

It's the climate emergency, stupid

Introduction

Let me start by thanking all of you. For inviting me. For being here to listen. And to the whole of the Aldersgate Group for doing what you do. In championing a competitive and environmentally sustainable economy you are doing the right thing – and indeed the most important thing that any of us can do right now. In doing it through active political engagement, strong evidence based analysis, and well-judged policy proposals you are doing it in the right way. And you are the right people to do it: there is nothing more powerful than a coalition of all the key players, from business, the NGO world and the public sector; and you are that coalition.

The climate emergency is the Main Thing

I worked in Washington DC during Bill Clinton's Presidency. The four words that got him to the White House against all the odds were coined by his campaign strategist James Carville 'it's the economy, stupid.' The point was to remind the campaign team what really mattered to the country and the voters. At Harvard Business School they teach you that success in any organisation comes down to following a simple principle, which is this: 'The main thing is to make sure that the Main Thing really is the main thing.' I'll be honest: I've been Chief Executive of the Environment Agency for over three and a half years now, and it's taken me a while realise what the Main Thing is. And the answer, which I now say to myself every day, is this: it's the climate emergency, stupid.

That's because the biggest single threat to everything we all care about, and the biggest threat to everything the Environment Agency exists to do – protect people from flood and drought, enhance the environment, support sustainable growth – is climate change.

Global heating is driving more extreme rainfall and rising sea levels, which is putting more people at risk of flooding. It's driving hotter and drier summers, putting our country – already experiencing water scarcity – at risk of what I call the Jaws of Death: the point twenty or so years out from now where the lines on the graph showing rising water demand and diminishing water supply cross, and we don't have enough water. Climate change is damaging our air, our water and our soils, as pollution incidents spike in more extreme hot weather. During last summer's prolonged dry spell, the Environment Agency responded to more than three times the normal amount of environmental incidents: fish kills, fires, water pollution, etc.

And climate change risks undermining our ability to deliver the sustainable growth that people need and demand. That's because more extreme weather will increasingly damage the inputs and the infrastructure on which our economies depend.

I saw the real world effects when I lived and worked in India. There,

increasingly extreme floods and drought kill hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people every year. Down at sea level, in the Sundarbans, I saw how the rising waters are not just taking away the places people live in but undermining the local economy, which is based on prawn farming. Up in the Himalayas, the rising temperatures mean that the commercial orchid growers I met are having to plant their flowers higher up the mountain each year. After a while they will run out of mountain. And it's not just about luxuries like orchids. It's about our most basic requirement: food. For farmers everywhere, more extreme weather will harm crop yields and make market prices more volatile. Some parts of the world will cease to be able to produce food at all because of rising sea levels or a lack of rainfall.

So far so depressing. It's easy to state the problem. The real issue is how we can tackle it successfully. I think we need to respond at three levels. We need a political and policy response from politicians and governments. We need an organisational response from businesses and organisations. And we need a public response, which is (not to put too fine a point about it) about changing the way we all live.

The political and policy response

The political response needs to be to recognise how urgent and important it now is to tackle the climate emergency; and to put doing so at the top of the political agenda, with all the decisions that flow from that. Winston Churchill once said that democracy was the worst form of government except for all the others. I'm a fan of democracy. Among other things, it means that the politicians will eventually do more or less what the voters want. And what the voters, here and elsewhere, are increasingly demanding of their politicians now is a response to the climate emergency.

You can see that in the Extinction Rebellion protests; in the Greta Thunberg effect; and in the school climate strike movement. And it's not just the young or the activists who are making noise. As I go round the country, I hear more and more frequently the same message from everyone – young, old, rich, poor, north, south. What they say to me is that things are not the same, that something bad is happening to our weather and to our climate, and that we need to tackle it.

Churchill also said that the best argument against democracy was a five minute conversation with the average voter. I would suggest that today the best argument for action on climate is a five minute conversation with the average voter.

As well as being a fan of democracy, I am also a fan of politicians. Most of the ones I have worked with over my career are in politics for exactly the right reason: to make the world a better place.

And I do think the politicians are listening. You can see that, for example, in what Michael Gove is saying. He has called this out as a climate emergency. His major speech in November 2018 – No Such Thing As Too Much Information – The Science and Politics of Climate Change – is a thoughtful and passionate call to arms. Jeremy Corbyn has called on the government to

declare a climate emergency. There is growing support across the political spectrum for action.

I also think we are making progress towards the right policies. The UK can take credit for the Climate Change Act, as can the politicians from all parties who have backed it – one of the few (and undoubtedly the most important) examples of real bipartisanship I can recall in the last few decades. The Act, as you know, was the first time a major economy took on legally binding commitments to reduce its greenhouse gas output.

