

HOW GREEN ARE OUR PARTIES? THE GREEN STANDARD REPORT



GREENPEACE



THE NATIONAL TRUST

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This assessment has been conducted by CPRE, Friends of the Earth, Green Alliance, Greenpeace, National Trust, RSPB, The Wildlife Trusts, Woodland Trust and WWF.

Published by Green Alliance, September 2007
Printed by Park Lane Press
© Green Alliance 2007
£5
978-1-905869-06-0

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This assessment has been conducted by the UK's leading environment groups. It goes beyond the environmental beauty contest of party political debate at Westminster, and examines the ambitions, actions and commitments of the three main political parties. Our aim has been to strip away the rhetoric and offer a robust account of where the parties stand in relation to a set of challenges that will define the 21st century.

We welcome the prominence that the three main parties are now giving to the environment. We welcome the urgency in the language and aspirations of all three parties in relation to climate change, and in particular, the shift that this represents in relation to Labour and the Conservatives. But we are seriously concerned that all three parties are still showing far less interest in the protection and enhancement of the countryside and biodiversity, and their importance to people.

Our analysis has left us disappointed by the disconnect in many, but not all, areas between the parties' aspirations and the limited proposals for action put forward to date. In our view no mainstream party is yet providing consistent leadership to match the breadth or the urgency of the challenge our society faces. We recognise that all three parties are on a journey in this area. But for all our sakes they need to accelerate the pace of change. People are looking for and need leadership which delivers.

This assessment is based on The Green Standard, a set of six robust environmental leadership tests launched in February this year. The report uses a traffic light system to score the parties against these tests: green to indicate support for both their ambition and commitments; amber to indicate a mixed picture in relation to their ambition and commitments; and red in areas where we are very concerned by both the effect of a party's approach and a lack of positive commitments.

CONSERVATIVE PARTY

David Cameron's Conservatives have given the environmental cause a profile greater than it has enjoyed for many years, and put pressure on the government to deliver. But even on climate change they still have very few policy positions, and there is therefore currently insufficient ground for confidence that they would deliver in government. The position is similar on the broader environmental agenda, where they are rhetorically strong but lack clear commitments to deliver on their aspirations. Given the stark gap between their ambition in many areas and the limited number of Conservative policy positions on the environment they have not received any green lights in this assessment.

We have followed with interest the party's policy review process, and recognise that at this stage in the political cycle no opposition party will have definitive policy positions in all areas. But considerable uncertainty surrounds the future direction of Conservative policy on the environment. The Quality of Life Commission led by John Gummer and Zac Goldsmith has attracted most attention, but the Competitiveness Commission headed by John Redwood is equally significant and offers very different analysis and recommendations to those we are expecting from the Quality of Life group.

LABOUR PARTY

Labour deserves much credit for its international leadership on climate change. Very few other countries have done as much as the UK. But a change in prime minister has not changed the significant disconnect between this and domestic action on climate change. The Labour government, despite displaying international leadership on climate change, is failing on its carbon emission reduction and renewables targets. And it has not taken a consistently positive or ambitious approach to the natural environment agenda, for example, so far failing to introduce a long-promised marine bill.

The government's planning proposals and changes to regional government are damaging to both their climate change aspirations and the natural environment. The last budget was one of the greenest put forward by Gordon Brown as chancellor, but much more is needed given the decline since 1997 in green taxes as a proportion of tax revenue. Labour therefore only receives one green light.

LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

The Liberal Democrats have received three green lights by offering the strongest set of policies on climate change, green taxation and green living. They have delivered the most substantive policy commitments, even though their leadership has not been as high profile on the environment as that of the Conservatives. But like all the parties, they have failed to give sufficient attention to policies that will protect and enhance our countryside and wildlife.




The Liberal Democrats' proposals for domestic and international action on climate change mitigation are in our view uniquely consistent with the urgency of this challenge. They have also embraced green taxes in a way not done by the other parties. But their approach to the broader environmental agenda is far less impressive. On planning and the natural environment, the Liberal Democrats are either uninterested, out of tune with our aspirations, or lack clear commitments to act.

Environmental issues present profound challenges for this generation of politicians. In the run up to the next General Election, we challenge the parties to be bolder and to convert the areas where we have scored them red and amber into green. The parties' performances in relation to our tests are not static and our assessment represents a snapshot of where they stand at this moment in time. There is considerable scope for improvement and we hope that all parties will work to embrace and deliver on the challenges we have set out.

