

Vote Blue, Go Blue: Have the Conservatives Forgotten about the Environment?

By

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Going green is intrinsic to modern conservatism. We are a green party, and we will be a green government.

Nick Herbert, Shadow Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Europe has divided the Tories since the late 1980s. Could climate change cause similar problems?

(Tim Montgomerie, Conservative Home).

It is not that long ago that the public was constantly exposed to David Cameron's green credentials: driving the sledge pulled by huskies in the Arctic, cycling to work in the morning, the application for a wind turbine and the new Conservative logo of the blue oak tree with green foliage. He claimed that by voting blue, we would go green. The environment was central to Cameron's attempt to modernise the Conservative Party. Yet, today, the environment not only has a much lower profile, but there are numerous signs of a hostile backlash within the Conservative Party against Cameron's blue-green strategy – particularly his support for tough emission reduction targets to help in the battle against climate change.

To those who have followed the history of the party politicisation of the environment, superficially this disappearance from view has a familiar ring. Since the major political parties first started to take the environment seriously in the 1980s, parties have seemed most receptive to the issue at the mid-term of the electoral cycle when public concern tended to be highest and leaders are more receptive to environmentalist pressure from within their parties (Carter 1992, 2006; Flynn and Lowe 1992). Are we seeing a return to type: a reassertion of a familiar pattern whereby the environment will disappear from the election campaign and from the agenda of the next government? In this paper, I will argue that whilst there are some similarities with previous cycles of interest, this particular dalliance with environmental issues has seen an unprecedented party politicisation of the issue, and a major impact on government policy on climate change. A Cameron Government will be unable to ignore environmental issues and it is likely to become an arena of party competition in the next parliament.

This paper develops an earlier article (Carter 2009). The first part assesses the past and continuing significance of the environment in Cameron's strategy to modernise the Conservative Party. It then analyses the impact of the strategy on the party and on government policy before assessing how green a future Conservative government might be.

Blue-green politics

There have been two distinct stages to Cameron's approach to the environment. During the first stage, from his election as party leader in December 2005 to July 2007, when Gordon Brown became Prime Minister, the environment was Cameron's signature issue. This was the era of high profile green gestures intended to generate maximum publicity: Cameron's trip to a Norwegian glacier to see the effects of global warming, his weekly cycle to work and his application for planning permission to fix a wind turbine to his house. One particularly visible symbol was the replacement of the Party's red, white and blue 'torch of freedom' logo by an oak tree, with green foliage and a blue trunk. The oak tree was supposed to symbolise solidity, tradition, friendliness towards the environment and 'Britishness' (*The Times*, 15 September 2006).

This symbolism was reinforced by sustained rhetorical commitment. Cameron repeatedly emphasised the environment in his speeches. Returning from Norway he declared that 'tackling climate change is a key part of my ambition for the Conservative Party to lead a new green revolution' and he subsequently made several keynote speeches on environmental topics, notably climate change and energy. The environment was also a central theme in his speeches on wider topics such as 'General Well-Being' (July 2006) and 'The Challenges of Globalisation' (September 2006), and prominent in those he gave to the Party's annual conference in Autumn 2006 and the Conservative Spring Forums in 2006 and 2007. The document *Built to Last*, a new statement of Conservative principles, published in August 2006 and later approved by a referendum of Party members, included environmental protection as the third in a list of eight aims. Perhaps the most explicit example of Cameron trying to reposition the Conservatives as a 'green' party has been the decision to fight every local election campaign since 2006 on the slogan: 'Vote Blue, Go Green'.

Significantly, the need to provide something more concrete to counteract the accusation that Cameron's commitment to the environment was no more than 'greenwash' prompted George Osborne to promise in August 2006 that a Conservative government would increase the share of taxation raised by environmental taxes. At the same time, Cameron offered an enthusiastic declaration of support for the Friends of the Earth 'Big Ask' campaign to secure a Climate Change Bill, which would commit the Government to reducing carbon emissions by 3% year on year. Cameron also established the Quality of Life policy group, led by John Gummer and Zac Goldsmith (editor of *The Ecologist*), to help develop the Party's environmental programme, as one of six policy groups that met throughout 2006-7.

