



Politics squeezes the environment

In this briefing, I look at the emerging political landscape in environment, housing and planning ahead of next year's general election. Below I review the party announcements that made the news, and some of those that did not, but it is not my aim to provide a comprehensive account of party policies.

The conference season came and went, with the usual display of set piece speeches and populist playing to the party faithful and next year's electorate. The environment and green economy has been major a political battleground during the last couple of general elections. This autumn, while Nick Clegg and Ed Miliband spoke of green matters in their conference speeches, Cameron and Farage largely ignored the "green crap".

Housebuilding featured strongly in all the political party conferences. The Labour party issued the Lyons report, the most comprehensive statement of housing ambitions and policy options since Kate Barker's review a decade ago. The Lyons report will be reported in another eBulletin.

The Conservatives are strengthening countryside protection through the planning system, though they are stubbornly refusing to budge on reforms to the NPPF and five year land supply rules. Labour is talking about revising the NPPF but has given few details.

The Green Party, which is still almost ignored by the media outside the Guardian, is growing in political strength and membership. It's one to watch as the Greens could tip the balance in some constituencies as young, left leaning and green thinking voters flee the Lib Dems.

UKIP is the biggest new force in politics and it has shown that it can win elections and pick up the populist vote. While its policies are clear on Europe and immigration, it is still weak on detail on planning and environment policies. Environmental blogger Miles King writes about the links he sees between CPRE and UKIP, failing to mention that many CPRE activists are members of the Conservative and Labour parties and, yes, even the Lib Dems.

As this is a political blog, I should declare that I am a Lib Dem councillor in Shropshire. I hope that hasn't introduced any bias into this eBulletin.

I will write a second political roundup just before the general election.

Andy Boddington, Shropshire

Conservatives protect green belt

Green belt protected. Eric Pickles and Brandon Lewis introduced changes to planning guidance which they say will further protect the green belt   . The guidance says that once established, green belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional cases and that should be through the preparation or review of a local plan. It also states that housing need – including for traveller sites – does not justify the harm done to the green belt by inappropriate development. Eric Pickles said:

"This government has been very clear that when planning for new buildings, protecting our precious green belt must be paramount. Local people don't want to lose their countryside to urban sprawl, or see the vital green lungs around their towns and cities to unnecessary development. This guidance will ensure councils can meet their housing needs by prioritising brownfield sites, and fortify the green belt in their area."

When the local authority prepares its Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment as part of the process of identifying a five year land supply, the guidance says the authority must:

"Establish realistic assumptions about the availability, suitability and the likely economic viability of land to meet the identified need for housing over the plan period, and in so doing take account of any constraints such as green belt, which indicate that development should be restricted and which may restrain the ability of an authority to meet its need."

Reaction. The Chartered Institute of Housing said the new guidance was "very worrying" and suggests "protecting claimed the green belt is: "Not really the countryside as we understand it" . In the Telegraph, Geoffrey Lean said: "It's very late in the day. The government's planning reforms made developing the green belt easier" .

Conservative Policy

Housing. David Cameron said a Conservative government would release brownfield land for housebuilding, with homes reserved for first-time buyers. He said the *Help to Buy: Starter Homes* scheme would deliver 100,000 starter homes over the lifetime of the next parliament. Under the proposals, the homes will be exempt from the community infrastructure levy, affordable housing requirements and the zero carbon homes standard. That will allow them to be sold at 20% below the normal market rate    . Eric Pickles said that 230,000 homes received planning permission in England last year "on top of the thousands of redundant buildings that have been converted into new homes." He outlined a Rent to Buy scheme alongside the expansion of the Help to Buy scheme  . Pickles said a new wave of City Deals will be launched before the election accompanied by devolution of more powers to cities and counties .

Garden cities. Rugby MP Mark Pawsey told a fringe meeting communities would not support new garden cities. He said: "I would rather see garden city principles adopted to support sustainable extensions to existing places, rather than new stand alone settlements... If we continue to talk about garden cities then it will just allow the planning and construction of homes we need to be delayed" .

Farming and environment. Liz Truss received a muted reception at the conference, where she admitted she was surprised to be appointed environment secretary. She told the conference that food and farming was one of the fastest growing areas for entrepreneurs, whether they were “using GPS in tractors or automated celery rigs or Sainsbury’s employing an army of coders.” She ended her speech pledging strengthened flood defences and said she would not rest until “until the British apple is at the very top of the tree” for exports [i](#) [T](#) [S](#). Truss condemned European interference in farming and said she is fighting for an urgent review of the three crop rule due to be introduced under CAP greening next year. She said she also wanted EU rules on GM crops and pesticide use relaxed [FG](#).