Tackling issues like climate change will require all government departments and every level of government to play their full part. Only strong political leadership will drive the change that is needed across government and lead a collective effort on the scale necessary to bring about a sustainable lifestyle for all. We need leaders with the courage to take action today. If they do not, businesses and individuals cannot play their full part. We will redouble our efforts to encourage politicians of all parties, businesses and the general public to accelerate the transition to a sustainable society that operates within environmental limits.

THE GREEN STANDARD: TESTS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP

KEY Our assessment uses a traffic light system to score the parties' policies and direction of travel:

-  green We are pleased with both the party's ambition and their commitments
-  amber We see positive elements, but without sufficient clarity on either the party's ambition and/or commitments to deliver
-  red We are very concerned by the potential effect of the party's approach, and the lack of positive commitments

UK ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Achieve reductions in UK carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions of at least three per cent year on year, en route to a low-carbon economy based on energy efficiency, renewable sources of energy and decentralised energy.

CONSERVATIVE PARTY LABOUR PARTY LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

		
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INTERNATIONAL ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Provide international leadership to restrict global temperature rises to 2°C and ensure worldwide emissions are falling by 2015.

		
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GREEN LIVING

Make it cheaper and easier for individuals to reduce their environmental impact through tax, regulation, information and other powers of government.

		
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NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Protect and enhance the beauty, accessibility and wildlife of the environment in our countryside, towns and seas through incentives, regulation, investment and other powers of government.

		
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PLANNING

Value, support and develop our planning system as a democratic tool for protecting and enhancing the natural and built environment of our countryside and towns.

		
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ENVIRONMENTAL TAX AND SUBSIDIES

Green the tax system by increasing the amount of revenue from taxes that reduce environmental damage, and eliminate environmentally perverse subsidies.

		
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INTRODUCTION

The responsibility for developing new ways to live and prosper – ways that do no harm to the environment – is shared by government at all levels, and by business, civil society groups and individuals. As environment NGOs we recognise our own responsibilities, and will do more to mobilise the public into playing their full part. But only national government can lead a collective effort on the scale necessary to create a sustainable society and a sustainable lifestyle for all.

This subject can be fired in the first place by political debate and action. As a group of leading UK environmental groups we have come together to highlight the primary challenges that any political party needs to grasp to be credible on the environment. We launched The Green Standard: Tests for environmental leadership in February this year.

Our agenda begins with climate change. This is the most pressing threat facing the global community, with potentially devastating impacts on our economies, societies and the natural world. These impacts are already being felt at home.¹ Acting now to prevent uncontrollable changes in global temperatures and to adapt to unavoidable climate change is paramount. Protection and enhancement of our countryside and wildlife is also of prime importance, both in the face of climate change, and because they are deeply valued by society and embedded in our culture and values.

The electorate is making it increasingly clear that they want effective action.² We urge all parties to seize the moment and adopt an approach that is fit for the future.

ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

This is our first assessment of the parties' performances against The Green Standard. We plan to publish at least one further assessment before the next General Election.

Our assessment has focused on the existing commitments of each party, their actions and policy commitments, rather than their aspirations and speeches. We have also taken into account each party's overall approach and consistency on these issues, the degree to which they have demonstrated leadership and the extent to which we are confident of their ability and commitment to deliver on proposed policies and aspirations.

Nine leading environment groups have conducted this assessment and support its conclusions. We recognise that in part this is a subjective exercise, but we have done our utmost to rate the parties consistently and by reference to their actual positions. This report sets out our judgement on where the parties stand and where they are going in relation to a set of issues we believe are critical.

We are grateful to each of the three parties for the information that they supplied to feed in to this assessment, and the appearance of the environment spokespersons from each party at the launch of the initiative.

We have focused on the parties' records since the 2005 General Election. The scope of our assessment is focused on Westminster, and does not include parties or actions by the devolved administrations or in local government.

For each of the tests we have assessed the parties' policies and direction of travel using traffic light categories: green indicating that we are pleased with both the party's ambition and their commitments; amber indicating we see positive elements, but there is insufficient clarity on ambition and/or commitments to deliver; and red that we are very concerned by the potential effect of the party's approach, and lack of positive commitments.

In undertaking this assessment we have sought to design a process that is as fair to a party likely to be forming a government, as it is to one that is likely to be in opposition. We recognise that in some respects the party of government is in the hardest position to deliver against our tests, as unlike the opposition parties they will be judged on the basis of their actions and commitments, rather than just their commitments. Readers may wish to consider for themselves whether our tests would have been easier for some parties to meet than others.