The second phase in Cameron's approach to the environment saw a noticeable decline in the prominence given to the issue from mid-2007. The environment initially slipped off Cameron's radar as part of the wider shift in party strategy in summer 2007 towards a more familiar Conservative agenda of crime, traditional family values and immigration. The immediate catalyst for this shift was the need to shore up Cameron's position in the face of his crumbling popularity and deter Brown from calling an early election that Autumn. As a result references to the environment virtually disappeared from his general discourse and the keynote environmental

speeches all but dried up. The report of the Quality of Life policy group – a massive 547 page tome with some radical green proposals – was quickly buried. But even after the threat of an election dissipated and Cameron’s popularity in the polls was restored, the environment did not regain its previous prominence. Throughout 2008, there were just two significant leadership speeches on the environment. The omissions were significant too. Neither the environment nor climate change was mentioned at Cameron’s press conference spelling out the priorities for a future Conservative government in May 2008. Nor, despite being the first party leader to call, in June 2008, for low carbon solutions to the economic crisis, did they feature in his keynote speech on the financial crisis in December 2008. He made just one keynote speech on the environment – on the Green Consumer Revolution – throughout 2009. In short, the Conservative leadership was (and is) now talking much less about the environment.

Nevertheless, although the party leadership was less inclined to trumpet their green credentials, a series of policy initiatives suggest that the environment has not been completely sidelined. For example, in July 2008, Cameron launched a blue-green charter. In January 2009 he unveiled plans for a low green technology start-ups, where green business ‘incubators’ would be backed by significant state funding, and he endorsed the idea of a green stock market where low carbon companies could raise cash with the benefit of tax breaks. His Green Consumer Revolution speech included details on a new Green Deal, whereby households would be entitled to receive up to £6,500 to spend on energy efficiency improvements in the home. If there was a reluctance to make many firm commitments, that was a characteristic common to all policy areas. However, what was noticeable was that there was no longer any mention of plans to increase green taxes on consumers.

So how do we explain this shift in the attention given to the environment and what is its significance for the policies of a future Conservative Government?

Brand decontamination

Even before Cameron became leader he had identified the environment as a central part of his strategy to transform the Conservative Party, frequently mentioning it during his leadership campaign. Notwithstanding his personal interest in the issue, the main reason why the environment was embraced so enthusiastically was tactical. The primary strategic aim was ‘brand decontamination’ or ‘detoxification’: to expunge the image of the Conservatives as a ‘nasty party’ by embracing a set of ‘caring’ issues, such as the environment. Party strategists hoped that once people stopped dismissing the Tories out of hand, they might then start listening to what Conservative politicians had to say about a wide range of issues.

The tactic of making the environment Cameron’s signature issue was appealing because it clearly represented a sharp and visible break with the past: Conservative governments have had a poor environmental reputation¹ and none of his predecessors as party leader had made any concerted attempt to strengthen Conservative policy on this issue. During the Thatcher era Britain gained the pejorative label of the ‘Dirty Man of Europe’ for its pollution record, and Conservative ministers, such as Nicholas Ridley, repeatedly resisted international initiatives to address major contemporary

environmental problems, such as acid rain, waste management and pollution of seas and rivers. Margaret Thatcher's 1988 speech to the Royal Society acknowledging the seriousness of contemporary global problems such as climate change and ozone depletion, came too late to repair the damage to Conservative green credentials after a decade of neglect. John Major similarly showed little interest in the environment, although his Environment Secretary, John Gummer, made some progress in turning around Britain's poor international environmental reputation. But whilst widely respected amongst environmentalists, Gummer was an isolated figure in a government largely unsympathetic to green concerns.

After the Labour landslide in 1997, Cameron's predecessors as opposition leader – Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard – made little or no attempt to attack the Government's (mediocre) record on the environment. Indeed, under Hague's leadership the Conservatives seemed positively hostile to environmental considerations. The increasingly Eurosceptic party was often critical of progressive environmental legislation emanating from Brussels and during the fuel protests in 2000 Hague praised the farmers and hauliers leading the action as 'fine upstanding citizens'. Hague's opening salvo in the 2001 General Election campaign was to promise a sixpence per litre cut in fuel duty whilst his shadow chancellor, Michael Portillo, pledged to abolish Gordon Brown's Climate Change Levy. Although Duncan Smith and Howard were personally more sympathetic to environmental concerns, they did little to change the party's image. In short, previous Conservative leaders have shown no sustained interest in promoting the environment as a core political concern.

