

Is this the lightest green government ever?



- ▶ In May 2010, David Cameron said the coalition government would be the greenest government ever.
- ▶ In July 2011, the Prime Minister announced that government had achieved its target to reduce carbon emissions from the office estate by 10 per cent in 12 months, with an actual reduction of 13.8 per cent over the year.
- ▶ This achievement is to be welcomed, but the government needs to act with greater urgency and ambition if it is to stand any chance of justifying its claim to be the greenest ever.

Public spending cuts

Public spending cuts are harming the UK's environmental progress and tarnishing the government's green image, according to the 2011 annual ENDS survey (Environmental Intelligence for Professionals). One of the government's first initiatives was to seek to sell large swathes of the Public Forest Estate – abandoned after massive public outcry.

But it has pushed through significant cuts to a range of other bodies sponsored by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, including Natural England and the Environment Agency.

Public spending cuts are also affecting a range of other environmental programmes including:

- ▶ investment in **marine energy**, where the marine renewables deployment fund has been cut from £50m to £20m. This is despite a commitment by David Cameron in 2008 to make marine energy research and development a priority for Britain. He said: "The next Conservative government will put rocket boosters behind this area of research".
- ▶ **Forest Research** is Britain's main provider of forestry research and scientific advice to government and the only significant employer of forest scientists in the UK. Initial information after the October 2010 spending review was that Forest Research would face the 25 per cent budget cuts applicable elsewhere in DEFRA.

On this basis, the organisation decided to end funding for research including: management of large herbivores, wood fuel and biomass research, and regeneration and sustainable silviculture.

It subsequently came to light that Forest Research in fact faces a budget cut of 34 per cent, which represents a real loss of skill and scientific world standing for Great Britain.

Green investment

The Aldersgate Group has warned that while the UK's economy has strong green foundations on which to build, it is rapidly losing ground to developing nations and other competitors. This is confirmed by findings from the Pew Environmental Group which show that the UK dropped from third to 13th position in the world rankings for investment in green growth in 2010.

Job losses

Job losses across the green economy in recent months include:

- ▶ 1,400 jobs at Bombardier in Derby as a result of the transport minister's decision to award a major contract to German company, Siemens.
- ▶ 700 jobs at Eaga resulting from a two-thirds cut in funding for the Warm Front scheme for homes insulation. All funding for Warm Front will cease from 2013.
- ▶ Jobs at 350 solar companies whose business plans have been overthrown by a 70 per cent cut in the feed-in tariff for large-scale, solar power systems.

Cavalier disregard for expert advice

The government has demonstrated a cavalier disregard for expert advice on the environment and green investment, axing funding for the Carbon Trust and the closing the Sustainable Development Commission and the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution. It is effectively divesting itself of all the expertise that should be underpinning its environmental and sustainability policies.

The **Public Bodies Bill**, currently going through Parliament, gives ministers powers to abolish or reform public bodies with little or no Parliamentary scrutiny. Constitutional experts believe that the powers in the bill are too wide and are inappropriate delegations of power.

Prospect agrees with the TUC that: "Taken together, the spending review cutbacks and the Public Bodies Bill will have impacts on all environmental protection and sustainable development work undertaken in the UK, across both the public and private sectors, from pollution, waste management and recycling through to nature conservation, climate change adaption, and biodiversity."¹

The government's lack of interest in genuine environmental regulation is evident from its '**Red Tape challenge**', which has included all Britain's 278 environmental laws in a list to be considered for the axe. These include the Wildlife and Countryside Act, the Clean Air Act and the Hazardous Waste regulations.

The **Carbon Trust's** remit is to provide specialist support to business and the public sector to help cut carbon emissions, save energy and commercialise low carbon technologies.

To date, the Carbon Trust has helped organisations save around 29.5 million tonnes of carbon and £2.6 billion in energy costs. It also invests in early stage, low carbon companies and brings viable investment opportunities to market.

The government reduced funding to the Carbon Trust from £95m to £50m for 2011-12, a cut of around 40 per cent. It will receive no core funding at all from April 2012. Along with the **Energy Saving Trust**, it will have to bid for contracts to deliver activities to support government green programmes.

The **Sustainable Development Commission** was wound up at the end of March 2011. The government's decision to close an organisation that was saving it money is difficult to understand.

Better management of carbon, energy, travel, waste and water in government departments in 2008-09 saved the government between £60-66 million per annum, while the SDC itself cost just £4 million - a saving of at least £15 for every pound invested.

¹ <http://www.tuc.org.uk/economy/tuc-19643-f0.cfm>

The **Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution** was created in 1970 to advise the Queen, government, Parliament and the public on environmental issues. Its reports covered the natural environment and the built environment, including nuclear power, energy use and climate change, the environmental impact of housing, and the use of pesticides and chemicals.

The Commission was closed in March 2011. Its government funding in 2009 was £1,005,000.

Professor Sir John Lawton, its final chairman said its abolition would leave government short of “awkward advice” on critical and complex environmental issues.

He told ENDS the decision to shut down the commission had left him “angry and sad” and that it was “a clear, political decision”.

Geoffrey Lean, Britain’s longest-serving environmental correspondent, also lamented its abolition: “...it has been close to getting the chop several times before. But each time it was saved before it got to the scaffold because it was just too valuable and, indeed, too useful to kill.”

He pointed out that it was “the mixture of lay and scientific members that made the Royal Commission work.”

Carbon Reduction Commitment Energy Efficiency Scheme

Prospect supported the original idea behind the CRC scheme – to encourage organisations to reduce their emissions by recycling the revenues to good performers. However, we agree with the assessment in the 2011 ENDS report that the current government has transformed it “into a money-making scheme for the government and an administrative burden to participants.”

There is evidence that the CRC scheme is actually undermining research into low carbon energy sources. For example, the Culham Centre for Fusion Energy will incur an additional annual cost of up to £400,000. The Science and Technology Facilities Council anticipates a CRC bill of around £900,000. One of the programmes affected will be ALICE (Accelerators and Lasers in Combined Experiments) which, through capabilities to watch how chemical reactions occur, enables research into more efficient solar cells for electricity generation.