CONSERVATIVE PARTY



AT A GLANCE

David Cameron has made the environment a priority of his leadership, and a defining centrepiece of his project to transform the Conservative Party. Positive highlights include the focus on the environment in the 2006 local elections (“vote blue, go green”), the campaign for a climate change bill³ and the recent speech by David Cameron on biodiversity.⁴ These have contributed to a significant increase in the profile of the environment across the political spectrum and have raised public awareness of the issues.

But disappointingly, the Conservatives have so far failed to provide solutions to match. Largely due to the timing of the party’s policy review process, there have been few substantive policy changes or commitments to date. In the absence of policy positions, we cannot be confident that the Conservative Party would deliver in government.

DIRECTION OF TRAVEL

The Conservative Party is in the process of redefining its priorities. The party’s policy review process is in its final stages, with the outcome expected early in the new year. We recognise that to date, actual policy commitments have been constrained by this process. We also accept that at this stage in the political cycle opposition parties do not have definite policies in every area. Both these factors mean that the Conservative Party have markedly few policy commitments, and uncertainty surrounds the future direction of their policy on the environment.

The Quality of Life Commission, led by John Gummer and Zac Goldsmith, has been the home for the environment in the policy process. But all six policy commissions are relevant in some way. John Redwood’s Competitiveness Commission is particularly important, and there are expected to be some profound conflicts between the recommendations of the two groups. The test of the Conservative Party’s approach is not the Quality of Life Commission report, but the response to this and the other

five policy commissions, including whether they commit to far-reaching policies on the environment in their election manifesto. This will enable us to draw firm conclusions on the likely impact of the party’s approach to the environment.

The Conservatives will need greater substance on the environment in order to maintain their environmental credentials. Expectations have been raised by their focus on the environment, which now need to be matched by policy commitments.



UK ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

The Conservatives have played a leading role in the political debate around climate change over the past 18 months and have been instrumental in getting the government to introduce the climate change bill. Their own climate change bill, published in summer 2006, is based on achieving at least a 60 per cent reduction in carbon dioxide emissions by 2050.⁵ They also support annual rolling targets.⁶ A more recent paper by Nick Hurd MP, convenor of the Quality of Life Commission’s climate change working group, called for a reduction of at least 80 per cent by 2050.⁷ It is imperative that the Conservatives fully commit to supporting the inclusion of aviation and shipping in the climate change bill and the need for an 80 per cent carbon dioxide reduction target.

The Conservatives have so far failed to put forward concrete policies that would deliver against the targets identified in their proposed climate change bill. They have outlined a number of proposals: a carbon levy, to replace the climate change levy; a cap and trade scheme for the electricity generation sector; a series of bold measures to tackle aviation, outlined in their *Greener skies* consultation;⁸ a general commitment to an increase in green taxes replacing tax cuts elsewhere in the economy; support for microgeneration and a move towards a more decentralised energy system; and a general commitment to carbon pricing.

But none of these are firm policies yet and some, such as the proposal for a second cap and trade scheme to cover electricity generation, do not appear to have been fully thought through.⁹

The Quality of Life Commission report is expected to make a comprehensive set of recommendations for domestic action to tackle climate change. We look forward to considering these. But they are not the only relevant recommendations from the policy process. We are extremely concerned by many of the proposals in the

Competitiveness Commission report, which are at odds with the commitment to tackling climate change.¹⁰ These include support for increasing road building and airport expansion, opposition to a higher carbon price, and proposals for a £1.4 billion reduction in the cost of regulation without a single reference to the role of environmental regulation.

We were concerned that shadow chancellor George Osborne defended criticism of the environmental implications of the report as “very unfair”, claiming, “there is plenty in the report on climate change and the environment”.¹¹



INTERNATIONAL ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

The Conservatives have consistently expressed support for the development of the next phase of the Kyoto Protocol, and have welcomed the important decisions on climate change at the 2007 European Spring Council.¹² They have also expressed support for strengthening the EU emissions trading scheme, and for the establishment of a global emissions trading scheme.¹³

However, they have to date offered no substantive explanation of their vision for a new international agreement, or the diplomatic means by which they would seek to secure agreement on this vision. As we move towards meaningful negotiations, this is a critical issue.

Europe is the key player in that negotiation. Europe is the one significant global player that has been consistently supportive in principle of securing that agreement, and collective action by the key European countries will be critical to securing a new international agreement. In our view, the Conservatives’ desire for a significant reduction in the role of the European Union, and their decision to establish a new political grouping outside the European People’s Party, would weaken their relationships and influence in European international negotiations.