Prior to Cameron becoming party leader, the Conservatives had made little effort to turn the environment into a party political issue. The environment has been given little space in Conservative manifestos and it has never been a priority issue in a general election campaign (Carter 2006). The Conservatives have generally trailed the other major British parties, particularly the Liberal Democrats, in embracing environmental concerns. Thus another potential benefit of embracing the environment was to make the Conservative Party more attractive to Liberal Democrat voters. Although the environment had low political saliency amongst the overall electorate – around 6 per cent regarded it as one of the most important issues facing the country when Cameron became party leader – it does have greater resonance amongst Liberal Democrat voters (e.g. YouGov, 14 December 2009, 24 February 2010). Cameron hoped the environment would help persuade Liberal Democrat voters to transfer their allegiance to the 'new Conservative Party' (Bale 2010: 290). Moreover, by its third term, the Labour Government was looking increasingly vulnerable to attack on its mediocre environmental record, with the Prime Minister in waiting, Gordon Brown, having shown little interest in promoting a green agenda as Chancellor (Carter 2008).

The impact of the environmental strategy

This section examines the impact of Cameron's blue-green strategy on the image of the Conservative Party, the Labour Government's environmental policy and the Conservative Party itself.

First, the broad ‘decontamination strategy’ seems to have worked: the Conservatives have led Labour in the polls since Spring 2006, apart from the first three months of Brown’s premiership. What is uncertain, however, is the extent to which Cameron’s advocacy of the environmental agenda has contributed to this turnaround in the electorate’s perceptions of the Conservative Party. It is very hard to draw any firm conclusions because it is difficult to disentangle the various elements, but there are proxy polling indicators that offer some clues.

There is some evidence that the public now perceives the Conservative Party as (a bit) greener than in the past. Table 1 reports several polls asking people which party they think is best on the environment (or climate change). Under Cameron the Conservative Party seems to have improved its environmental reputation (from a very low base) to the point where there now seems little to choose between the parties. One caveat is that voters may not be convinced that a Conservative Government would deliver on its promises. A Populus poll (admittedly, early in his leadership in April 2006) found that whilst marginally more respondents agreed (47 per cent) than disagreed (41 per cent) that Cameron genuinely cared about the environment, a significant majority (53 per cent/38 per cent) agreed that ‘I wouldn’t trust the Conservative party to implement policies to help the environment’.²

Table 1: Which party is best on the environment/climate change? (%)

	<i>Con</i>	<i>Lab</i>	<i>Lib Dem</i>	<i>Question topic</i>	<i>Pollster</i>
Sept 2004	7	7	16	Environment	Ipsos-Mori
Sept 2006	12	12	16	Environment	Ipsos-Mori
Nov 2006	14	10	6	Global warming	YouGov
Aug 2007	15	19	17	Environment	YouGov
Sept 2007	11	8	22	Environment	Ipsos-Mori
July 2008	21	22	26	Climate change	Populus
Aug 2008	19	16	19	Environment	Ipsos-Mori
Mar 2010	21	22	23	Environment	ICM

None of this data is conclusive, but at worst it suggests that Cameron’s efforts have achieved preference accommodation, with the environmental issue public less likely to vote for one of the other two major parties (although they might prefer the Greens to any of them). At best, we might infer that Cameron’s personal enthusiasm for the environment has contributed to the restoration of the Party’s reputation.

