
People first

Selling nature to Labour

Adam Dyster

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This is an independent essay written for Green Alliance by Adam Dyster. Adam formerly served as a political adviser to Steve Reed during his time as shadow secretary of state for environment, food and rural affairs, and prior to this worked as an adviser to the director general and chair of the National Trust. This essay was written in October 2024.

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In many ways, nature feels like it should be an easy win for Labour.

The story of our natural environment is about conserving our shared inheritance. For a party that has worked hard to reassociate itself with patriotism, the pitch would focus on the countryside as part of our national identity, with Labour as the conservers.

The campaign video would feature some of our most iconic landscapes, from ancient woodland to serene Scottish lochs, with footage of red squirrels and puffins too. The soundtrack features Elgar and Vaughan Williams, and there would be a line drawn from Keir Starmer's love of the Lake District to his imperative to protect places like this for the future.

"All of this is under threat", the voiceover would intone. The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. For too long we have taken nature and our environment for granted, ignoring its fundamental role underpinning our society. If this government's goal is national renewal, what better aim than to bring life and beauty back to our countryside? Labour has, the video would remind us, acted before, with national parks and countryside rights of way. It can – no, must – act again.

History, poetry and pride. It's a compelling narrative, and one that has been used before to good effect. We are, after all, a nation of nature lovers, raised on a diet of Beatrix Potter and David Attenborough. Whereas debates on climate change tend to be divisive, nature is a unifier, loved by all.

Labour must make hard choices

The challenge, however, comes beyond the podium, when choices will need to be made between competing areas. It is said that politicians campaign in poetry and govern in prose and Labour has been clear that it will be unsentimental in its pursuit of its priorities in government. It's not just whether the policy choices made are the right ones, but whether it's possible to back them up with resources, as well as what happens when a hard choice between policies arises.

Labour's economic inheritance makes these decisions challenging; the pool of resources is far less deep than it was in, say, 1997. But they're also difficult because of the party's political focus. Five years is a short window to shape the country, and attention is just as much on the next election as it is on delivery today, particularly with Morgan McSweeney in the chief of staff hot seat. To quote Labour Together, the party "must approach every day of governing in the knowledge that it will need to persuade voters again and again and again. They must focus on their priorities, not get distracted by pet projects."

Nature risks being seen as a luxury

Against this backdrop, while the opening pitch's poetry and pride may be compelling, it risks being demoted as a second order issue. Hospitals and tackling homelessness win out against red squirrels and Lake District vistas every day, if that's how the debate is seen

or imagined. So-called 'hero voters' are unlikely to proactively raise nature and the countryside unprompted, while surely action on climate change and the clean energy mission means the party's green credentials are secure enough already?

This portrayal may appear pessimistic, but nature's soft poetry is its double edged sword. Britain lacks the harsh scenes of felled rainforests, and the image conjured up is of a still green and pleasant land, far from the pressing realities of growth, the economy and people's daily lives.

Talk of 'Nature' with a capital N as a separate entity to people's lives, risks it feeling like a luxury issue, entwined with beauty and bucolic ideals. With the exception of cleaning up sewage spills - viewed as a literal political hygiene and health issue - the rest of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' (Defra's) environmental work can wait. The mountains and forests will, some might argue, still be there in a few years' time, ready for the economic good times to roll again.

The party has a rich natural legacy

The truth is that Labour has always had a unique relationship with nature and the countryside. It has a rich legacy to draw on: the party's milestone achievements include the creation of our first national parks, the Town and Country Planning Act managing urban sprawl, the Countryside Rights of Way Act and the England Coastal Path, as well as key pieces of agricultural legislation.

These advances have, however, been driven by a more transactional view of the countryside. Rather than being motivated by the intrinsic value of nature, or an ingrained sense of custodianship, Labour has focused on the benefits the countryside can provide people today. It's about an environment in service to the betterment of people's lives, whether that's through health or access, or beauty or food. It's not unsentimental – Attlee spoke of our "great national heritage of beauty" – but the needs of the present certainly weigh more heavily.