GREEN LIVING

The Conservative approach to the role of government in behaviour change is uncertain. On the one hand, social responsibility and quality of life appear to be cornerstones of modern Conservatism. David Cameron has stated in speeches and elsewhere that government must establish a framework for action,

incentivising green behaviour by taxing the bad and rewarding the good.¹⁴ However, this appears to be in conflict with strong rhetorical support for a smaller, less interventionist state.¹⁵ The critical issue we have therefore focused on in assessing their position is their approach to recent government initiatives in this area. The Conservatives have opposed important measures aimed at changing behaviour, such as Home Information Packs and financial incentives for recycling and waste prevention.¹⁶

The apparent conflict is captured in a quote from David Cameron’s speech at last year’s Conservative conference: “We need to understand that cultural change is worth any number of government initiatives. Who has done more to improve school food, Jamie Oliver, or the Department of Education? Put another way, we need more of supernanny and less of the nanny state”.¹⁷

This characterises an approach that underplays the role of government leadership in helping individuals change their behaviour and act in a socially responsible way. We are concerned by the potential implications of this for the Conservatives’ willingness to help bring about a more sustainable lifestyle for all. Transport choices are a classic and highly visible example of the critical role of government action in determining whether green living choices are available and financially attractive to individuals. But the role of government in enabling individuals to act is no less critical in many other elements of individual behaviour.



NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Conservative policy in this area is not yet clearly defined. But there have been some developments that we welcome. *Built to last*, which sets out the Conservative Party’s values and aims, states: “We believe that there is more to life than money; that the beauty of our surroundings, the quality of our relationships and the sustainability of our environment are central in building a strong and just society”.¹⁸ David Cameron’s speech on biodiversity earlier this year was also extremely encouraging, as was Oliver Letwin’s speech on beauty, which offered a compelling and thoughtful perspective on the importance of beauty to our quality of life.¹⁹ These speeches and statements show personal commitment, demonstrate political leadership and provide a strong intellectual foundation for future policy. But we are disappointed by the lack of substantive policy commitments to back them up.

We strongly welcome the Conservatives’ active support for a marine bill.²⁰ The recent consultation on forests²¹ and the establishment of a biodiversity policy review are also positive.

But there remains considerable uncertainty over the future direction of Conservative Party policy in this area. The party needs to commit to policies that will protect and enhance the natural environment in our countryside, towns and seas, such as measures to facilitate climate change adaptation. There also appears to be conflict, as in other areas, between John Redwood's Competitiveness Commission and the Quality of Life Commission's expected recommendations on road building, airport expansion and planning controls.

See also comment on CAP in the green tax section below

amber

PLANNING

The Conservatives' approach to planning is framed by their opposition to the government's planning white paper.²² Whilst we welcome strong opposition to the proposed reforms, we would also like to see greater recognition of planning as a positive tool for sustainable development. At present the party's overarching concerns appear to be about the erosion of local democracy and the creation of a powerful, democratically unaccountable body to make major planning decisions.²³

In a recent speech on the threats to biodiversity and green space, David Cameron said that "local authorities have to recognise the consequences of their planning decisions".²⁴ This is emblematic of the Conservatives' wider approach to planning, which emphasises the potentially damaging role of planning decisions on the natural environment but fails to sufficiently acknowledge its role as a vital tool for protecting and enhancing the natural environment and the quality of the urban experience. We would like to see the Conservatives take a more proactive and positive approach to planning. Conservative support for in-town development and recognition of the role of beauty in the built and natural environment shows some developing awareness and recognition of this role.²⁵

amber

ENVIRONMENTAL TAX AND SUBSIDIES

We have been very encouraged by the Conservatives' apparent shift in approach to green taxes over the past year. In particular, we welcome George Osborne's commitment in August 2006 to raise green taxes.²⁶ We also welcome the commitment to a system of carbon pricing across the economy, employing a range of methods from emissions trading to tax and incentives, and support for complete

transformation of the common agricultural policy away from production subsidies towards environmental payments.²⁷

But we are concerned by the lack of policy detail underpinning these overarching commitments. Other than the pledge to replace the climate change levy with a carbon levy there has been little on how these commitments will be achieved. And without substantive policies we are unable to assess how much green taxes would increase as a proportion of overall taxation.

The policy ideas in the *Greener skies* consultation, launched in March this year, would represent a big step in the right direction.²⁸ They included replacing air passenger duty with a per-flight tax based more closely on actual carbon emissions, and introducing a 'green air miles allowance' so that people who fly more frequently would pay tax at a higher rate. Reforming the tax system to reflect the real environmental cost of transport is crucial, never more so than in tackling air travel. The Conservatives deserve credit for their consultation, which broke the political logjam on a critical issue where politicians too often ignore the environmental implications.