George Osborne told the conference: “We will tap the shale gas, commission nuclear power and renewables, and guarantee our energy for the future. We will build the high speed rail, decide where to put a runway and support the next generation with starter homes in a permanent Help to Buy” [S](#). Friends of the Earth condemned Osborne’s speech: “Barely days after David Cameron touched down from the UN Climate talks, his Chancellor is promising more roads, more airports and more fracking – with no mention of the solutions needed to slash emissions” [O](#).

Climate change fades. At the UN summit, David Cameron said world must “act now” to deliver a legally-binding climate treaty. He said that he would continue to push the EU to commit to an emissions reduction target for 2030 of at least 40% and called on all nations to deliver clear pledges to tackle their emissions [T](#) [BG](#) [S](#). In his speech to the party conference, Cameron said Britain is: “Leading not following on climate change.” And that was all he said about the environment and the green economy [S](#). In his introduction to the *Environment Edition* of *The Parliamentary Review*, Cameron does not mention the environment or climate at all ([requires Dropbox account](#)). Sacked Defra secretary Owen Paterson gave a speech to the climate sceptic Global Warming Policy Foundation. Paterson said the Climate Change Act 2008, which ties Britain to strict environmental targets, should be suspended and then scrapped if other countries refuse to agree legally binding targets. He warned that claims of impending environmental disaster are “widely exaggerated” [T](#) [M](#). Carbon Brief looked at the science and the politics of Paterson’s arguments [CB](#).

Labour Policy

Aviation. Shadow treasury secretary Ed Balls softened the party’s opposition to a third runway at Heathrow and pledged more runway capacity in the South East. He told the conference: “We must resolve to finally make a decision on airport capacity in London and the South East – expanding capacity while taking into account the environmental impact. No more kicking into the long-grass.” Party sources later said that Labour is “equidistant” between Gatwick and Heathrow. Balls also reiterated the party’s [earlier proposal](#) to establish a National Infrastructure Commission [S](#) [ES](#).

Garden cities. Lord Adonis told a fringe meeting: “I am now persuaded that developing new towns from scratch is going to be a very tough and tall order. The right course... is urban extensions” [P](#).

Housing. Ed Miliband put housebuilding among his six top priorities and said New Homes Corporations should to be set up by local authorities across the country to accelerate housing development [S](#) [P](#) [O](#). He announced:

“By 2025, for the first time in fifty years, this country will be building as many homes as we need. Doubling the number of first time buyers in our country. Again it is going to require a massive national effort. We won’t let large developers sit on land, we will say to small developers and construction companies that we will help them to build homes again in our country. We will build a new generation of towns, garden cities and suburbs creating over half a million new homes. And we will also make housing the top priority for additional capital investment in the next parliament. This party will get Britain building again.”

Shadow housing minister Emma Reynolds told a National Housing Federation conference that the party is looking at land market reform: “Land has become a speculative commodity rather than seen as something on which we can build residential property.” She confirmed Labour would bring in ‘a use it or lose it’ policy to tackle landbanking by developers; a ‘right to grow’ for councils wanting to expand development into neighbouring council areas; and a ‘help to build’ policy of guaranteed loans to smaller housebuilders [H](#).

Planning. Shadow planning minister Roberta Blackman-Woods told a planning conference that a Labour government would not rip up the NPPF [P](#):

“I think Labour has been fairly consistent in saying we think we can live with the NPPF. We would make a few changes to it – over time we want to integrate neighbourhood planning into the planning system, we want streamlining.”

At the party conference fringe she pledged to change the NPPF “to strengthen brownfield first and put it back to what was a successful policy” under the previous Labour administration. But she warned: “Because of the huge uplift that we need in housing supply, brownfield is just not going to be enough. I think that we have to be really honest about that. It’s not just garden cities, it can be garden villages, it can be urban extensions. But I think to try to suggest that we don’t need some of those larger developments would be wrong” [P](#) [P](#). Blackman-Woods also told the conference that planning could not work for communities unless planning departments have sufficient resources:

“I’m absolutely convinced that in the long-term [community engagement] will speed up planning because if you get consent early on then we should be able to truncate some of the timescales in terms of getting planning approval.”