This also applies to how threats to nature are perceived. Keir Starmer has featured the Lake District in several speeches, speaking movingly about how much it means to him. But this isn't necessarily about its intrinsic wildness or species; it's about the escape that holidays there provided his family, and the beauty of the area as a backdrop to those. These benefits aren't obviously at risk from biodiversity loss or reduced species numbers. The case to act is strongest when benefits are obviously denied: polluted rivers restricting the freedom to swim or paddle is an obvious case in point.

It's tempting to point to Labour's electorate and its demographics to explain different attitudes. Even if the route to No 10 must pass through the green and pleasant countryside, rural seats do form a far smaller part of Labour's green benches than the Conservatives, and thus feature less heavily in its psyche. Similarly, you're far less likely to meet a member of the landed gentry in Labour's parliamentary ranks, and the number of politicians with farming backgrounds are fewer too.

Yet such an approach is overly simplistic. It ignores Labour's rural activism and heritage and reduces to pure analysis. Instead, a better and more interesting guide is Labour's political ideology.

People and growth come first

Labour's progressive politics inevitably steer its policies to intervention and reform. Its MPs and ministers come to power seeking to improve people's lives, naturally opting for change rather than preserving the status quo. That's exacerbated by the fact that each Labour government has come in after a long period in opposition, with all the urgency that the wait and imagined precariousness creates. Keir Starmer may not have come to power promising the 'white heat of technology', conscious of a cynical electorate, but his pledge of national renewal still looks to a better future to come. The party's environmental achievements have, therefore, been about improving conditions and forging anew. The post-war creation of our national park system wasn't about defending landscapes, it was about creating a new national asset, shared, owned and to be enjoyed by all. That universality is key too: class still matters, to all of Labour's policies, including the environment.

The progressivism of today's administration is driven by a particular theory of change. Creating growth is seen as a prerequisite to improving people's lives, and it's against this yardstick that environmental policies are therefore judged. The rhetoric of that opening pitch, of defending our countryside, can sit alongside this messaging. But when it comes to a choice between the two - or a choice about the allocation of resources - then growth, and improving people's lives today, wins out. When the Environment Secretary Steve Reed was asked about the perceived conflict between housebuilding and the environment, there was no doubt that reform was the right choice: "Politics is about negotiating for the common good. Those homes have to be built". For an environment department and sector that are both typically associated with defence, of holding back the tide, this could pose a major challenge.

The parallels with climate change are obvious. Rather than talking about holding back the tide or mitigating the worst impacts, Labour's political strategy has been to focus on the gains to be won, both for individuals and the nation at large: lower bills, new jobs and energy security. Not only has this argument clearly helped Ed Miliband and his team establish the Clean Power mission as a major plank of the government's agenda, it's also proved incredibly popular with the public, consistently ranked as one of the most memorable and popular policies of the new administration.

There is still a path for nature

To win its place around the Cabinet table, the perfect pitch for nature has to be about making people's lives better today. While it may feel uncomfortable, people, communities and, following

Labour's logic, growth, need to come first. The discussion has to be about what difference interventions will make to people's lives if policies are to be prioritised, and, like climate, this narrative needs to be made each and every time.

The argument for nature can't afford to be reactive, to be presumptive about the importance of nature as a separate entity, or rely on nostalgia or poetry alone, though these will of course still have a place in messaging. For a sector that has spent time promoting the intrinsic value of nature, such a transactional approach is likely to be grating, but when the need for action today is so pressing, then the ends surely justify the means.

The good news is that such an agenda is not just possible, it's exciting. There are plenty of ways to help make people's lives better and support growth that also benefit nature and our countryside, arming Defra with the arguments needed to push its work up the political agenda.

It's a powerful investment in public health

Take health. Every family has a story to tell of an under pressure NHS; the challenge of long waiting times is all too common, while the healthcare budget continues to grow and grow. Wes Streeting, as health minister, has rightly focused on growing the preventative arm of the state, saving the NHS time and resources by addressing health issues before they reach the hospital door.

