

SCIENCE POLICY

People, Politics and the Planet: Where next for UK environmental policy?



Ben Connor / Policy Officer, British Ecological Society
Rebecca Shellock / Policy Intern, British Ecological Society
ben@BritishEcologicalSociety.org policy@BritishEcologicalSociety.org

Making ecology count was exactly the point of the recent Natural Capital Initiative summit, held from 6-7 November 2014. It is a subject that demands the involvement of the broadest range of expertise, and that was what the summit provided. Unusually there was an even mix of academics, policy makers, and business leaders coming together to discuss Natural Capital: what it is, what progress has been made, what we need to do next, and what problems we face in using it as a practical tool.

At the time of writing, the 2015 UK general election looked set to be one of the closest fought electoral battles in decades, with no party securing a clear lead in the polls amidst an increasingly fragmented political landscape. Yet as you read this – barring a particularly close or unexpected result – a new government will be in place, and beginning to outline its policy priorities and legislative programme for the next parliament.

What can we expect from environmental policy over the next five years? While the environment was afforded scant attention in the televised pre-election debates, it was top of the agenda at “People, Politics and the Planet – Any Questions”, held at The Light in London on Monday 9th March. Organised by the BES, The Sibthorp Trust and CIEEM, and expertly chaired by broadcaster Jonathan Dimbleby, the event brought together a panel of politicians from the UK’s six largest political parties to debate their environmental commitments with an audience of over 300 BES and CIEEM members and the general public.

The high-profile panel consisted of Lord Rupert de Mauley (Conservatives, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Natural Environment

and Science), Barry Gardiner MP (Labour, MP for Brent North and Shadow Minister for the Natural Environment), Baroness Kate Parmenter (Liberal Democrats, Environment Spokesperson), Natalie Bennett (Green Party, Leader), Dr Eilidh Whiteford MP (Scottish National Party, MP for Banff and Buchan) and William Cash (UK Independence Party, Heritage and Tourism Spokesperson).

The debate gave BES and CIEEM members a crucial opportunity to put their most pressing environmental

concerns to the panel (See box 1), and to assess the policy options proposed. Over the course of the evening the discussion covered a wide range of issues including climate change and energy, biodiversity loss, the role of EU legislation, the badger cull and the role of independent scientific advice, sustainable agriculture, and grouse shooting. But after two hours, was the audience any the wiser as to how the next government might secure a sustainable future for people and planet? Here are six key things we learnt from the debate.



Question Time! Photograph courtesy of Jason Reeves.

BOX 1

What do our members think?

BES and CIEEM members were asked to complete an online survey, before and after the 'People, Politics and the Planet' debate. The surveys aimed to (1) find out what burning questions our members would like to ask representatives from the UK's major political parties (2) gain our members' opinion on the main environmental issues that will need to be addressed by future government. Over 300 members responded to the survey.

What do our members want to ask the UK's major political parties?

Our members had over 300 questions that they would like to ask the UK's major political parties. Predominantly, questions were themed around the following topics:

- 1 Tackling climate change
- 2 Embedding an understanding of the environment into government decision-making
- 3 The dependency of the economy on a healthy environment.
- 4 Shifting away from short-term politics to long-term sustainability
- 5 Tackling the long-term decline in biodiversity

Following the 'People, Politics and the Planet' event, members were asked to identify topics that they felt were missed during the debate. Topics included future funding for research and government organisations, Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) and the green economy.

What are the top environmental issues that need to be tackled in the next UK parliament?

Our members were provided with a list of environmental issues and were asked to vote for the issues that they believed to be the most important for politicians to tackle in the next UK parliament. The top five environmental issues were:

- 1 Biodiversity loss
- 2 Habitat degradation, planning policy, land use change and agricultural subsidies
- 3 Climate change
- 4 Moving to a sustainable 'green' economy (including over-exploitation, resource efficiency, and energy generation)

The natural capital approach is becoming mainstream

The debate established the extent to which the language and framing of natural capital has become a key component of environmental policy. Lord de Mauley made clear that he was "fundamentally convinced" that the "economy is completely dependent on the environment". Baroness Parminter argued that the Natural Capital Committee should be placed on a permanent, statutory footing, whilst Barry Gardiner stated that a Labour government would develop a parallel system of national natural capital accounts by 2020. While it is highly encouraging that the natural capital approach is becoming embedded within mainstream thinking, it remains essential that any adoption of the concept is grounded in sound science: something the BES is working to ensure with our partners in the Natural Capital Initiative.

The badger cull remains a divisive issue

The question of whether or not badgers should be culled to prevent the spread of Bovine TB, and the extent to which this approach is grounded in sound science, was one of the most polarising of the debate. Lord de Mauley reiterated the Conservatives' position that culling

should be part of a comprehensive strategy to tackle Bovine TB, and that this was supported by science. However Barry Gardiner was clear that the Labour Party disputed this interpretation of the evidence, and that culling would cease immediately under a Labour government. Eilidh Whiteford and Natalie Bennett also questioned the scientific basis for the Government's approach, a point echoed by the questioner, Professor Rosie Woodroffe, a member of the team that designed the Randomised Badger Culling Trial.

The ongoing debate around the science of the badger cull demonstrates the crucial role that independent organisations such as the BES can play in providing objective scientific advice to help inform decision-making. Encouragingly, Lord de Mauley stated that "science and evidence are at the heart of all we do at Defra", a pledge that we hope any future government will adhere to.

