

Conservative voters want the right kind of green policy

The voters of Chesham and Amersham sent a message to the Conservative party. It is a message they have been trying sending in other ways for a long time, and one that is shared with many other constituencies in Conservative England. They want a green Conservative policy that is relevant to their lives, landscape and locality. As Conservatives we all wish to conserve and look after the best of our local natural world. We understand our relationship with fields, farms and forests and the need to treat them well. The voters do not welcome excessive new housing development taking away their countryside. In Chesham and Amersham they have long fought against the way HS2 will cut swathes through their open spaces and woods and leave many of them living close to a very noisy fast train line.

The battle of greenery will be the defining one of our age. The Conservatives will not be able to outbid the Greens and Liberal Democrats, parties in opposition, when it comes to tougher action to cut carbon and match ever more difficult targets. A carbon target is easy for those not in office, and very difficult for those in power who need to persuade or force millions of people to change their behaviours to deliver. The way Conservatives can reassure most that we are the party of good green is to set out a new and positive green agenda.

First the government must show how we will limit excessive migration and too many demands to build more homes. We believe in treating people well that we welcome into our country, including helping them with good housing. There has to be a limit on how many we can accommodate, given the shortage of good housing and the need to cater for the wishes of the many already legally settled here for better provision for them and their families. The current pace of housebuilding in the most popular areas is unsustainable whilst the need is very great. If hundreds of thousands of new people come every year to join us that is a lot of extra housing.

We need to demonstrate an intuition about what people will do for the green cause. We can make common progress with the many by encouraging, incentivising and promoting better home insulation. Lower fuel bills is a winning proposition. If the aim is to substitute dearer power for cheaper power, and more interruptible power for reliable power, it will be a difficult sell. The government still hasn't even removed the EU's VAT levy on insulation materials, boiler controls, draught excluder and the rest. Surely that would help promote the virtues of keeping warm whilst burning less energy. The public reluctance to take up smart meters should worry the

government, as these are offered free. People see little advantage for them for the work that has to be done in their home. They already know how much power they are consuming, and what makes the most difference to their bills. Social media is full of chat that may be misinformed fearing that a smart meter will lead to differential pricing by time of day and even temporary removals of power as the authorities seek to balance a system with more interruptible wind and solar power, and with more heavy demands from car battery recharging and electric heating.

The emerging government agenda to be kinder to animals is a positive. We are a nation of animal lovers. There needs to be some commonsense about how far to go on rewilding with the introduction of dangerous species to areas people may wish to use for recreation or food production. There is considerable support for the government passion to plant many more trees. Many a Conservative would rather have a wood nearby than another housing estate. As the trees grow we should also encourage sustainable forestry. It is a disgrace that we import so much of our timber needs, often from colder countries where the growing times are longer. The government could be greener by offering to cut the wood miles. The economy would be stronger for producing more of our own material for roof trusses and floors, fuel for biomass electricity plants and timber for furniture.

At the heart of the new agriculture policies being set out following our exit from the Common Agricultural Policy the emphasis is all on nature. I am in favour of encouraging areas of wildflowers, good hedgerows and attractive woods and coppices. I am also very keen on cutting the food miles. For too long we have been dragged into dependence on continental food at the expense of our domestic agriculture. Our dairy industry was kept small by shortage of quota, our fruit industry was offered grants to grub up our orchards to replace Cox with the Golden delicious. Our market gardening industry for flowers and vegetables was undercut by the Dutch and others, with arguments over subsidies and the price of gas to heat glasshouses. Defra should as a matter of urgency bring forward support systems to encourage a big expansion of our domestic capacity to grow fruit, flowers and vegetables, and to expand our meat and dairy activities to reduce imports. Our competitors use a range of trade barriers and subsidies to benefit them. Our market share has fallen a lot in the last fifty years. Today there is strong demand for more UK produced food which super markets are struggling to meet. Note how anything home produced sports the Union flag to reassure, and note how anything from the continent has its origin in small letters with no national or EU flag to entice us, presumably for fear of deterring those who want domestic produce. More fields honestly tilled and more orchards full of fruit would add to the beauty of our landscape.

I have no problem with an electric revolution, but it can only proceed with popular consent. That means working with the private sector on

the better and cheaper ways of travelling and heating that electricity might afford us. It also means proceeding at a pace which ensures we have enough electric power to meet the needs of the buyers of the new electric products. The UK has been pushed into dependence on importing electricity from the continent. We should be self sufficient and building extra capacity to allow for growth. Staying short of power and dependent on unreliable imports points to higher prices and disruptions ahead. We need more hydro and pump storage to smooth out interruptible power and more biomass for baseload based on UK wood pellets.

In Australia and in Canada in their 2019 General elections the left of centre parties went too far with their decarbonisation proposals. People dependent on fossil fuels felt threatened, and voted instead for the Conservatives who took a more moderate line. We need to learn from that. Transitions have losers as well as winners and they have votes and rights. An opposition party can demand the closure of all traditional vehicle factories and the end of North Sea oil and gas. Government has to decide what happens to replace them and what happens to all the people who would lose their jobs by being on the wrong side of change.