcomes in 'quad' negotiations. However, there have been few Liberal Democrat objections to cuts to Defra and its agencies' budgets, or to Defra's generally weak performance in protecting and enhancing UK natural systems.

The Liberal Democrat minister in Defra, David Heath, has supported the damaging and unscientific badger cull and buzzard nest destruction. He has also not insisted on

Liberal Democrat ministers have made a positive impact on low carbon decisions in government

effective government action to halt the catastrophic decline of bees and refused to support a ban on neonicotinoids.

International leadership

Nick Clegg led the UK delegations at the UN summit on Millennium Development Goals in 2010 and at the Rio+20 conference on sustainable development in 2012. At the former he drew attention to the need to “manage natural resources, particularly biodiversity, in an environmentally sustainable way” while at Rio he announced that the UK’s biggest companies will have to report on their carbon emissions.

Chris Huhne played an important role on the international stage, showing leadership at the UN climate change negotiations in Cancun and Durban. His successor, Ed Davey, can be credited with securing UK government support for a 50 per cent reduction in Europe’s carbon emissions by 2030, in the context of a global deal on climate change.

However, Vince Cable has not supported the phase out of UK taxpayer support for international fossil fuel projects through UK Export Finance, as was agreed in the Liberal Democrat manifesto and the coalition agreement.

The official stance on biofuels, set out by Norman Baker in the European Council, is among the best of all the member states, calling for evidence based carbon accounting for indirect land use change.

However, the government does not support European targets for renewable energy and energy efficiency and is negotiating for benefits from nuclear investment, with the backing of Liberal Democrat ministers.

This review charts the highs and lows of the performance of UK senior politicians on the environment over the past three years, and identifies the party-specific challenges that will have to be overcome if they are to provide effective leadership in the future.