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Uh oh. David Cameron's record on environmental policy – and Theresa May's first moves



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The country's shift to a low-carbon economy has stalled, industrialisation of the countryside has sped up – and last week, just hours into her new job as prime minister, Theresa May blew a chill wind over hopes of anything different from her new administration.

David Cameron started well when he took over leadership of his party in 2005: he identified climate change as a win-win issue; he could detoxify the Tory brand from being (Theresa May's) "nasty party"; he could respond to public demand for action on climate change; and he could respond to a growing business clamour for regulation to ensure a level playing field as the country moved to a low-carbon economy.

Mr Cameron even set up a Quality of Life policy group. This reported on a new Conservative answer to the question of how to achieve sustainable economic development within the planet's natural limits.

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For a while he changed the politics of climate change. His photo shoots with huskies in 2006 drew attention to the melting Arctic and sent a signal to his party that capitalism needed to adapt if it was to prosper on a warming planet. Later that year he helped launch **Friends of the Earth's Big Ask campaign for the Climate Change Bill**. In 2008 the Bill passed in a moment of political consensus across parliament.

As a new prime minister in 2010 Mr Cameron declared himself the "fourth climate change minister" and made his "greenest government ever" speech.

But his record in his first term of office was mixed and showed that positive environmental policy would come second to economic and political vested interests.

GM, badgers, forests and climate

Mr Cameron appointed Caroline Spelman to lead the Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs. In her first interview she alarmed environmentalists by committing the government to be the “most pro-GM yet”, and confirming plans for a badger cull – one of many policies not “led by science” as had been promised.

By October 2010 she was making one of the government's most high-profile political mistakes in attempting to sell off the nation's forests – a policy clearly sanctioned from the top. The move fundamentally damaged public trust in the party's credibility as stewards of our country and provoked an extraordinary public outcry. “We got this one wrong,” said Mrs Spelman as she took the political hit.

Appointing Liberal Democrat Chris Huhne to head the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) was widely interpreted as a clever means of accelerating action on climate change while ducking some of the flak from Mr Cameron's right flank.

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The department oversaw a steep increase in renewable energy deployment boosted by implementation of the previous government's **feed-in tariff policy to incentivise green energy** generation – a policy that Friends of the Earth had campaigned for.

Back-tracking on renewables

But by 2011 Friends of the Earth was taking the government to court for trying to back-track on solar feed-in tariff payments. **The case went all the way to the Supreme Court** and we won in a landmark case that secured the future of the solar industry – at least for the next few years.

But boosting renewable energy isn't enough to tackle climate change. Fossil fuels also need to be cut, fast. It's a choice, and Mr Cameron's coalition government made the wrong decisions. Budget after budget announced more tax breaks for fossil fuel exploration. The department pursued a gas-first strategy – describing it as a bridge fuel towards decarbonisation. In reality it diverted funding for renewables.

By September 2012 the Conservative mood music on the environment had changed – the environment no longer seemed part of Mr Cameron's strategy to win over the nation.

Shockingly, Owen Paterson, a vocal climate change sceptic, was appointed Secretary of State at Defra. Emboldened, he declared war on the environmental movement and set out his vision for something called “Ecomodernism” which pressed for ultra-intensification of agriculture.

Astonishingly, he even criticised developing countries “still coupled to the natural environment”. Mr Paterson was exposed by Friends of the Earth for cutting flood defence spending ahead of the devastating 2013 floods.

Treasury vs environment

In 2013 at the Conservative Party conference George Osborne said he didn't want the UK to lead on tackling climate change.

“I don't want us to be the only people out there in front of the rest of the world. I certainly think we shouldn't be further ahead of our partners in Europe.” Behind the scenes the chancellor was arguing strongly against the fourth carbon budget – a cap on emissions set as part of the Climate Change Act. The budget was adopted only after a long battle and observers were alarmed at Cameron stalling instead of making a decisive intervention to settle the matter.

We're going all out for shale



David Cameron, 2014

“We're going all out for shale,” said Mr Cameron in 2014 as he announced plans to try to bribe local communities which had become resolute against fracking wherever it was proposed. The vote-blue-go-green vision had been scrapped.

In a rare bright spot, a significant victory was won for nature when the government adopted a pollinator action plan in November 2014.

This was meant to address the causes of the dangerous decline in bees and other pollinators. It followed Friends of the Earth's massively popular **Bee Cause campaign**. Although the action plan was more a commitment to have a plan than to deliver necessary action, it was an important step forward.

The 2015 general election saw a Conservative government returned - and it was a test of the choices David Cameron would make when his party was fully in control.

The Conservative manifesto alarmed not just environmentalists but investors wanting certainty about the path to a low-carbon economy. It proposed an end to the cheapest form of renewable energy, onshore wind – even where local people welcome it, a “significant expansion in new gas”, including fracking, and ruled out a target for cutting carbon out of the power supply.

The manifesto did, however, make two important commitments that will form part of Mr Cameron's green legacy: the phase-out coal in power generation, and the protection of large areas of ocean around UK overseas territories.

Slash and burn

Back in power, Mr Cameron's Conservative government

unleashed a breathtaking series of attacks on environment policies that sent Friends of the Earth and our colleagues in other environment organisations reeling.

Following through on the pledge to virtually ban onshore wind, and slashing the feed-in tariff, the rug was pulled from under the renewables industry. UK carbon emissions had been falling but, as warned, the growth in renewables deployment stalled, and solar companies employing thousands of people around the country went bust.

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The government scrapped key energy-efficiency schemes – including those designed to protect the most vulnerable people from cold. And they removed the requirement for new homes to be zero carbon - consigning another generation to high fuel bills and high carbon footprints. Fracking was proposed to be

mins and high carbon footprints. Fracking was proposed to be allowed in precious wildlife sites in National Parks, through water aquifers and even under people's houses. These proposals were partly fended off.

All this was happening in the run-up to the Paris climate negotiations in which the UK was claiming to play a global leadership role. The UK entered the talks as the only G7 country to have increased tax breaks for fossil fuels, while slashing support for renewable energy.

In his last week in office, Mr Cameron passed the 5th carbon budget, in line with advice from the independent Committee on Climate Change. This commits the UK to cutting 57% of emissions by 2030. This is an important long-term plan, but the Committee said significant policy changes are needed to get the UK on track to meeting the budget - from energy to transport and to massively cutting energy waste.

Impact on young people

It is young people whose lives will be affected most by David Cameron's legacy and political decisions taken now by the new prime minister. Just last week the government's own advisors warned of ever-growing risks to our businesses, homes and food if we don't do more to cut fossil fuel pollution.

And yet, hours into her new job, Theresa May downgraded government focus on tackling climate change by announcing that the Department for Energy and Climate Change is to fold. Alarming, Mrs May has also appointed a vocal climate sceptic, David Davis, to the role of Brexit minister.

She and he must commit to uphold and strengthen environmental protection - whatever the outcome of negotiations with Europe. She must not concede to the powerful vested interests intent on a race to the bottom on environmental as well as social protections.

With the hundreds of thousands of people who support our work for positive environmental policy, we're looking for a clear commitment to policies that will put the country on track to meeting our Climate Change Act goals and to delivering the Paris climate change agreement to keep global temperature rises to 1.5 degrees.

Time is running out to avert catastrophic climate change and to halt the decline of nature. This is about protecting people as well as the planet we live on.

There is no time to lose for the new Prime Minister in changing path - so much time has already been lost.

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