But we still remain uncertain about whether any of these measures will be adopted, pending the outcome of the policy review process. We are concerned about whether there is sufficient wider support in the party for the proposed green tax shift. Reconciling the recommendations of the Quality of Life Commission with those of John Redwood's Competitiveness Commission will be a fundamental test.

LABOUR PARTY



AT A GLANCE

Labour, and in particular the former Prime Minister Tony Blair, deserve much credit for their international leadership on climate change. Very few countries have done as much as the UK. But their record at home does not bear comparison, with carbon emissions higher today than in 1997. The draft climate change bill is ground-breaking, and welcome.²⁹ But we want the bill to incorporate targets consistent with the science of climate change. Most worrying in our view, is that Labour's domestic policies will not deliver even the current emissions objectives outlined in the bill.

Behaviour change by individuals and businesses is central to meeting these targets. But government leadership is critical to making that happen. We welcome recent moves to enable the public to adapt their behaviour in ways that reduce their environmental impact, despite resistance in some instances. But much more can be achieved in this area. The same is true in relation to taxation. The last budget was one of the greenest put forward by Gordon Brown as chancellor. But in overall terms Labour has not made the most of the opportunity presented by green tax reform.

Beyond the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), Labour seems indifferent to public concern for the natural environment, countryside and wildlife. The government's planning proposals, house building programme and changes to regional decision-making processes are of particular concern here.

DIRECTION OF TRAVEL

Labour's approach and commitments are evolving, just like those of the opposition parties. This assessment focuses on Labour's approach and commitments, as we understand them today, rather than on Labour's overall record since 1997. As the party in power, we recognise that in some respects Labour is in the hardest position to deliver against our tests, as unlike the opposition parties they will be judged on the basis of their actions and commitments, rather than just their commitments.

The last years of the Blair premiership saw a determined drive to re-energise international debate on climate change, with considerable success.³⁰ It is too early to tell whether the new prime minister will want to sustain and accelerate that effort. But the disconnect between the government's international and domestic approach to climate change appears just as serious under Gordon Brown.

On the natural environment, we see alarming evidence that Prime Minister Brown's government is less concerned about these issues than his predecessor. It is still early days, but we are seriously concerned by proposals in the planning white paper, changes to English regional governance and the continuing delay in the introduction of the long-promised marine bill.



UK ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

The Labour government has committed to introducing a climate change bill, which will include targets to cut carbon dioxide emissions by 60 per cent by 2050, with an interim target of a 26–32 per cent cut by 2020.³¹ The bill would make the UK the first country in the world to have a legal framework for managing the transition to a low carbon economy. Labour is not committed to annual targets, and there is no indication that it will commit to going beyond the 60 per cent reduction.

The government has a comprehensive package of policies and measures aimed at delivering their targets. There have been some successes, in energy efficiency for example,³² but UK emissions continue to rise and the government has admitted it is not on course to meet the 2010 carbon dioxide reduction.³³ Clearly, the package is not delivering.

Overall, the government's approach to domestic action on climate change has been timid and has lacked political leadership. We would like to see a clear plan as to how the 2020 and 2050 targets will be met, as we are concerned that the government has failed to introduce the policies needed to reach these long-term objectives. The measures in the recently published energy white paper only do enough to get to the lower end of the 2020 target with some heroic assumptions about what they will deliver.³⁴ The government is failing on its renewables targets,³⁵ and plans for airport expansion in the aviation white paper, road building programmes and new coal-fired power stations threaten to undermine progress elsewhere.³⁶ More is needed, and urgently.

green

INTERNATIONAL ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

The UK government has been leading the international debate on climate change. The Labour government has driven the debate at the G8 and within the EU, initially by making climate change a top priority for the UK's presidencies of both in 2005. It has led the way in forging international agreements, and has played a key role in trying to keep the United States engaged and re-invigorating the UN process.³⁷ The G8 initiative and the Stern review have both contributed to restoring climate change to its rightful place as a heads of government issue, and action through the EU and UN since then has helped to create further momentum. The UK played a significant role in securing agreement on an important package of targets and proposals for action at the 2007 EU Spring Council.

But we have two concerns. Firstly, the government has stated its position as being to limit global warming to 2°C above pre-industrial levels. It is interpreting this as meaning that atmospheric levels of carbon dioxide need to stabilise at 450-550ppm. Most of the scientific evidence is that levels of carbon dioxide need to stabilise at near 400ppm if we are to stand any chance of limiting warming to 2°C.³⁸ Secondly, recent evidence has indicated that the government is looking for ways to roll back from the commitments it has made at the Spring Council this year, particularly on renewables.³⁹

amber

GREEN LIVING

In the past year, Labour has performed better than any previous government in its effort to make it cheaper and easier for people to reduce their environmental impacts. David Miliband deserves credit for the steps he took while he was at Defra to alter both government communication and policy to support behaviour change.⁴⁰ But there is still a reluctance to use tax, regulation and other powers of government to make green choices easier. In order to achieve a major and extensive change in people's behaviour, the government must give greater recognition and priority to its role in facilitating that shift, in particular in the areas of transport and existing housing stock.