Second, Cameron’s environmental stance has undoubtedly had a significant impact on environmental politics and policy. Simply by talking about the issue, he has contributed to a wider party politicisation of the environment – one indicator being the increased number of people (in Table 1) who feel able to state which party is best on the environment and climate change. In a study of the Labour Government’s environmental policy, I conducted 16 interviews of senior figures in and around the environmental policy network, every one of whom emphasised the critical importance of the ‘Cameron effect’ in contributing to the step change in environmental politics after Spring 2006 (Carter and Ockwell 2007). For example, when the then Environment Secretary, David Miliband, announced that the government would be introducing a Climate Change Bill, Cameron was able to claim considerable credit for

this positive policy change: at the very least his support for it strengthened Miliband's hand in arguing for the Bill in Cabinet. Cameron certainly had a direct impact on Chancellor Brown, who as Prime Minister-in-waiting knew he would soon be facing the Conservative leader across the floor of the House of Commons and was concerned that Cameron could steal a march on him. Consequently, Brown introduced a raft of environmental measures in his last months as Chancellor, including increases in several green taxes and support for eco-towns. Subsequently, after several months when both Brown and Cameron had neglected environmental issues, Cameron's announcement of a 'blue-green charter' in June 2008 seems to have contributed to the Government announcing several new environmental initiatives, including acceptance of a tougher UK greenhouse gas emissions reduction target by 2050, the introduction of feed-in tariffs that will reward consumers more generously for selling surplus energy from small scale renewable electricity generation to the national grid, and the creation of the new Department of Energy and Climate Change under Ed Miliband. Significantly, several of the Government's green initiatives over the last three years were policies initially proposed by the Conservatives, including the Climate Change Bill, reforms of air passenger duty, feed-in tariffs and support for a new high-speed railway linking London to Birmingham and beyond. Of course, many factors combined to persuade the Government to adopt some tougher climate change mitigation measures, including the publication of the Stern Report, new assessments by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, increased public concern, the dynamism of both Miliband brothers as Environment Secretary, the lobbying of Blair and Brown by corporate leaders, and the climate change leadership of the EU. However, there is no doubt that there was a 'Cameron effect', too.

Thirdly, Cameron has encountered increasing resistance to his environmental strategy from within his own party. Initially, many party members were prepared to see where the leader's green path would lead, whilst longstanding environmentalists such as John Gummer, Tim Yeo and Peter Ainsworth, were enthusiastic proponents of the new strategy. But it gradually became clear that large sections of the party remained unconvinced by what was disparagingly referred to as the outbreak of 'bunny-hugging' within the leadership. Initially, this opposition was expressed in a disparate way. There was growing disgruntlement amongst many party activists who used the growing range of political blogs to vent their feelings, with stories often picked up in the Conservative press, such as the Telegraph. Some MPs also remained a long way off-message: for example, Eric Forth led a filibuster by Conservative backbenchers that talked out the Climate Change and Sustainable Energy private member's bill in March 2006.

This opposition was able to coalesce around Osborne's declaration that a Conservative Government would increase green taxes, albeit with no rise in the overall tax burden. This promise to raise taxes generated enormous discontent in the party. Some of the backbench opposition was predictable, as illustrated by the vitriolic criticisms of green taxes by John Redwood on his blog. More generally, key party blogs, such as Conservative Home, contain deep-seated opposition to green taxes, which solidified during the subsequent financial and economic crisis, with critics arguing that such taxes might reduce the competitiveness of British business. The disgruntlement was frequently expressed in the Conservative press, where green taxes are typically portrayed as 'stealth taxes'. By the time that Gummer's Quality of Life Policy Group reported in September 2007, in the middle of the phoney election

campaign, the mood had shifted. The report was widely criticised³ and internal party discontent prompted the leadership to issue an immediate public rejection of two of the most controversial measures – proposals for green taxes on supermarket parking and on short flights – and the document was discreetly shelved. By Autumn 2008, in the face of strong internal opposition and with the country beset by financial crisis, press speculation was rife that Osborne was preparing to drop the green tax commitment. Subsequently, no plans for any green taxes on consumers have been announced.

The unwillingness throughout the party to embrace the leadership's blue-green strategy uncritically is also illustrated by the widespread opposition of many Conservative politicians to wind farms. As Vestas announced the closure of its factory on the Isle of Wight, it emerged that the (protesting) local Conservative MP had actually campaigned vociferously against the siting of wind farms on the island. Caroline Spelman has promised to halt the construction of all wind farms in Scotland. There is also opposition to offshore wind farms, as illustrated by Conservative-led Swale Borough Council's efforts to block the 'London Array', the world's largest wind farm 12 miles offshore in Thames estuary.