Aligned to this interventionist agenda are several big ticket policies linked to land use and nature that can reduce the pressures on our NHS, including obesity, which costs the service £6.5 billion every year. The biggest prize is healthy food, investing in the supply of homegrown fruit and vegetables, tackling food waste to reduce prices on the shelves and supporting varied diets. This isn't about dictating diets, but rather being comfortable to intervene in a market stacked against both consumers and producers.

In every community there's a further asset to invest in public health: our green spaces and parks. The benefits of spending time in green space have been repeatedly demonstrated for both mental and physical health, helping us to get more active and providing space to escape. Yet it's along class lines that inequality falls: poorer areas are far more likely to be grey than green. Here then is another area ripe for intervention. Green social prescribing is cost effective, so too is investing in local parks. That both will help support nature too is a happy side effect.

We need a new deal on housebuilding

The housing crisis is just as pressing, and far too often Defra and its arm's length bodies have been caricatured as reactionary blockers of progress. Simply defending the status quo is hard to justify: despite the protections of the current system, nature continues to decline, while numbers on housing waiting lists grow. We should instead be fighting not to defend but to help build the next generation of decent homes and communities. A decent home

has nature at its heart, because it benefits people. Ask a child to draw their perfect home and it won't just be a brick and mortar house, it will have space to play in and probably trees and flowers too.

Securing a safe and permanent home for a family will improve their lives more than the benefits of nature will. Any argument that tries to deny this will fail. If the environmental sector can put forward a grand bargain that has social need at its core, then not only can it tackle that need but, by building well, it can maximise the benefit provided and improve the lives of the wider public too.

Reaching that bargain might involve painful conversations: the planning system represents many years of hard won protections, built up over decades as the last and sometimes only line of defence for our natural world. But acknowledging the need for a new deal to respond to changed circumstances should bring all parties to the table for a better outcome.

Natural solutions are 'securonomics'

Turning to Labour's focus on growth and the economy, one of the biggest barriers to investment in recent years has been market shocks and instability. If growth is key to improving people's lives, then security is just as important for the role it plays in underpinning economic activity, as supported by Rachel Reeves' interventions on 'securonomics'.

Every year dozens of communities are impacted by flooding, with each flood event wreaking havoc on homes, businesses and public services. The Environment Agency's flood defence backlog is significant, and costly. That a solution should exist which can reduce flood damage, at significantly less cost to the taxpayer, feels near miraculous. But that is exactly what is possible through natural flood management, slowing the flow of water and reconnecting historic floodplains to dissipate it before it reaches critical infrastructure. Like the solutions above, in turn this benefits nature, creating new habitats and improving river systems. Natural solutions aren't as instinctively trusted as concrete ones; part of the messaging must include examples of success.

Flooding is just one example of a broken natural system. Taken as a whole, the economic impacts from extreme weather are growing. A 2022 report by the Grantham Institute found that the total cost of climate change damage to the UK is projected to increase from 1.1 per cent of GDP at present to 3.3 per cent by 2050 and 7.4 per cent by 2100. Our economy is hit on multiple fronts: supply chains affected by flooded roads and railways, reduced productivity in heatwaves, lost harvests from wet winters and the cost of repairing homes, businesses and infrastructure after extreme weather.

Even with Labour's ambitious clean energy plans, these climate impacts will worsen. The government will need to use all the tools at its disposal to increase resilience, of which the natural world is a significant one. It can invest in improving people's lives in future, by planting tree-lined streets to shade our towns and cities, rewetting our uplands to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires and supporting healthy soils to safeguard food production.

A fair deal for farmers is essential

Food security is itself also a key part of resilience and Labour's manifesto recognises it as part of the UK's national security. Here, Labour's willingness to intervene to address injustice has huge potential. The reason why farming has become a political powder keg in recent years is because the economic system for agriculture is fundamentally broken, leaving farmers chasing smaller, riskier margins, at the mercy of global markets. Payments under the EU effectively papered over the cracks and, while most of the debate has recently focused on public funds, it has ignored the rest of the tools in the government's arsenal to help secure a sustainable farming sector.

When the idea of paying farmers public money for the public goods they produced was agreed (rather than, say, subsidising food production) it was part of a quid pro quo. The government would pay for what the market didn't, and it would ensure that the market properly paid for the rest. But action didn't come.