There has been action in some areas: the ambitious commitment to zero carbon new homes by 2016; progress towards financial incentives for recycling and waste prevention;⁴¹ increases in domestic recycling and composting;⁴² the Market Transformation Programme; the recent 'Act on CO₂' advertising campaign; and proposals to increase water metering. But overall, progress has not gone far enough.

Addressing the sustainability of housing is a crucial starting point. We welcome recognition of this in initiatives such as the Code for Sustainable Homes, and the commitment to zero carbon new homes by 2016. But measures are desperately needed to ensure that the very large number of new homes that are built before new building regulations come into effect are built to high environmental standards.

The energy efficiency commitment has been the principal driver for improving the energy efficiency of existing homes in the UK. But despite this investment, tackling existing stock has been a critical gap in the government's efforts to address climate change. Given that existing stock will comprise around two thirds of housing in 2050 significant progress is needed.⁴³

Finally, as set out in the green tax section below, the failure to stem the relative rise in public transport costs as compared to motoring is of particular concern. Significantly more action is needed to make public transport a cheaper and more attractive option.

amber

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Despite some positive developments, overall we have been disappointed by Labour's progress in this area since the last election. The natural environment has not been a priority, as compared with other environmental issues such as climate change. Gordon Brown has never made claim to being instinctively green, and since becoming prime minister he has done little to suggest the natural environment is an agenda he cares about. The government's appreciation of the importance of beautiful landscapes, diverse wildlife and access to green space to people's well-being must be strengthened.

Progress has been limited, but there have been positive developments in some areas: the creation of Natural England; the development of an eco-systems action plan;⁴⁴ the decision to expand agri-environment funding, which whilst not doing so to the maximum available, some progress has been made; a continuing commitment to the South Downs National Park; and consideration being given to extending access to the coast which, if done sensitively, will help people further their enjoyment of the natural environment.⁴⁵

But action has not gone nearly far enough, and threatens to be overshadowed by developments such as the planning white paper, which will significantly downgrade the importance of planning as a tool for environmental protection. In addition, the publication of the marine bill white paper was a significant step forward, but failure

to commit time for a marine bill in the draft 2007–08 legislative programme is a bitter disappointment.

As the effects of climate change are starting to be felt at home,⁴⁶ the need to implement a robust and fully funded adaptation programme to ensure that wildlife is resilient to the effects of climate change is imperative. This is starting to be recognised, for example, in the new *Strategy for England's trees, woods and forests*.⁴⁷ But too often initiatives on climate change tend to overlook adaptation, as is the case with the climate change bill which barely acknowledges it. There is a long way to go, and we are short of time.

See also comments on CAP in the green taxes section below



PLANNING

We have consistently been supportive in principle of efforts to improve the planning system as a tool for sustainable development. But Labour's recent proposals⁴⁸ seem designed to diminish the significance of our primary objectives for the planning system. With a heavy focus on promoting economic development and competitiveness, the proposed reforms characterise environmental considerations as a constraint on development, rather than ensuring that the system secures environmental protection and promotes sustainable development.

Labour's reforms also threaten to diminish the planning system's democratic basis and transparency. Planning at its best should be a democratic and participative process. Proposals to establish an unelected commission to make decisions on major infrastructure and leave the examination process to its discretion are significant moves in an unfavourable direction.

This is compounded by changes to regional government.⁴⁹ Making regional development agencies (RDAs) the regional planning authorities will decrease the democratic basis of planning, and further prioritise economic interests at the expense of the environment. The RDAs have democratically unaccountable boards, a weak remit for sustainable development and a single minded focus on economic development.

Reform of the planning system is a key opportunity to embed sustainable development in the planning system, ensuring that climate change and environmental protection are core considerations when allowing development. Missing this opportunity, whilst watering down the system's openness and

democratic accountability, leaves us with concern that Labour's approach will see planning become a barrier rather than an aid to environmental goals, and diminish public engagement in planning decisions.



ENVIRONMENTAL TAX AND SUBSIDIES

Overall, the government has been timid in its approach to greening the tax system. Lack of innovation, dynamism and impetus has meant we have seen few creative or significant measures to reduce environmentally damaging activity or behaviour.