She said Labour was looking at how to get more land into the system: “We’re also looking at a compulsory purchase order for land assembly... Where we think people are not developing land that has planning permission will we look at perhaps... a penalty” [P](#). Lord Adonis told a fringe meeting: “We do need to get back to serious planning. We need a new vision for local authorities. They have been largely disabled in terms of their vision for their own communities. We now need a new planning and masterplanning mentality” [P](#).

UKIP Policy

Communities and planning. Taking a more localist line than Lord Adonis, shadow communities secretary Hilary Benn told the conference :

“Instead of communities saying that the design is poor, the rooms are too small, and the GP surgeries, roads and schools won’t be there. And instead of them thinking that even if the homes are built, that their children or friends or neighbours will never get one of them. We will give communities the powers they need to tackle land banking, put together the sites, get the design right, put in the infrastructure, and work with small, medium and large builders to build the homes that local people need where local people want.”

Green economy. Labour leader Ed Miliband pledged to create one million green jobs as part of a 10-year plan to make Britain a global leader in clean technology and renewable energy. He announced that his party would commit to decarbonise electricity generation by 2030 and give more borrowing powers to the Green Investment Bank. He told the conference:

“The environment isn’t that fashionable anymore – but it matters. It’s incredibly important to our economy and there is no more important an issue for me... than tackling climate change.”

He promised to make energy efficiency a national infrastructure priority   . Carbon Brief took a detailed look at Miliband’s green policies . Edie Energy has a roundup of green reaction to the Labour pledges . Shadow energy secretary Caroline Flint pledged the party will devolve power and resources to communities to insulate five million homes over the next ten years. She said: “Climate change is too costly to ignore” and promised Labour would: “Invest in renewables, carbon capture and storage for coal and gas, safe nuclear power and warmer [and] low energy homes”   . Flint also said the party would make it easier for schools to install solar panels .

Environment. Julie Elliott, Labour’s shadow minister for energy, said the government’s decision to close the Renewable Obligation subsidy for solar farms from April 2015 is part of a pattern of policy shake ups that were preventing the UK from becoming a “world leader in clean energy” . Shadow environment secretary Maria Eagle said Labour would deliver “a new deal with the water companies” – focused on affordability and fairness. She promised to scrap the badger cull and make “job opportunities and homes available at a reasonable cost” in the countryside. Eagle pledged a national framework for low emission zones to “encourage greener, less polluting vehicles.” The party will introduce a new climate change adaptation programme and reinstate flood protection as a core priority .

LEPs and city regions. Lord Adonis, the shadow infrastructure secretary said LEPs should merge to become a vehicle for devolution of powers. Adonis also called for “city and county regions which embrace the entire country... with the LEPs acting essentially as business advisory services to them” . Hilary Benn told LGC Plus: “Bring yourselves together, county regions as well as city regions. We really ought to be looking at common boundaries between these new local government structures and the LEPs” .

Brownfield. Housing spokesman Andrew Charalambous pledged to establish a UK Brownfield Agency. It will compile a national brownfield register, provide grants to assess decontamination, and give low interest loans for decontamination and remediation . The Agency will issue brownfield bonds to raise £5bn, transferring the risk for decontaminating land to the government. The bonds will: “Pave the way for more affordable housing and more home ownership by investing in our country’s most derelict and underused land rather turning beautiful landscapes into concrete jungles.”

Greenfield. Andrew Charalambous defended green fields:

“UKIP will never concede an inch of the British countryside to residential development. Politicians do not have the right to deprive future generations from living the marvels of the British countryside; to confine their experience of the beauty of Britain to images in photographs and video archives.”

In the New Statesman, William Cash, UKIP’s new heritage spokesman, launched a blistering attack on the Conservatives rural credentials  . He said:

“The idea of a new ‘green shield’ to protect the countryside is an unfortunate starting point to win back Tory voters. It makes the Tories look as if they are resorting to the political equivalent of free ‘garage glasses’ to win back the rural vote.”

Citing CPRE Shropshire’s recent debate on *Our Shropshire Countryside Under Threat!*, Cash continued:

“These local protestors were largely traditional Tory voters who are being forced to dig deep into their own pockets to fight a series of battles to prevent identikit home new housing estates. After three years of local planning wars, many rural voters no longer regard the [Conservatives] as the party that now stands up for, and protects, the rural countryside and our built heritage.”

