

Politics and the Panel

As the Government's response to the Independent Panel approaches it's clear there is only one way out of the political mess the Conservatives landed themselves in. That is to understand, accept and take action to turn the panel's views into policy.

Will the new Secretary of State have grasped that this issue is not about squabbling political parties, it is not even about the Government versus established pressure groups: it is about the Conservative party against a broad spectrum of the people of this country who understand very clearly what our forests mean to them, even if the politicians do not. I'd advise Owen Patterson to sit down with a nice glass of claret and the video of the House of Commons debate before the Prime Minister's historic climb down: it will remind him that without the captions and the broad view of the chamber it was quite impossible to tell Conservative from Liberal Democrat from Labour back benchers as they condemned the Government's proposals on behalf of their angered and concerned constituents.

This is not primarily about money, but the money is vitally important. It would be unrealistic to expect the Government to find lots more money: the biggest bill would be for increasing woodland through current grant arrangements. My personal view is that only a complete reform of landuse policies – and using existing money to tackle the challenges of climate change – will work. However, funding the Forestry Commission is a completely different matter: whilst hating the 25% cut, I do accept that it is in line with a real need to reduce public expenditure. Anything more will inevitably look like revenge – and a backdoor attempt to undermine the Commission's popularity with the public. It is the line in the sand: whatever else the Government comes up with will be meaningless if in the process they try to rip the guts out of the FC and, as a result, the management of the forests we all love.

Let's be quite clear that this is not about affordability, it is about political choice. The money involved is not significant and it's worth remembering that the headline payments to farmers have not been reduced at all – in fact, David Cameron is arguing against the proposal to limit the maximum any one owner can be paid under CAP, showing a determined commitment to the largest, richest farmers. If you have any doubt about this just ask one simple question: had the Government succeeded in selling our forests to its supporters would it now be announcing drastic reductions in the grants they expected to be entitled to? Of course not.

It's standard Government procedure to defuse difficult issues by delay. The interminable process of first the panel then the Government's response all delayed and pushed back might well have cooled the temperature of the debate – but then Chalara came along to fan the flames. Chalara guarantees that trees will be on the agenda at the next election because, tragically, it will be killing trees where millions of people live by then. The Secretary of State can't hold back the tide, and as he was at the Northern Ireland office at the time action might have been taken, Owen Patterson must be one of the least guilty in the whole saga. However, Chalara makes it doubly important that the Government is seen to be doing its best, taking our trees seriously and most of all reflecting the love of our national forests shown by over half a million people opposing the sell off.

Defra isn't meant to be a 'political' department. It sits in the background, handing out money to farmers, thrust into the limelight only when the flood waters rise or yet another disease hits our livestock. Has it ever won or lost a single parliamentary seat ? I doubt it. The Conservatives rely on the conservative with a small c views of the shire counties, none more so than Mr Patterson himself, from ultra-rural Shropshire. Now they face not one but two challenges to that cosy assumption: both the forests and the badger cull have the potential to split core voters from the general rural conservative consensus.

They might only swing a seat or two but just how many seats is a sweating Oliver Letwin back at Conservative HQ ready to give up for such trivial, fringe issues ? Not a single one I'd suggest, so the pressure is on to show that the Government has listened, understood and is genuinely sincere about looking after our national forests for all of us, forever.

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