The Prime Minister and the present government can also take credit for the hugely important new commitment to net zero by 2050 – to legislation which will commit us not just to continue reducing our carbon emissions but to get to a balance by 2050 where we remove as much carbon from the environment as we emit.

We should also recognise the significance of two commitments the Chancellor made in the Spring Statement. These were little noticed at the time in the fog of the Parliamentary war over Brexit. But the Chancellor announced that the government would do two really important things.

First, it will introduce a Future Homes Standard by 2025, so that new build homes are future-proofed with low carbon heating and world-leading levels of energy efficiency. That will help mitigate one of the main drivers of climate change.

Second, the government will mandate net gain for biodiversity on new developments. That will help ensure developers consider the needs of the animals, plants and environment as well as the needs of the humans; and delivering an overall increase in biodiversity will also help mitigate many of the effects of climate change. The right policy is what I call net zero plus. We need to embrace net zero. But it's not enough of its own. We also need to a commitment to net gain. Not just net gain to biodiversity. But – if we are going to deliver the future our children want – net gain to growth as well.

There should be an audacious ambition at the heart of our strategy for tackling the climate emergency: to make a better world – literally. We shouldn't be aiming for a planet which is in a marginally less bad state than it would be if we didn't act. We should be aiming for a planet which is better than it was and better than it is now. A planet where the climate stabilises, biodiversity increases and sustainable growth goes forward, lifting billions of people out of poverty. A planet which is blue and green, not grey and brown.

That's the insight at the heart of the government's 25 Year Environment Plan: that we should be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we found it. It's that political ambition that needs to infuse all our policy decisions.

The response from individual organisations

The right response from governments and politicians is a necessary but not sufficient condition for success in tackling the climate emergency. The individual organisations to which we, and most people on this planet belong – businesses, public sector bodies, NGOs – all have a central role to play too.

What the Environment Agency is doing

What is the Environment Agency doing? We're seeking to embed climate action in everything we do. So: We have just produced a proposed new national strategy for managing the risks of flooding and coastal erosion. This is an explicit response to the climate challenge. In the face of an existential threat it makes some radical proposals.

It suggests that we should move from a strategy of protection – essentially building walls round things we want to protect against flood and erosion- to a broader one of resilience, which will strengthen the nation's ability to cope with flooding and coastal change when it does happen.

It suggests that we should recognise that some communities cannot be defended forever against ever higher seas and rivers, and should be moved out of harm's way.

It suggests that all our infrastructure should be resilient to the effects of climate change. And it suggests that we consider common standards of resilience for all communities, though how those standards will be achieved will naturally differ from place to place.

We're consulting on the strategy right now. Please have a look and tell us what you think. Flooding and coastal erosion affects everyone, directly or indirectly. We want the strategy which tackles it to be everyone's too. We're also changing the way we regulate businesses in response to the climate crisis. We're working with industry to ensure that we grant permits to operate only if applicants have assessed and addressed the climate risks to their proposed activities.

We're paying particular attention to the big and potentially hazardous industrial installations we regulate – oil refineries, chemical works, nuclear power plants – where the consequences of a climate driven event like a flood or a fire could be particularly severe.

And we're considering with BEIS how, once we leave the EU, we can replace the EU Emissions Trading System, which the Environment Agency oversees, with arrangements which are as or more effective in bearing down on carbon emissions.

We're also determined to treat the climate emergency as an opportunity not just a risk. An opportunity in particular to make things better, not just less bad; and to deliver multiple benefits. Let me give you two examples. Example One: near Bristol, the Avonmouth Severnside Enterprise Area is seeking to create growth and 12,000 new jobs. To ensure it can reach its full

potential the Environment Agency is delivering new flood defences resilient against the more extreme rainfall and higher seas that global heating is bringing; and providing new wetland habitat to offset the impact the development would otherwise have on the wildlife of the River Severn. It's a great example of how you can respond to climate change with something that actually creates a better place: more jobs and prosperity, more security against flooding, more habitat, more wildlife, more beauty.

Example Two: the OxCam Arc. This development between Oxford and Cambridge may see up to one million new homes by 2050, more infrastructure, and more jobs and businesses based on the knowledge economy. There are pressures: the twin risks of flooding and drought and the obvious risks to the environment. We are working to turn those risks into opportunity: an opportunity to enable sustainable growth, deliver environmental net gain, and develop climate resilience.

By working together with our partners – in Defra and elsewhere across government, the developers, local authorities, infrastructure providers – we're aiming to plan the right communities from the start. The goal is to build energy and water efficient homes with a clean and plentiful water supply; climate resilient developments supported by low carbon energy and transport infrastructure, with green and blue spaces for recreation and habitats for wildlife. It's a chance to show that we really can create great places to live and work, enhance resilience to climate change, support the economy and improve the natural environment, all at the same time.