Environment spokesman Andrew Charalambous said the UK needs to “move away from the outdated obsession with carbon inhibition” . He attacked the biodiversity record of windfarms:

“Apart from devastating the view of serenity and breathtaking scenery of our countryside the rotating blades kill and maim countless of innocent birds even from protected species. Moreover, wind farms emit grotesquely disturbing noise pollution which petrifies so many small animals.”

Nigel Farage told the party conference that UKIP councillors will campaign for referendums on local issues such as fracking and the building of wind farms. He also said the EU’s “climate change obsession has destroyed industry across Europe” .

Farming. Agricultural spokesman Stuart Agnew said UKIP would retain Single Farm Payments if it led the UK out of Europe . Farms would need to meet Entry Level Stewardship standards but payments will be capped at £120,000 or 1,500 acres. Pesticide controls will be relaxed and greater concentrations of nitrates will be allowed in water. Badgers will be culled and there will be a ban on live exports of animals. Prisoners will pull up ragwort. Farmers Guardian has an extensive analysis of UKIP’s farming policies .

Green Policy

Not so green. Green Party leader Natalie Bennett renewed her prediction that the HS2 rail link will never get built. She said: “The investment should be going into the local infrastructure, into their local train and bus services instead” [\[CNJ\]](#). Green issues barely got a mention in Bennett’s speech to the Green Party conference [\[G\]](#), and the same was true of the keynote speech given by MP Caroline Lucas [\[G\]](#). Local green party candidates have opposed solar farms in Reigate [\[BBC\]](#) and Shropshire [\[L\]](#).

More green. The Green Party mini-manifesto has rather more to say on its green policies [\[G\]](#).

Green fury. The Greens are furious at the BBC’s refusal to allow the party to take part in next year’s TV leader election debates, despite its growing support [\[G\]](#).

Lib Dems back garden cities

Cornerstone. Nick Clegg told the party conference that the Lib Dems would build five garden cities on the East West rail line between Oxford and Cambridge. The cities will host an extra 50,000 new homes in an area where demand for housing is particularly intense [\[IH\]](#) [\[B&G\]](#) [\[S\]](#) [\[P\]](#) [\[L\]](#). He described garden cities as central to the party’s housebuilding plans:

“Garden cities are a vital cornerstone of our plan to boost house building to 300,000 homes a year – enough to meet demand and keep prices in reach – while still protecting our precious green space and preventing urban sprawl.”

He said the party would ensure that “at least ten get under way – with up to five along this new garden cities railway, bringing new homes and jobs to the brainbelt of south-east England.”

Stalinist. Vince Cable said that although garden cities can run into rural opposition, the idea “probably represents the best possible outcome in combination with other things.” He also said that a purely ‘bottom-up’, locally-led approach was insufficient, and “an element” of “Stalinist” top-down house-building was necessary, involving development corporations and greater council powers to acquire land [\[P\]](#).

Locations. Lib Dem press spokeswoman Charlotte Kelloway told the media [\[OM\]](#) [\[H\]](#):

“The garden cities will be locally led, with local people at the centre of the approach. We will encourage the towns along the Oxford to Cambridge rail link to come forward with plans for this scale of development, approximately 9,000 to 15,000 homes or more if an area prefers. There will be clear benefits for existing residents, such as express stations with higher frequency rail services.”

Outgoing party president Tim Farron declared that he is in favour of naming the locations where the garden cities will be built [\[H\]](#):

“That means you are being honest about it and people believe you. I’m also attracted to it as a way of neutralising the Nimbys... We are not saying we will be building in your back yard, but we will be building on your horizon.”

Liberal Democrat Policy

Planning. Vince Cable said permitted development rights that allow conversion of offices to homes without planning permission were a result of a “recentralisation of some decision-making” on planning and a “particularly bad example of central imposition.” He said: “There’s nowhere for small firms to operate in. So we are creating homes but driving out employment which is perverse” [\[P\]](#) [\[BBC\]](#). Cable warned that brownfield land alone was not a solution to the housing crisis because it is often expensive to develop and leads to higher housing densities in urban areas. He told a fringe meeting that if he were in a middle income family in Surrey struggling to find a suitable home he would “ask myself is a golf course sacred or are there better uses of the land?” He said it was a cliché to rely on brownfield land for new developments and insisted there must be a focus on using up agricultural land [\[C\]](#). The conference voted in favour of greater flood defence spending, ensuring it is adequate to protect against climate change impacts [\[O\]](#).

