

Agora Briefing :
Environmental Policy
Post-Brexit:
Reflections on the 25 Year
Environment Plan

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Executive Summary

Since the outcome of the Brexit referendum was announced in 2016, multiple environmental charities and advocacy groups have expressed the concern about how the departure from the European Union will impact environmental policy.

As the government announces plans to release a new Environment Bill, it is important to see where the strategy's priorities lie. Ahead of the bill the author looks at the 25 Year Environment Plan report, released by the government at the beginning of 2018, and what their future policies may include following the UK's eventual departure from the EU.

Introduction

On July 18 the Prime Minister announced that they would be bringing forward a new Environmental Bill, the first Environmental bill by the British government in over 20 years¹. Yet within days of this announcement, permission was granted for the heavily criticised fracking project in Lancashire and, given the detrimental impacts of fracking², this seemingly contradicts the British government's stance on environmental policy and strategy to meet the Paris Climate Targets.

In light of this dichotomy between the promises and the reality, it's worthwhile to look at what has been outlined in the 25 Year Environment Plan released in January 2018 and examine whether the priorities of the government will actually lead to sustainable policy, and what potholes will need to be filled in the construction of the actual Environment Bill.

Analysis

Within the first few pages of the 25 Year plan, there are two interesting points that are made clear. That the UK will seek to show leadership on environmental issues, and that their policies have to capture the opportunity to deliver a 'Green' Brexit. Despite this, the policies that they outline appear to be very broad and do not bear much relevance to Brexit at first glance:

We have identified six key areas around which action will be focused. These are:

- Using and managing land sustainably
- Recovering nature and enhancing the beauty of landscapes
- Connecting people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing
- Increasing resource efficiency, and reducing pollution and waste
- Securing clean, productive and biologically diverse seas and oceans
- Protecting and improving the global environment

Thus, this policy brief will look at the contents beyond these simple policies in 4 categories to grasp a better sense of how the Environment Bill may take shape.

Waste and Pollution

Waste and pollution is one of the most visible impacts we have on the environment. In 2014, studies indicated that the average waste per person in Europe was as much as 475kg of waste per day³. Granted, this also accounts for waste that is also recycled or composted, but with a majority of municipal waste being sent to landfill its clear that the amount of waste being produced in Europe alone is gargantuan.

The current government plan appears optimistic, particularly with regards to the highly unsustainable use of plastic waste. The government introduced a plastic bag tax in 2015, following in the footsteps of other countries like Rwanda that have had the ban in place since 2008⁴. Since then they have set out the plan to achieve zero avoidable plastic waste by 2042, however this offers an entire 24-year window for the elimination⁵.

With regards to the other aspects of waste, the main drive appears to be the establishment of further Energy from Waste (EfW) facilities similar to those in place in the Nordic states and emerging in emerging economies like Ethiopia⁶. They outline how in 2016/17, 38% of waste collected by local authorities went to EfW to recover energy through its disposal⁷. However, there are other initiatives that the plan does not consider, like the largely successful Deposit and Return Scheme that has emerged in countries like Germany and Sweden⁸. The scheme, where an extra tax is embedded on recyclable products that can be redeemed upon the product's return to designated, has been successful in many countries and has the potential to significantly reduce waste and pollution across the UK.

Yet pollution does not only appear through waste, and the government needs a more conclusive plan to combat pollution. The government is currently facing a nation-wide push to create a stricter policy to fight pollution, notably air pollution in London, which exceeded its annual recommended maximum output in a within just the first month of the year.⁹

Biodiversity

The most recent studies have indicated that Britain's biodiversity is in flux. The UK is home to multiple iconic species, from the highland cow to the poppy, but the natural history also features many trials and tribulations. The first story that comes to mind is the struggle of the native red squirrel, long outcompeted and threatened by their North American counterparts¹⁰. However, the story is encountered across many other species in the UK. Some efforts have been invested into the reintroduction of lost species such as the Eurasian Beaver, but

support for dwindling species such as the long-horned bee and the small tortoiseshell butterfly are lacking¹¹.

Around the economic value of nature that the plan is based, there have been some successes. The UK has joined the worldwide call for the ban on neonicotinoids, a pesticide found to impede the function of pollinators¹², and they have also outlined and supported multiple initiatives to restore and protect important ecosystem features like mangroves and coastal ecosystems¹³.

Regardless, there is much more that needs to be done. Despite the prevalence of multiple protected areas across the UK they appear to be under threat, with several suggestions by MPs to use the areas for the subterranean dumping of nuclear waste¹⁴. Additionally, the threats many ecosystems are facing are becoming more visible every year, with the year of this new environment bill being dubbed, once again, the hottest year on record. This may take shape in the proposed development of a Strategy for Nature, but main focus at the moment needs to go beyond the review of protected areas and further into concrete initiatives that support and protect national and international biodiversity.

