

Seeing the Woods for the Trees – Vision, Revision and Real Politick, Robin Maynard

January ended up being a good month for England's woods and forests (Ash dieback notwithstanding). On 31st January, the Government set out its response to the recommendations from the Independent Panel on Forestry. Chaired by Bishop James of Liverpool (highly-respected as a green-minded churchman, and for his part in finally achieving justice for the victims of the Hillsborough disaster), the Independent Forestry Panel was set up in a panic by the then Secretary of State, Caroline Spelman after the country-wide protest by people from across the political spectrum and class divide against the Government's original proposal to 'dispose of' (Whitehall double-talk for 'flog off') all 1,500 woods and forests that make up the public forest estate in England.

That proposal to anyone other than ill-informed ministers, dogmatically prejudiced against any form of public ownership was clearly bonkers. As CRT chairman, Robin Page pointed out in his inimitable style in the Daily Mail almost exactly two years ago,

"Guess what? The United Nations has just announced that 2011 is the International Year of the Forest. How is our green, countryside-friendly Government planning to celebrate? By selling and disposing of Britain's national forests. It is staggering; without doubt the Forestry Commission's 635,000 acres across England constitute the best-managed woodland in the country, providing timber, wildlife and recreation. There are more than 40million visits to our forests each year - more than to the seaside. Indeed, more than half of the people living in England live within seven miles of a public wood. The Government proclaims to those gullible enough to listen the wonders of the Big Society and 'localisation', but the sale of our forests represents nothing less than Big Government and 'centralisation'. Jim Paice, the Agriculture Minister, has said this piece of fundamentalist privatisation is 'unfinished business'. How ridiculous." ('They've gone Squirrel Nutkins!' 14/2/11)

The Government clearly read Robin's piece, as just three days later, Caroline Spelman threw in the towel and declared the 'disposal proposal' would be halted and that the Independent Panel would be formed. Under the guidance of the Bishop, the Panel actually went out and talked to the people who lived amongst, worked in, and cared for their woods and forests – the communities, friends of the forest, and grassroots group in and around the Forest of Dean, the New Forest, Thetford etc. etc. The message was resounding, 'Hands off our Forests!' - as the robust free-miners, graziers and folk who live in the Dean unequivocally named the protest group for their particular and special piece of our fragmented woodland heritage and culture.

The new Secretary of State, Owen Paterson and forestry minister, David Heath have, almost unprecedented in the history of panels, inquiries, consultations normally set up to 'punt difficult issues into the long-grass', listened to the Bishop and his colleagues. In Bishop James' own words, the Government response is, "*a complete endorsement of the Panel's work.*"

A world away from Jim Paice's growling threat just couple of years back that as Robin rightly put it, 'this piece of fundamentalist privatisation' was "*unfinished business*", Owen Paterson and David Heath have declared their commitment to protecting the whole 258,000 hectares of England's public woods and forests as they stand. Even better they propose the creation of a new form of public body removed from the machinations of ministers and short-term party-political interference – '*Shock horror, Tory minister creates Quango!*' And one to be overseen ultimately by what the appropriately bearded Gandalf, I mean David Heath, is calling 'Forest Guardians' – sounds very 'Lord of the Rings'! But it reflects a real recognition of the romance and visceral attachment people have to our old, if not always ancient, woods. The shabby practice forced upon the Forestry Commission by a year-on-year dwindling budget from Defra under both Labour and the present Coalition Government, of selling off fragments of woodland to balance the books is to end. The parallel would be a family farm or poorly run-estate auctioning off a field here or piece of land there each year, until the developers are up to the front door and 'Manor Close' has been built. Good Lord, the Government even has a vision! Not for the 'Domesday Forest' put forward by **Our Forests**, recreating the 15% of tree-cover believed present across England in 1086, but a pretty good interim ambition, which it terms wittily (something of a rare commodity in government), 'Chaucer's Forest' - with a target of 12% tree-cover by 2060 replicating the woodland area of 1300.

So this is all good news? Not quite... Funding has only been achieved to enable the Forestry Commission to begin to translate this vision into reality over the next year. What happens thereafter depends on the FC developing 'new revenue streams' and of course, upon the agreement of the axe-wielding, quango-hating, public spending slashing Treasury. The danger is that George Osborne and his colleagues who fulfil the old adage about economists, 'knowing the price of everything and value of nothing', could still reduce this ambitious vision to a mere 'merchant's tale'.

One final point needs to be put on record: The hypocrisy and revisionism of several of the NGOs. Not one of whom initially openly or unequivocally opposed the Government's original intention to 'dispose' of the entire public forest estate. Indeed, their complacency and apparent complicity gave

the dunderheads in Defra and the ministers at the time the 'green light' to go-ahead. Even more reprehensibly, some of them put in 'shopping lists' to Government for any public woods that might be on offer, with financial sweeteners.

Despite their routine demands for openness and fervent calls for 'freedom of information' when it comes to government policy or business dealings, the NGOs have been strangely reluctant to reveal '*who talked when to whom*' about the disposal proposal (months ahead of it being in the public arena) and what bits of woods they wanted on the cheap. Only by employing a barrister to exercise our rights under Environmental Information Regulations was **Our Forests** able to secure some detail of those shenanigans, but several questions and the records of key meetings between government officials and NGO senior staff remain shrouded in secrecy.

It was 'Big Society' (not quite in the mild, manageable form David Cameron had hoped for), not 'Big Government' and certainly not 'Big NGOs', who persuaded and enabled the very welcome and visionary change in policy from Owen Paterson, David Heath and Defra: Those half a million people who signed **38 Degrees** 'Save Our Forests' on-line petition; the dog-walkers, horse-riders, mountain-bikers, fresh-air seeking families; the former mining communities fighting for reforested spoil-heaps, local saw mills dependent on the timber from well-managed FC woods - and especially, the communities living within and working amidst them, the various 'friends of forests' groups, amplified by the efforts of **Save Our Woods**, **HOOF** and **Our Forests**. It was all of those activists, individually and collectively who forced the spectacular government U-turn, not the conservation NGOs, who now issue lofty statements about the values and rights of public ownership and the need for greater support for managing private woodland. That reality needs to be put on record, rather than some revisionist 'Real Politick' gloss that suits the marketing, membership and fundraising departments of NGOs.

See:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1356286/Sell-forests-Theyve-gone-Squirrel-Nutkins.html#ixzz2JoDKLz41>

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/publications/2013/01/31/pb13871-forestry-policy-statement/>

<http://saveourwoods.co.uk/our-forests/our-forests-vision-for-englands-woods-and-forests/>