The Environment Agency has a direct role in mitigating the extent of climate change, in responding to its consequences, and in helping others adapt. But all organisations, including the Environment Agency, also need to look at themselves and take responsibility for how their own operations are affecting the climate. We should all be seeking to follow Gandhi's advice: be the change you want to see in the world.

The Environment Agency is trying hard. Since 2006/07 we have cut our own carbon footprint by 48%. Our vehicle fleet has tightly defined CO₂ and NO_x limits and by 2025 all of it will be ultra low emission. We're using our procurement power to drive change, for example insisting that a well-known hotel chain we use eliminates Single Use Plastic or lose our custom (they chose the former). We're building sustainability as standard into our contracts, for example by insisting that all the timber we buy (which is a lot) is certified legal and sustainable. We are using our Pension Fund to encourage the companies in which it invests to adopt sustainable business practices.

But as Gandhi knew himself, being the change you want to see in the world isn't always that easy. Example: net zero. The Environment Agency has a commitment to reduce our own carbon footprint year on year, and we are doing that. But we don't yet have a commitment to be a net zero organisation ourselves. We are pretty clear that we should have such a commitment. And as more and more other businesses – including those we regulate like the water companies – make that commitment themselves, we know we need to set an example for others.

But there's a but. We also need to be able to do what we do. One of the things we do, and are doing right now in Wainfleet in Lincolnshire, is help communities recover from flooding – including by using our pumps to take water out of flooded homes and away from the town. The high volume pumps we use run on diesel, and whenever there's a flood our carbon footprint goes up. I cannot tell the people of Wainfleet that we are not going to be running our pumps today because we need to save on carbon. So if we are going to hit a net zero target and carry on serving the people and communities we exist to serve, we will need to find new technology and new techniques. We will.

There's a second but. What kind of net zero target do we set? Most of the ones I've seen are targets for net zero production of carbon. But there is a school of thought that this is the wrong target. Some argue that the right target is a much more demanding one, that of net zero consumption of carbon. That would entail not just ensuring we don't produce any net output of carbon ourselves, but that we don't consume goods or services which have themselves produced a net increase in carbon emissions.

That would be a much bigger challenge, and could force us to radically configure our whole business. That might be the right thing to do in due course, but before we set our target, we will want to think carefully about its nature and when we aspire to hit it. And we will want to listen to others, including members of this group, about how they are doing it.

There's a wider point there: while individual organisations can and should be taking action, the most powerful action of all is collective action. All of you, and the businesses and bodies you represent, are committed to action on climate. Together we can help each other and prompt others to get engaged. And all of you can help the Environment Agency directly, in many ways: responding to our new flood strategy, helping us identify partnership funding from business to create the better places we all want to create, helping us make the case for action now to ensure water resilience for the next generation.

The public response: changing how we live.

And you can help us with the biggest challenge of all, if we are to end the climate emergency: changing everyone's behaviour. Put simply, we need to have less stuff and use it better. An economy based on constantly creating things people don't need with resources we can't replace is madness. You don't need to be a Marxist to think that, just a realist.

And the stuff we do have not only needs to be used better: it needs to be made better too. Inbuilt obsolescence and poor manufacturing standards are the enemies of sustainability. A society which throws everything away rather than keeping it or reusing it, is not just extravagant: it's digging its own grave. You don't have to be an ecowarrior to think that, just a clear-eyed observer.

So the biggest challenge, and the biggest prize of all, is to change how we live, work and play. That's doable: social attitudes really can shift, and quickly. We've seen it happen for the better in one generation in terms of

attitudes to women, minorities, sexuality, cruelty to animals, smoking, safety, drink driving, mental health. That tells me it can also happen on climate.

Conclusion: don't be downhearted – we can do this.

A final point. It's easy to be daunted by the scale of the challenge. It's easy to conclude that it's all too difficult, that we are all doomed, and that there's no point in bothering to try to fight the inevitable. Easy but wrong, because none of those things are true.

Humans caused this crisis. Humans can fix it. While humans can do stupid things, our defining characteristic, and the reason we're all here, is that we're smart. If putting our own existence at risk by altering the world's climate was the stupidest thing we humans have ever done, we also have the capacity to get ourselves out of this mess. The right policies, the right innovation, the right attitude, the right lifestyle – all of these are in our gift. And that means that it is also in our gift to end the climate emergency and keep this world a great place to live – both for the humans, and for all the other forms of life that didn't cause this crisis.

Last week I was at the annual Flood and Coastal Erosion conference, where the climate emergency was the underlying theme. One of our speakers was a 15 year old girl, Emma Greenwood, who is the Youth MP for Bury. She told the assembled adults:

You have the power to make or break my future.

We do have that power. Let us use it wisely.