Energy

The energy sector is one of the more historically contentious topics in UK environmental policy. The UK is the heart of the industrial revolution and thus, the home of coal and the age of fossil fuels. Despite the decline in the country's consumption of fossil fuels, the government still appears to have a flexible stance on the phase-out of other fossil fuels, and the support of alternative fuels is not as well supported as the long-institutionalised sources of energy.

The UK government currently operates the Contracts for Difference (CfD) scheme for renewable energy projects, where companies and initiatives bid for funding and contracted contribution of electricity and energy to the national energy grid. This coincides however with a decline in the previous Feed-in-Tariff (FiT) scheme which is due to be shut for new applications in 2019¹⁵, which may reduce the incentive for new investments in renewable alternatives as there is less additional capital available and supported by the government for investment.

The prevalence of wind power in the UK is marginally more optimistic, with growth of wind power capacity reaching an all-time-high in 2017. Offshore wind is of particular interest, with a potential capacity of offshore wind generation to reach 10 Gigawatts by 2020¹⁶.

In light of this however, there have also been some confusing choices in terms of the sustainability of energy developments in the UK. The government's partnership with the Chinese government and EDF Energy remains strong, namely with their dedication to the Hinkley Point Nuclear program. Although planned to

achieve a capacity of 3.2 Gigawatts, it's been reported to be behind schedule and has far exceeded the budget supported by the government¹⁷. There is the eternal question of efficient disposal of nuclear waste, which already has questionable solutions as already aforementioned.

Additionally, in the phase-out of coal we've witnessed the rise of wood-fired power plants instead. The Drax power plant, famously one of the largest coal-fired power plants in the country, is now almost entirely biomass friendly. This may seem to be a great idea, as it reduces the amount of carbon released into the atmosphere drastically; however there are many opponents that argue the overall sustainability of wood-fired power offsets its marginal sustainability and costs¹⁸.

The 25-Year Plan bypasses explicit plans for future energy through the Clean Growth Plan, but it will be important within the 2018 bill to include further dedication to the phase-out of fossil fuels and the support of renewable alternatives.

Climate Change

The British government claims to be making strides to become the world's leader in climate action, making bold claims that they are at the forefront of the fight against the phenomenon. Yet whilst so many sectors and people are at risk of its effects, the government appears to actually be a few years behind other countries in the global movement.

The Paris Agreement was preceded by the submission by Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) by every country in the world; documents which outlined the plans each country would take to contribute to reducing emissions and securing a 1.5°-2° target to secure the future of the planet. Following the Paris Agreement, signatories were to submit their new Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)¹⁹, which are updated and confirmed plans that would commence locally. The current document submitted on behalf of the UK is the submission by the European Union, which remains a rough draft with no foreseeable commencement until 2021.

Of course, this will have to change. The UK is due to leave the EU in 2019, but it appears that no concrete NDCs are emerging on the part of the government so far. This is likely to emerge through an update on the Climate Change Act of 2008²⁰, but the government needs to fully grasp the need to submit an NDC as soon as possible in order to fully begin measures to meet their share of targets set out by the Paris Agreement. Particularly given that the current policy trajectory is nowhere near what is needed to meet the targets²¹.

The 25-Year Plan outlines an estimate of what the government will pledge, stating their desire to reduce carbon emissions by 80% by 2050²². This could

happen, given that the UK has reduced GHG emissions by 42% since 1990, but there needs to be a more concrete plan outlined in order for the government to begin its plans to meet the targets.

Recommendations

In light of this 25-Year Plan, the 2018 Environment Bill must have concrete motives that put the environment and the services that it provides first. The government must tread lightly and needs to ensure that the next Bill will not marginalise the environment for economic or political benefit.

The strategy outlined so far has a very business-focused approach to the environment, defining it as 'natural capital'. This continues even further with incentives likely to be offered to businesses and corporations which, without strict policy to ensure commitments to investment into the environment, can potentially create a vacuum for any actual impact. Thus, the current approach as it stands could risk the integrity and weight of the environment in future policy.

The claim that the current generation can become 'the first...to leave that environment in a better state than we found it and pass on to the next generation a natural environment protected and enhanced for the future'²³ is a bold one. Despite its boldness however, it is not impossible. A sufficient policy that supports economic interests whilst protecting the environment and our natural resources could in fact secure the very definition of sustainable development²⁴.

This would ideally include the protection and support of local biodiversity such as important pollinators, better waste management and taxes on unsustainable packaging, support and subsidies for renewable and low carbon energies, and a lasting commitment to emissions targets in order to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement. Most importantly, the government needs to ensure that the regulation has the legal backing necessary to hold stakeholders like the government and companies accountable.

About the author

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End Notes

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