

The right kind of greenery My article from Conservative Home

Conservatives and greenery go together. We wish to conserve what is best in nature and our environment. Conservatives have often pioneered legislation to improve water quality, clean up our air, protect our countryside and conserve what is best in our landscape and heritage. Around the country Conservative Councils are often struggling with the dilemma of people needing affordable homes whilst many others regret the passing of woods and pastures to grow crops of new houses. Many of us share the passion for clean air and water and for the gentle contours of English rural landscapes.

The levelling up agenda provides a heaven sent opportunity to do something better. There is no reason why planning policies should continue to direct ever more executive homes to the hard pressed south east, when other parts of the country could benefit from the jobs and investment major new housebuilding creates. Now that in the post pandemic world more homeworking and remote working is becoming part of our lives many more people will be freed from the need to live close to London on a commuter pathway. More small businesses and start up enterprises could be encouraged to establish away from the lure of the capital city. That requires more attractive housing for the investors, managers and entrepreneurs who will help populate the growth and success of areas that are grasping the opportunity to level up.

Levelling up will be a vast series of personal journeys. For everyone in an area that is improving who does set up a business or brings in a new investment there will be many others who will seize the opportunity to get a better job, to use and develop their talents to advance the new enterprise. Every major company siting a business premise in a new area represents an opportunity for smaller companies to spring up to supply everything from the lunchtime sandwiches and coffees through to the technology support, the cleaning and components they will need. Every new housing estate creates first round jobs for the building trades to be followed by all the jobs to support new residents in their new homes.

Government's role is not only to provide better planning policies, but also to help with high quality education and training. Working with business there can be a new can do approach in places which have been sidelined by investors in recent years. The main thing enterprises need is talented people to work for them and deliver great customer service and product excellence.

Over the last fortnight the UK government has valiantly tried to craft worldwide agreement over the issue of climate change. It was always a difficult task. India, China, and Russia, three of the largest producers of carbon dioxide on the planet were never going to agree to curb their appetites for burning coal, oil and gas. China accounts for some 30% of the total world creation of additional carbon dioxide, and has decided to mine more coal and build more coal power stations. The conference was divided on the very issue of whether coal burning should be completely phased out

worldwide or not. In the end the assembled countries could only agree to a diluted sentiment that coal would be phased down, without timetables or pledges from the main users of the fuel. Germany kept a low profile, though she as an advanced country is holding out to burn coal in power stations through to 2038. The Greens are wanting to form part of the new governing coalition after the recent German election, and are pressing to bring this down to 2030 to bring Germany a bit closer to other advanced countries and the UN approved policy of phasing out coal quickly. It still shows how difficult it is to agree the end of coal when a major advanced industrial country clings to it as a prime source of energy.

The problems besetting COP 26 were not just the divided world over how feasible it is to decarbonise, nor even just the disagreement over how much money rich countries should send to poorer countries to help them change. Central to the whole debate is the question of people's buy in to what the transition means for their own lifestyle. It is only when there are sufficient affordable and good products available to heat your home, to travel to work and to fill your plate with carbon free food will the green programme take off. So far the elites who come to summits have lectured the many that we need to change our lifestyles whilst they themselves fly in jet planes to air conditioned hotels to eat meat diets as if none of their advice applied to themselves. When challenged they might claim that they have spent money on carbon offsets, whilst seeing no choice for their own purposes but to carry on using jet fuel, gas heating, traditional food products and the rest. The digital revolution sweeps all before it without government requests or demands, without subsidies and taxes to drive it. People want mobile and smartphones, computer pads, entertainment downloads and the other services that the digital giants can offer. For COP 26 to succeed it needs to spawn a new generation of products and services that meet the carbon requirements whilst also being affordable and better solutions to the problems of everyday life.

Levelling up can of course help produce the range of new jobs and skills which a popular green revolution could generate. The main thrust is to electrify much more of life and then to generate more power from renewable or carbon neutral sources of energy. As governments bring this about they need to reassure people that there are ways of keeping the lights on when the wind does not blow and the sun does not shine. COP 26 set up various working groups of countries to explore new technologies to provide better travel, heating and industrial process. The sooner they produce results the better. If there are more breakthroughs with cheaper and better ways of doing these things that cut the carbon, then India, China and Russia will also want to adopt them. If there are not even the advanced countries will find it difficult to sell the practice of decarbonisation to their own electors.