Party discontent has also increasingly grown around the issue of climate change. Ever since Cameron became leader there has been a sharp division between his own commitment to tough carbon emission reduction targets, as illustrated by his support for the Friends of the Earth 'Big Ask' campaign, and the views of the significant number of Conservative MPs who are sceptical about climate change - for example, a ComRes survey in July 2008 found that one third of Conservative MPs still questioned the existence of climate change and its link to human activity. Despite Cameron's strong personal support for a Climate Change Bill, when it was voted upon in 2008, five Conservative MPs voted against it and many abstained. Crucially, party managers imposed only a low priority one-line whip in order not to provoke a backbench rebellion that would have highlighted divisions in the party (*The Independent*, 2 December 2009). In the run up to the Copenhagen summit and the controversy over the scientific claims made about climate change, this scepticism turned to public – and often vitriolic – hostility. The Conservative blogs were a key means for this opposition to be expressed, not least because many of the most popular Conservative bloggers are highly sceptical on the issue. Immediately before Copenhagen several senior politicians, including David Davis, Ann Widdecombe and Peter Lilley, expressed their doubts in newspaper articles and interviews. Davis, for example, wrote an article for *The Independent* predicting that the policy of tough targets was 'destined to collapse' because of the unpopularity of 'hair-shirt policies' imposed on the public (*The Independent* 2 December 2009). Lilley, whilst accepting that global warming is happening, claimed the effects were being 'exaggerated'. Others, such as John Maples, expressed doubts about the scientific evidence itself. Several backbenchers were more vocal: for example, Philip Davies commented that climate change had 'taken on all the hallmarks of a religion rather than a policy issue. Anyone who says "hang on a minute" is completely decried and treated like a Holocaust denier'. Yet, in practice it almost seems that the opposite is now true within the ranks of the Conservative party, as a huge momentum has grown up behind the sceptics in recent months. Tim Montgomerie of Conservative Home has commented that 'You scratch almost any backbencher and you find they are sceptical and I know of six shadow cabinet ministers who are sceptical about the economic consequences

of a low carbon policy (*The Observer*, 7 February 2010). Certainly, very few people outside the Cameron inner circle are now publicly calling for tough climate change policies.

Vote Blue, Go Green?

A Conservative Government will act to keep the lights on, cut our carbon emissions and give Britain a stake in the clean energy industries of the 21st century
(Greg Clark, Shadow secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change)

The unease within the wider Party about a core environmental policy instrument, along with the lower profile of the issue in leadership rhetoric, inevitably raises questions about how 'green' a future Conservative government might be. Will Conservative rhetoric about the environment turn out to be no more than 'greenwash'? Or would a future Conservative government led by Cameron implement a 'progressive' environmental programme?

Having spent much of his first 18 months as leader emphasising the importance he attached to protecting the environment, Cameron virtually stopped talking about it thereafter. After seeing off the threat of a general election in Autumn 2007, the environment has failed to return to the top of his agenda. This fall from grace is nicely illustrated by a comparison between the *Built to Last* document in 2006, when environment was third in a list of eight aims, and its complete absence from Cameron's list of the top six messages for the forthcoming election (Conservative Party 2010).

There is extensive polling evidence that helps explain why the environment has received decreasing attention from the Party leadership – and why they will not make it a major campaigning issue in the forthcoming general election (hence conforming to the familiar 'mid-term issue' tradition). The bottom-line is that the environment is still not an electorally salient issue. Despite the spiralling of public concern about climate change since 2006 (albeit somewhat tempered since the failure of the Copenhagen summit and the University of East Anglia/Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change controversies) the public still ranks the environment quite low in the list of most important issues facing the country today. Even in the run-up to the Copenhagen summit during which climate change was getting huge publicity, when asked to name up to 4 issues only 18 per cent of respondents included the environment as one of the most important issues facing the country (ranking it eighth overall)(YouGov, 14 December 2009). Similarly, when asked to name up to three issues, only 15 per cent stated the environment (YouGov, 24 February 2010). With just a small minority of voters stressing the importance of the environment, and none of the major parties seen as distinctly greener than the others, there seems to be little electoral advantage to be gained if the Conservatives campaign vigorously on the environment. Interestingly, one poll of marginal seats suggested that the environment 'issue public' – in this case the 11 per cent who named it as one three top issues - are likely to support the Liberal Democrats (24 per cent), or Labour (13 per cent), with very few voting Conservative (5 per cent) (YouGov, 4 March 2010). In an earlier indication that Cameron's green message was not popular with core supporters, party pollsters found that Conservative focus groups criticised Cameron for 'just going on