The proportion of government revenue derived from environmental taxes has fallen since Labour came to power, because of a reluctance to use the potential of the UK tax regime to reduce environmental damage. But this assessment focuses on progress since the 2005 General Election, and the last budget was the best for some years. Increasing the landfill tax escalator from three pounds per year to eight pounds, raising aviation taxation and increasing fuel duty were important steps. But they did not go far enough.

Transport in particular is an area where Labour needs new policies. This means maintaining a fuel duty escalator and further and better taxes on aviation. In real terms, the cost of public transport has actually risen by comparison to travel by car, and this must be addressed.⁵⁰

The government does support further reform of the common agricultural policy (CAP), but the environmental dimension has not been given sufficient attention. There is a need for a stronger commitment to a fully reformed CAP, which supports environmental enhancement.

LIBERAL DEMOCRATS



AT A GLANCE

The Liberal Democrats have scored well against the majority of our tests for environmental leadership. The party has clearly grasped the challenge of climate change mitigation and has developed an ambitious set of policies to address it. Green living and greening the tax system are also areas where the party's record and commitments deserve credit. The ambitious proposals set out in *Zero carbon Britain: taking a global lead* published in August this year, offer a bold and far-reaching strategy, which accords with the scale of the climate change challenge we face.⁵¹ The little media attention the report received when published did not do justice to its significance.

But, as with other parties, there are specific factors at play here. We acknowledge that the much lower prospect of a Liberal Democrat government provides them with greater freedom to develop policy commitments.

We have serious concerns about the Liberal Democrats' policies on the natural environment and planning. We would like to see the party's leadership on climate change mitigation extended to cover adaptation, in particular measures to ensure the environment has sufficient resilience and wildlife has the flexibility to adapt to the changes resulting from climate change. The Liberal Democrats have failed to tackle these challenges with the same sense of urgency and priority. In these areas they are often either uninterested, out of tune with our aspirations, or lack clear commitments to act.

DIRECTION OF TRAVEL

Based on past record and commitment we are confident that the package of climate change measures in *Zero carbon Britain* will be adopted at this year's party conference. If this is achieved, it will put the Liberal Democrats firmly ahead of the Conservatives and Labour on domestic climate change policy. But the Liberal Democrats need to move beyond climate change in order to be credible against

all our tests. We would like to see a greater focus on the natural environment at a leadership level, and for the Liberal Democrats to put this issue at the heart of their environmental challenge to the government and other parties.



UK ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Of the three main parties, the Liberal Democrats have the strongest set of policies and commitments for domestic action on climate change. Current Liberal Democrat policy (adopted in Autumn 2006) is to reduce the UK's carbon dioxide emissions by a minimum of 60 per cent by 2050.⁵² This is to be supported by a series of annual targets subject to parliamentary scrutiny. The Liberal Democrats are currently considering moving to a target of 100 per cent reduction by 2050, as set out in *Zero carbon Britain*.⁵³

The present commitment to a 60 per cent carbon dioxide emissions reduction by 2050 is backed up by a strong package of policies and measures. This includes their 'Green tax switch' – increasing taxes on carbon emissions and other resource use and cutting income tax;⁵⁴ support for a sustainable energy strategy based on energy demand reduction, greater energy efficiency, combined heat and power, small scale energy and other measures; and a target for renewables to contribute 20 per cent to the electricity mix by 2020 to be delivered by strengthening the renewables obligation and introducing a similar obligation to promote renewable heat.⁵⁵

These measures look set to be significantly strengthened if the radical proposals in *Zero carbon Britain* are, as we expect, accepted at this year's annual conference. The Liberal Democrats' plans are comprehensive and far-reaching, covering all of the main sectors of the economy, including transport, housing, energy, offices and factories, which they claim will transform Britain into a carbon neutral country by 2050. Proposals include: a target for 30 per cent of the UK's electricity to come from clean, non-carbon emitting sources by 2020, rising to 100 per cent by 2050; feed-in tariffs to encourage renewables; and a limit on runway capacity to its current level.⁵⁶



INTERNATIONAL ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Recent statements by Chris Huhne, shadow environment secretary, have indicated that the Liberal Democrats support the need to limit warming to 2°C above pre-industrial levels, that this means stabilisation of emission levels below 450ppm,⁵⁷ and that a 60 per cent cut by 2050 will not be enough. *Zero carbon Britain* confirms this.⁵⁸

The Liberal Democrats' proposed strategy on international action, as outlined in a *Zero carbon Britain*, is based on the EU implementing a 30 per cent greenhouse gas emissions reduction target, a continuation of the current international multilateral climate regime beyond 2012, and continued engagement with countries currently outside the Kyoto Protocol, specifically Australia and the US. The foundation stone of their approach is the concept of contraction and convergence. This is a laudable approach, particularly the recognition of the need for the EU to commit to a 30 per cent reduction target. However, given the resistance of a number of key countries to the concept of contraction and convergence a strategy based exclusively around this is unlikely to be successful.



