

My speech during the Third Reading of the Environment Bill, 26 May 2021

I welcome cleaner air and cleaner water, and I wish the Bill well as it completes its passage. I hope that we will be nicer to nature and better to the other species we share our islands with.

I would like briefly to make a few points to the Secretary of State and the ministerial team, who have worked hard to get this far. The first point is on water. I urge them to work with the water industry and the regulators to put in more reservoir capacity. We have had many homes and new families coming into my area of Wokingham and West Berkshire, but there has been no increase in potential water supply. Nationwide, we still have a rising population, and they will need good provision of clean water.

There are two great natural advantages of having more reservoir capacity. First, when we have long periods of excessive rainfall—we seem to be having one at the moment—and there is the danger of the rivers overtopping and causing flood damage, we need more good places to park the water, and we could then recharge the extra reservoir capacity. Secondly, were we once again to have one of those long, hot summers with long dry spells, as we have had from time to time in the past, we would be able to draw down in more comfort, knowing that we had adequate reservoir capacity, without having to run the streams and rivers too low or draw excessively on the natural aquifers.

On Report, I talked about the excellent news that there will be many more trees and urged Ministers to ensure that they help to build a much bigger forestry and timber industry. We import far too much and need to replace it with home production and fewer wood miles. I also urge the Secretary of State to bring forward those great schemes to promote more food production here at home. We lost too much market share, particularly in areas such as vegetables and fruit, in our CAP days. I do not think it is morally right to be drawing so much of that food from a country such as Spain, which is parched and in great difficulties eking out its inadequate water supplies, when we have plenty of water at home and could do so much more to promote a good domestic industry, cutting the food miles and giving confidence in the environmental benefits of having the home product.

I would also like to draw Ministers' attention to the unresolved business that they have promised to work on as we complete this piece of legislation: the possible conflict between the Office for Environmental Protection and the Climate Change Committee. I urge Ministers to recognise that they need to supervise both bodies and give them clear public guidance on their remits. The Government will need to bring forward that piece of work to explain what the relative roles of the two are and how the different sets of targets—the natural UK targets on the one hand and the climate change targets on the other—will knit together and be compatible, rather than cause tensions.

For example, we need to know what the thinking is about the pace of carbon dioxide reduction and transition and how that impacts on our natural landscape, because if we are going to accelerate the move to electric vehicles or from gas boilers or both, there will need to be massive investment. That investment includes the production of a lot of steel, glass and batteries. Mining activity somewhere is required to produce those raw materials and fashion them into something that can then be part of an electric product. We need to know whether we will be doing any of that in the UK, or whether the idea is that we should import much of it because we do not wish to husband our own natural resources for this purpose.

If we are going to import, we should properly account for it, because it is not helping the planet if we say, "Well, we're not putting the mine here or burning the coal to smelt the steel here," but it is happening somewhere else. Indeed, it may be happening somewhere else where environmental concerns are taken much less seriously and the environmental damage of producing that product is far greater than if we had done it at home.

I hope that more work will be published on the pace and cost of transition. Again, the Bill seems to point us more in the direction of repair, maintenance, recycling and reuse, and not wanting a throwaway society but reckoning that, if we make good things, they could last for rather longer. How is that reconciled with the idea that we want a rapid transition to get rid of our existing fleet of petrol and diesel vehicles and to rip out all our gas boilers and solid fuel heating systems? Has there been proper carbon accounting on all that, and how is that reconciled with the very good aim in this Bill that we must consider the impact on our earth and the amount that we take out of our earth in order to fashion the things we may need?

There is a lot of work ahead for Ministers, who have already been very busy. As others have said, the Bill is only the first step, and it will then need to be fashioned into popular products and feasible programmes: things that business will want to collaborate with and things that people will want to do. There is an educational process involved. We also need to ensure that we know what the costs are and that they are realistic, that they are phased and that they fall fairly. I would still like to hear more from the Government on the total cost of all this work, because we need to ensure that it is realistic, that it does not get in the way of levelling up and greater prosperity, and that it reinforces our prime agenda, which is the health and welfare of the British people.