

PEOPLE, POLITICS AND THE PLANET: ANY QUESTIONS?

What does 'Brexit' mean for the future of the UK's environment?

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The British Ecological Society and the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) partnered with the Sibthorp Trust – a small charity aiming to keep the environment on the public agenda and question conventional thinking - to promote a lively public debate on 21 July 2016. Chaired by broadcaster Jonathan Dimbleby, the panel for *People, Politics and the Planet: Any Questions?* comprised George Eustice MP (Conservative, Minister of State for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food), Kerry McCarthy MP (Labour, former Shadow Secretary of State for the Environment), Baroness Kate Parminter (Liberal Democrats, Environment Spokesperson), Natalie Bennett (Green Party, Leader), Stuart Agnew MEP (UKIP, Agriculture Spokesperson) and Martin Nesbit (Senior Fellow, Institute for European Environmental Policy).

This was the second year of the *Any Questions* panel debate. While the 2015 event challenged politicians on their environmental priorities if elected, this year the focus was clearly on the implications of 'Brexit'. An audience of over 400 included members of both Societies as well as the general public, and included a live link to the BES Undergraduate Summer School at Malham Tarn, ensuring strong student participation. Held in the Ondaatje Theatre at the RGS-IBG, where so many research expeditions were planned and reported on, it was perhaps fitting that no less a step into the unknown was being discussed.

Just 28 days after the EU Referendum this was the first opportunity to ask some of our politicians and an expert from the Institute for European Environmental Policy what 'Brexit'



may actually mean for our natural environment. There is a growing recognition that the environment is not just a place for nature - its wildlife and habitats - but that it underpins the sustainability and health of our economy, contributes to all aspects of human wellbeing, and provides the resilience to combat global threats such as climate change and food insecurity.

There is still a long way to go if we are to better link the environment with other policy areas of government and some may feel that this holds back the prioritisation of the environment in decision-making. Our links to European Directives have been a strong driver of UK environmental policy and natural resource management in recent decades. How might this now change? Our management of the environment is necessarily determined by political decisions and priorities but government's use of best available scientific evidence and other knowledge has sometimes been lacking.

A full recording of the event can be found at <https://youtu.be/P4HEWYQPoDw> but here we summarise some key aspects of the issues raised.

THE OPENING SALVO: GREENER IN OR MORE EFFECTIVE OUT?

The strength of support from a 28-strong European Union was the basis of the argument for ensuring that environmental matters were taken more seriously within member states and was what underpinned more effective and coherent international actions and representation. Natalie Bennett strongly endorsed that position, emphasising the importance of the environment in dealing with many of the current social and economic crises. Kerry McCarthy regretted that the environment had not been sufficiently discussed during the Brexit debate and was sceptical whether the government could deliver improved environmental policy. Baroness Parminter was concerned that the boundary between the UK and the rest of the EU would raise unanticipated problems and that as so many environmental questions are global they need the combined power of the EU to tackle them. The collaborative strength of the EU was cited as an exemplar for the rest of the world of how cooperation could work to implement climate policy. Martin Nesbit argued that the EU had been a positive force for environmental policy and that there were significant risks from an exit without very careful contingency planning. He gave the example of the designation of Marine Conservation Areas which might not have been implemented without the European push.

Contrary to these positions, George Eustice indicated that there was

genuine excitement in Defra about the new opportunities that Brexit would provide for policy innovation rather than simply following the Brussels lead. In particular it was argued that 'Brexit' would put the UK back on the world environment stage with its own voice as opposed to being buried in (and sometimes at odds with) the EU collective. Examples of animal welfare and fishing rules were cited in illustration. The Minister dismissed concerns over the future of important Directives such as the Birds and Habitats Directive, citing as an example our commitment to the Bern Convention which would allow government to adapt legislation more specifically suited to the UK. Stuart Agnew was particularly pleased at the prospects of the UK being able to take control of its fishing industry and management as well as farming and climate control measures. Of overriding significance was the difficulty in achieving coherent policy, especially in agriculture, among 28 member states with very different socio-cultural and economic conditions.

WHAT DO WE WANT FROM THE ENVIRONMENT?

In a future outside of the Common Agricultural Policy, which has shaped the management of much of our countryside, there is a pressing need for greater public debate on what we actually want from our land (together with its water and living resources). Implicitly reminiscent of the first principle of the Ecosystem Approach, as adopted by the Convention on Biological Diversity and underpinning much of Defra's stated policy objectives, the debate recognised fully the wider ecosystem services beyond food production. For example, Baroness Parminter suggested the need for a "common landscape policy", and Kerry McCarthy endorsed the idea of a holistic approach to land management. There are already examples of businesses and their customers, especially the water companies, contributing costs to environmental improvements resulting in public benefits, and the notion of paying farmers and landowners for the delivery of services such as floodwater

retention seems well established in the political mindset. The immense scientific effort that went into the UK National Ecosystem Assessment can play a vital role in reinforcing this policy development.

IMPORTANCE OF SCIENCE AND AN EVIDENCE-INFORMED APPROACH

Acknowledgement of the need for sound science and other appropriate evidence must be music to the ears of the membership of the BES and RGS-IBG. It was highlighted with specific reference to the debate on pesticides, with George Eustice stating that even outside of the EU "we'll follow the science as we always do". While the Minister quoted research from the NERC-funded Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, much scientific research and conservation action is supported by the EU, and concerns over loss of funding and access to networks of collaboration must be assuaged. George Eustice suggested that that new funding might proceed more efficiently without the complex bureaucracy often attached by the European Commission- avoiding what was described as some "dead-weight" costs associated with certain projects.

ACHIEVING GREATER COHERENCE AND IMPLEMENTATION OF DESIRED ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

Much discussion revolved around the potential benefits of retrieving competence over the environment from Brussels and legal jeopardies preventing discretionary actions in exceptional cases of individual or community wellbeing. The importance of risk management tools to assist farmers and the incorporation of new support for ecosystem service provision were aspects of the desire for more coherence across sectoral policies. There was recognition of the value of the experiences from the CAP and Stuart Agnew expressed the view that the general support to farmers from the taxpayer in terms of single farm payments was a fair and effective way of reducing food prices. George Eustice felt that under the

EU there was too much emphasis on spatial designation of conservation areas particularly in the case of marine areas where highly mobile species were a key object of protection. He advocated more emphasis on process and management strategies supported for example by by-laws.

LOOKING AHEAD TO THE POST-BREXIT LANDSCAPE

There is clearly still much uncertainty regarding how the environmental balance sheet might look after Article 50 is triggered and Brexit subsequently takes place. One of the positive themes emerging from the debate is that politicians across different persuasions appear increasingly aware of the artificiality of any separation between our policy for food and farming as against biodiversity and the need to see ecology and economics as part of the same coherent framework. Yet along with the opportunities for innovation and fresh thinking that Brexit may offer, it also poses a great number of environmental risks as established legislative frameworks are changed. It is essential that future environmental standards are at least as good, if not better, than those that currently exist within the European Union.

It is hoped that the partnership between the Sibthorp Trust, the BES and the RGS with IBG can continue to encourage informed debate that might just yield post-Brexit environmental benefits.