GREEN LIVING

The Liberal Democrats appear to recognise the fundamental role of government to set a framework to enable greener choices by individuals, which is central to our test on green living. This is especially true in relation to climate change: the 'Green tax switch' contains a clear and comprehensive set of policies aimed at changing individual behaviour on climate change.⁵⁹ We also welcome the Liberal Democrats support for financial incentives for recycling and waste prevention.⁶⁰

The Liberal Democrats are also likely to accept further policy proposals at this year's annual conference, as part of their *Zero carbon Britain* package. These proposals include measures to significantly improve the sustainability of transport and housing infrastructure, in order to enable people to lead lower-carbon lives: introducing green mortgages; bringing forward the date from which all new homes should be zero carbon to 2011; and a 'Future transport fund' to build a high speed rail line and back rail improvements.⁶¹



NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

This is a weak area for the Liberal Democrats. Our concern is as much about the lack of attention given to this agenda as it is about the content of policy positions. The party's overriding environmental concern is climate change. This is obviously a valid priority, but it appears to be to the neglect of other issues, such as the protection and enhancement of our wildlife, countryside, towns and seas. Given the party's leadership on climate change and understanding of farming and land management issues, we are disappointed by the lack of attention given to facilitating climate change adaptation of our countryside and wildlife.

However, we recognise and welcome the party's support for a marine bill and opposition to the continued delay in introducing the legislation. The party also has some good policies on water, for example those set out in the 'Sustainable management of water resources' motion, which was passed at last year's annual conference.⁶²

But in general, the Liberal Democrats lack a coherent and progressive agenda on the natural environment. The July 2007 statement on rural policy *A fair future for rural England* reaffirms the party's policy commitments in this area, which appear dated.⁶³ The Liberal Democrats have failed to grasp some critical contemporary challenges facing the natural environment.

See also comments on CAP in the green taxes section below



PLANNING

The Liberal Democrats clear strength, from our perspective, is their support for a democratic planning system. Their support for local decision-making and improving the democratic credibility of the planning system is the focus of their opposition to the government's proposed reforms. But in our view the party's opposition has not been loud enough, has failed to put enough emphasis on the downgrading of the environment and contrasts with their lack of clear and coherent criticism of current plans to accelerate major infrastructure projects.

We welcome the party's recognition that "sustainability must be at the heart of planning policy" and that it cannot focus solely on economic goals, but we are disappointed by the lack of detail backing up this statement.⁶⁴ We would like

to see a system that positively plans for sustainable development and urge the Liberal Democrat's to articulate their position more thoroughly and move beyond their focus on planning's role in regenerating towns and cities. They have made mention of planning's ability to enhance the built environment and environmental performance but need to think more widely and be more vocal and more ambitious in their vision of what a sustainable planning system will look like – especially in the face of proposed reforms which are moving in the opposite direction.

green

ENVIRONMENTAL TAX AND SUBSIDIES

The Liberal Democrats have grasped the potential benefits of green taxation for the economy and the environment more wholeheartedly than either of the other main parties.

The 'Green tax switch' became Liberal Democrat policy following a vote at the 2006 annual conference.⁶⁵ The package of measures is aimed at shifting the tax burden from taxes on income to taxes on polluting behaviour. The package includes commitments to: a more steeply graduating vehicle excise duty for new vehicles based on carbon emissions; index fuel duty to inflation except in periods of oil price spikes; replace air passenger duty with an aircraft duty based on the emissions of each aircraft; and to restructure the climate change levy as a tax on carbon across the economy.

Moreover, green tax proposals were at the heart of a series of policy announcements this summer, which form part of the *Zero carbon Britain* package. They include measures such as charging a climate change levy on domestic flights, taxing more polluting cars more heavily and tolls on road freight. The package offers a range of mechanisms, from feed-in tariffs for renewables to carbon taxes, to put a price on carbon across the economy.⁶⁶ Based on current policies and long standing commitment to tackling these issues we are confident that the party will accept these new measures.

The main gap in the Liberal Democrats' policies in this area is the absence of any real commitment to reforming the common agricultural policy, or any recognition of public good as a rationale for continued support for land managers.

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