Our approach to Genetically Modified Organisms must be informed by sound scientific evidence

Sustainably feeding a rapidly growing population will be a key global challenge in the coming decades, and ecological

science will have a vital role to play in addressing this issue. During the debate, discussion mainly focused on the role of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in tackling this problem. Only Natalie Bennett maintained clear opposition to the release of GMOs into the environment (yet allowing for the possibility of ongoing research), whilst Lord de Mauley cited evidence from the European Food Safety Authority that GMOs were safe for humans and the environment. Barry Gardiner, Eilidh Whiteford and Baroness Parminter all indicated that they would consider the use of GMOs if appropriate safeguards were in place and evidence of their safety was clear.

With a recent Science and Technology Committee report acknowledging that debates around GMOs have largely been dominated by values and politics rather than science, it is crucial that as we search for solutions to the problem of food security, decisions are informed by the best possible evidence. Ecology has an important role to play, looking beyond GMOs to broader agro-ecological solutions.

There is more agreement on the need to tackle climate change than on how this should be done

There was broad agreement that tackling climate change is a pressing concern, with Lord de Mauley, Natalie Bennett and Eilidh Whiteford highlighting it as one of their personal priorities, and only William Cash questioning the wisdom of carbon emissions targets. Yet on the detail of whether fossil fuel extraction – such as fracking – should still be supported by government, the panel remained split. While Lord de Mauley saw fracking as a “cleaner” source of fossil fuels, and William Cash favoured its use over windfarms, Natalie Bennett accused the Government of pursuing a “fracking fantasy”, and called for a total ban. Eilidh Whiteford and Barry Gardiner both supported a moratorium on the practice before certain conditions were met.

A landscape scale approach to tackling biodiversity loss is required

In line with the increasing recognition of the value of our natural capital, the panel was mostly convinced that a landscape approach to species and habitat protection is the way forward. Barry Gardiner appealed to the principles of former BES President Professor Sir John Lawton's *Making Space for Nature* report: “bigger, better and more joined up”. Lord de Mauley echoed this view, and pointed to the Government's progress in this area, asserting, perhaps optimistically, that the target to halt biodiversity loss by 2020 could be met. While Labour and the Conservatives did not outline specific policies for how this would be done, both Natalie Bennett and Kate Parminter committed their parties to introducing new legislation – a Nature Act – if elected, whilst also affirming the importance of upholding the European Birds and Habitats Directives (currently under review by the European Commission – see the article in the March 2015 *Bulletin* by Ben Connor, for details).



Photograph courtesy of Jason Reeves

Most parties do not favour a ban on grouse shooting

Grouse shooting, and the illegal persecution of hen harriers and other birds of prey associated with it, has proved a recent hot topic amongst conservationists. Natalie Bennett was the only panellist to commit her party to banning grouse shooting altogether. Barry Gardiner stated that Labour would end the illegal persecution of raptors and ban lead shot, whilst the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives pledged to work with rural businesses to stamp out illegal practices, whilst also acknowledging the economic benefits of shooting. Research by ecologists has suggested new approaches to resolve long-running conflicts between grouse shooters and conservationists and may offer a starting point in addressing this thorny problem.

Looking ahead: to the General Election and Beyond

As the post-election dust settles, many of these issues will be high on the priority list of the new Environment Secretary as he or she settles into post following the election. And in all of these issues, ecological science has an essential role to play. Within the BES External Affairs Team we have identified three ambitions for good environmental policy-making over the term of the next Parliament (Box 2): *environmental policy informed by sound scientific evidence; recognising the vital role of ecological science in meeting societal challenges; and integrating the value of the environment to human wellbeing and prosperity across government.*

Over the next few months, as part of the BES's new Strategic Plan, we will be fleshing out our policy priority issues for the next Government, underpinned by the three key principles outlined above. Regardless of who is elected, we will seek to ensure that sound science is placed at the heart of decision-making for the environment. We will continue to promote the solutions and insights that ecological science can offer to address pressing challenges from biodiversity conservation to food security, and in order to do this we will be developing case studies and resources demonstrating the impact of ecology.

Finally, with our partners in the Natural Capital Initiative, we will further develop the case for decision-making for the sustainable management of natural capital based on sound science.

BOX 2

The British Ecological Society's priorities for environmental policy-making for the next Parliament are:

1. That environmental policy is informed by sound scientific evidence, and that policy-makers have access to the best available ecological science to inform decision-making. The British Ecological Society is an independent, authoritative learned society committed to presenting scientific evidence in an objective and unbiased way.
2. That ecological science is valued for the vital role it has to play in meeting some of the most important challenges of the 21st century. The UK's universities and research institutes are home to world-leading ecological science that helps us to predict the consequences of human activity on the environment and the importance of the environment for human welfare.
3. That the value of the environment to human wellbeing and prosperity – our natural capital – is recognised across government. Protecting and enhancing the UK's natural capital is essential for securing a sustainable economy and society, and the environment must be fully

YOUR HELP IS VITAL

Our policy work depends on the support and expertise of our members. Get in touch to let us know what you think the key environmental policy issues should be for the new Government, or register your interests and expertise on the BES website to stay informed as we develop our priorities.

Find out more about the BES's policy work at www.britishecologicalsociety.org/public-policy/.

Watch the full video from “People, Politics and the Planet – Any Questions” at www.britishecologicalsociety.org/public-policy/policy-events/2015-events/environmental-question-time/