about the environment all the time’ – a further factor in the leadership’s decision to play down the issue.

Nevertheless, the environment will probably receive more attention than in previous elections. Having introduced some progressive policies on climate change Labour will want to stress how much it has done and Cameron, at least, will want to try to trump Labour on the issue, whilst projecting a green image to potential Liberal Democrat switchers. There are also good strategic reasons why Cameron will want to include plenty of commitments in the manifesto.

Even if the environment gets little airing during the election campaign, the combination of Cameron’s personal commitment and the requirement that *any* future government must reduce emissions, suggests that a Conservative government will wish to address climate change seriously. But a major obstacle – especially to Cameron’s plans for a low carbon economy and the achievement of stringent emissions reduction targets – is clearly the extensive and deep-seated hostility within the party to his green agenda. Obviously much will depend on the make-up of the new parliamentary party. Significantly, a Conservative Home poll of 141 Conservative candidates in winnable seats identified ‘reducing Britain’s carbon footprint’ as the least important of 19 priorities for the next government (*The Independent* 19 January 2010). So confident is the sceptical blogger, Tim Montgomerie, of the groundswell of opposition to Cameron’s blue-green strategy that he claimed: ‘I’m confident the sceptics are going to win. It’s for Cameron to decide how he’s going to get out of this. He’s lost the battle already’ (*Daily Express*, 19 January 2010). So how might Cameron overcome this opposition?

One strategy may be to include in the general election manifesto several progressive commitments that Cameron could ensure are implemented in the first two years of his premiership, whilst he benefits from the honeymoon period of having brought the Conservatives back into office after 13 years in Opposition. If policy commitments are enshrined in the manifesto, it is much easier for the leader to overcome opposition to them.

A second approach is to repackage climate change policies in different, more appealing ways. This tactic is already evident in the energy policy green paper announced by Greg Clark and Cameron in March 2010, in which climate change measures are framed – quite reasonably - as delivering energy security and economic development. Thus proposals to streamline the planning process, provide a floor price for carbon and invest in the grid infrastructure to help renewable (and nuclear) energy, would also ‘ensure that the lights stay on’ whilst ‘boosting investment and creating job’ (Greg Clark, *The Times Online*, 19 March 2010).

Another tactic – and one necessitated by the state of public finances – will be to seek out low cost policies, particularly those that can also be demonstrated to have additional (non-environmental) benefits. A good example of this approach is the plan to put smart meters in millions of homes so that people can easily see how to reduce their energy use, thereby saving people money as well as cutting carbon emissions. Of course, the need to ‘sell’ carbon reduction policies more effectively to the public and to business so that they are not seen as a costly burden is something that the current

government and the wider environmental community is already grappling with, so in this sense the Conservatives are promising more of the same.

Will these efforts to circumvent party opposition amount to a credible climate change programme? A fundamental problem for the leadership is that, insofar as the Conservatives had a distinctive and ambitious climate change strategy, it rested heavily on the commitment to increase green taxes. It seems unlikely that new green taxes on consumers will feature in the manifesto, which will leave a large hole in their climate change programme. One way in which they have tried to plug the gap is by reversing their previous opposition to nuclear power. The recent energy green paper made clear that a Conservative Government, following Labour's lead, will promote the construction of new nuclear reactors. However, like the Labour Government, the Conservatives are offering no credible package for tackling rapidly rising emissions in the transport sector. Their symbolic opposition (which is deeply unpopular in the grassroots party⁴) to the construction of a third runway at Heathrow airport now appears to be little more than gesture politics to help secure key marginal seats. The policy bears the imprint of Zac Goldsmith, who will be the Conservative candidate for Richmond Park, close to the Heathrow flight path. (Indeed, it is consistent with the radical proposal for a moratorium on all new airport expansion in the otherwise forgotten Quality of Life policy review document.) But there is no indication that opposition to the Heathrow runway represents a major policy U-turn on aviation policy, away from the Labour Government's 'predict and provide' approach set out in the 2003 aviation White Paper.