Green belt. The leader of Eastleigh council Keith House said meeting the party’s target of 300,000 homes per year must involve an honest debate about the green belt [\[H\]](#):

“We have got to be prepared to say honestly, some green field sites have got to come forward. I’m prepared to be the heretic here and say parts of the green belt don’t work. In some areas we have got shrub land, or low quality countryside, that could more appropriately be bought forward for housing.”

Cities must expand. Stephen Williams, under-secretary of state for communities and local government, said that the current local government structure is not fit for purpose. He also told a fringe event that cities needed to be able to expand their boundaries. Many cities, such as his own constituency of Bristol as well as Oxford, need expanded boundaries and are “ridiculously constrained” [\[P\]](#).

Runways rejected. The Lib Dem conference defeated an amendment which would have seen the party back a second runway at Gatwick [\[G\]](#) [\[G\]](#). The amendment was backed by climate change secretary Ed Davey and Nick Clegg. Davey said:

“If you look at the future of flight it is possible to imagine, with technological innovation, that we have zero-carbon flight in the future. It is not a U-turn on environmental criteria. If those criteria can be met elsewhere they clearly cannot be met at Heathrow.”

In an earlier interview with The Times, Nick Clegg said technological advances would help to negate the environmental impact of flying and pave the way for airport expansion. He said: “I do happen to think the environmental impact can... be consistent with some form of airport expansion given the rapid improvement in environmental performance of modern aircraft” [\[ES\]](#). As a result of the defeat, the Lib Dem position remains: “We remain opposed to any expansion of Heathrow, Stansted or Gatwick and any new airport in the Thames Estuary, because of local issues of air and noise pollution.” The broader policy remains “no net increase in runways across the UK as a whole” [\[BBC\]](#).

High Speed 2. Transport minister Baroness Susan Kramer said she supports a connection between the High Speed Two and High Speed One railway lines in north London, just six months after a planned link between the two lines through Camden was dropped in the face of overwhelming local opposition [P](#).

Energy. At the party conference, Ed Davey gave his backing to fracking and condemned coal [E](#) [P](#):

“Shale gas is not a magic bullet. But simple opposition to shale gas is also wrong. The real fossil fuel enemy is coal – coal is the climate destroyer... I have had to hold back the Tories’ desire to frack every square mile of Britain... Protecting our national parks, areas of outstanding beauty and world heritage sites. Stopping a Tory free-for-all on fracking.”

He confirmed households would get a £100-a-year Government-funded council tax discount over the next 10 years if they improve the energy efficiency of their homes. Vince Cable warned that Britain is in danger of exporting its pollution as the burden of carbon taxes makes home industries less competitive [L](#) [E](#).

Windfarms backed. Ed Davey said Eric Pickles was in danger of “abusing ministerial power” by “calling in every onshore wind planning application he can.” He accused the Conservatives of having a “pathological aversion to onshore wind” and said its opposition to wind turbines was “irrational” [CG](#) [E](#) [P](#) [L](#). Davey told the conference:

“Onshore wind has been growing fast under us... But the Tories don’t like this. Day after day they’ve urged me to cap onshore wind. I’ve just said no. Not just because it’s vital for climate change. But also to keep energy bills down, as onshore wind is now the cheapest large scale green energy option... Mr Pickles is in danger of bringing the planning system into disrepute.”

Opponents irrational. Vince Cable said that people in the countryside who oppose wind turbines because of the way they look are “irrational”. He told a fringe meeting: “For reasons I don’t fully understand, our coalition partners have a pathological aversion to onshore wind... Lying behind it there is some really irrational phobia” [E](#) [M](#).

Housing. The Lib Dems pledged to build 300,000 new homes with major capital investment in infrastructure. It aims for ten new garden cities in the south of England, including five along East West rail between Oxford and Cambridge. A state-capitalised housing investment bank will attract institutional investors into the housing sector. Councils will be offered the power to suspend the right to buy [H](#). Treasury minister Danny Alexander attacked the government’s flagship £7 billion New Homes Bonus, warning there is no evidence it has made any difference to housebuilding rates [L](#).

The CPRE eBulletins

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