A Conservative Government might also choose to emphasise other environmental policies that are less directly linked to climate change, such as protecting habitats and reducing waste. Here there is also some interest in using the market to provide incentives. Thus rather than tax or punish households that do not recycle, the Conservatives are impressed by American examples of councils that provide incentives to those that do recycle. They also seem willing to embrace an ecosystem approach to preventing biodiversity loss by using conservation credits to encourage investment in biodiversity. However, in an era of public expenditure reduction the obvious concern is that there will be insufficient money available to make any credit/incentive scheme work effectively.

Overall, with the Labour government having stolen several Conservative ideas – and in recent months having moved beyond what the Conservatives are promising in some areas – it is hard to see any significant difference on paper between the two parties. For a while the Conservatives looked different – and more progressive – because of Cameron's personal advocacy of the environment and the leadership's commitment to raising green taxes. However, over the last year or so, Ed Miliband has presided over a step-change in the Labour Government's approach to climate change – and looked personally committed and impressive in doing so – whilst Cameron's blue-green revolution has run into major opposition from his party, raising serious doubts about his capacity as Prime Minister to deliver a progressive climate change programme

Moreover, on a wider note, the fierce resistance to the blue-green strategy is an important indication that Cameron's modernisation of the party remains only skin deep. The extent of opposition to the leadership's position on climate change has even prompted Tim Montgomerie to comment that: 'Europe has divided the Tories since

the late 1980s. Could climate change cause similar problems?’ (*The Independent*, 19 January 2010). Whilst he might be overstating the impact of climate change, it has certainly become one of the dividing lines separating the modernisers and the traditional party activists – with the latter growing significantly stronger over the last six months.

The very fact that Montgomerie could make such a claim about the potential impact of climate change is also a clear demonstration that environmental politics in Britain has changed. Even if the environment receives little attention in an election campaign likely to be dominated by the economy, public expenditure, public services and immigration, it would be wrong to regard that as evidence that environmental politics has resettled into a familiar mid-term pattern. Cameron’s embrace of the environment – albeit for the primary instrumental purpose of rebranding the party – has undoubtedly contributed to a reinvigoration of environmental politics. Even if it remains of low electoral salience, the environment is now more politicised than ever before. In particular, now that climate change is such a divisive issue within the Conservative Party, the opposition parties are certain to use it as an issue to attack a future Conservative Government. Cameron’s commitment to climate change does seem genuine, and he can honestly claim to have exerted some impact already, by forcing the Labour Government to improve its climate change policies significantly over the last three years. But Cameron as Prime Minister would be certain to face serious opposition from his own party to his blue-green strategy in a context when the economic recession, public expenditure cuts and the recent controversies about the climate change science will make it hard for any government to push through progressive policies. In practice, that probably means that at best, a Conservative government would mean continuity rather than change in environmental policy. At worst, Cameron may be forced to shelve his aspiration to create a low carbon economy. Ironically, the most likely avenue for a more radical approach may lie with a hung parliament. If a Cameron government were to be dependent on securing Liberal Democrat support, then the environment is one area where the leaderships of the two parties might be able to agree a common programme.

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Notes

¹ For accounts of environmental policy under the Conservatives, see McCormick, (1991) and Carter and Lowe (2000).

² Populus, April 2006, <http://www.populuslimited.com/the-daily-politics-political-attitudes-020406.html>).

³ See, for example, the Spectator's coffee house blog which dismissed the report as 'overflowing with guff': <http://www.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/164626/policy-pollution.html>

⁴ The Heathrow commitment prompted the formation of a grassroots group called 'Conservatives for International Travel' to lobby for the unrestricted growth of aviation (<http://www.c-fit.org.uk/>)