A key action now must be supply chain reform. Ultimately, it is the price returned to the producer which secures a thriving agricultural system; at present, the amounts received are pitiful. Instead, most of the profit is generated by intermediaries along the chain, including indirect suppliers and smaller operators, currently not within the Grocery Code Adjudicator's remit. By extending its scope and funding, the government could support a more muscular system that would allow more profit to be returned to farmers. This would help reduce the precarity that too many farmers feel, allowing more space for conversations around regenerative and sustainable techniques.

Another threat to food security, beyond production rates, is input costs, with farmers at the mercy of foreign fertiliser suppliers. By investing in homegrown soil improvers like compost, as well as using low input techniques such as no-till farming, not only would farmers' costs be reduced, but so too would our exposure to international events. Both approaches would also help to address the long term health of our soils, essential for long term security and the future of our countryside.

Nature jobs can be everywhere

Growth and security aren't enough on their own to improve people's lives. The government has been clear that, to benefit the nation, prosperity must be felt across the whole country. Again, nature and the countryside can play a part here: many of the solutions described above would attract money, jobs and growth to villages and valleys far from the busy centres of industry, across all four nations of the UK. This isn't a one-off flash in the pan either. The nature of jobs linked to land and landscape means many are sustained for maintenance.

Many green jobs are unionised too, from the National Trust to the Environment Agency. With an increasingly environmentally engaged younger generation, supporting nature jobs near where they live offers the perfect route to opportunity. This has a

multiplier effect. It makes sense that areas known for nature and landscape beauty attract more investment; both through tourism and simply because people want to move to and work in attractive places, all supporting wider economic activity and local growth.

Don't underestimate local pride and identity

The final prize is pride of place and improving local communities. There's a risk that this could be lumped in with the poetry of that opening pitch: a fine ideal but easily forgotten when the real problems set in. Yet there's a major difference between abstract ideas of nation and countryside, and how people's lives are affected by the places they experience every day in their town or village.

One of the environmental topics that gets people most animated is the issue of litter. That's unlikely to be what most environmental campaigners would prioritise first, but it both denies communities the opportunity to enjoy their local environment and suggests a lack of care for place and, in turn, for people. A study by Public First saw local nature spots, parks and green spaces ranked as the most important source of local pride, above people, high streets and heritage. Making these places better, whether by planting trees, picking up litter or creating whole new parks and green spaces, is a surefire way to increase pride and local identity.

Investing in people's local environment is also one of the quickest ways to demonstrate visible change in a community; jobs and economic growth may be whirring in the background, but people notice the park looking more cared for or new planting in the high street. Increasing pride creates its own virtuous circle: the prouder you are of a place, the more likely you are to want to spend time there, with greater benefits for health. You're also more likely to want to protect it, whether that's through community action or simply more responsible behaviour, a view that can spread into attitudes to nature at large.

An army of people are ready to act

All of these solutions are aided by the force of nature that is the environmental movement. Along similar lines to that opening pitch, the sector has often been underestimated by politicians, imagined as soft and sleepy, a network of knitters and people in anoraks. Such underestimations have been made to politicians' peril: David Cameron faced the environmental movement twice over planning reform and the forest sell-off. He lost both times. The flipside, however, is that the sector can be an equally powerful force for good, for reform and for delivery. Its physical size is not to be misjudged: the National Trust employs about the same amount of staff as Tata Steel and cares for an area of land the size of Dorset. As a result it is not only able to pioneer changes, it's able to affect change - and improve lives - on a grand scale.

Just as appealing to a government hoping to demonstrate delivery is the sector's ability to speak to broad audiences: the Wildlife and Countryside Link coalition counts eight million members collectively. Here is the potential not just to improve lives - and

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perhaps change habits and attitudes too – but to demonstrate that change is happening to a wide audience.

A people first pitch is possible

It's clear there is plenty to talk to Labour around nature that fits the bill of being 'people first', directly appealing to those politicians who have come into parliament to improve people's lives. In truth, the perfect pitch will of course vary from context to context, person to person; the poetry and the patriotism will always be useful for speeches, for appeals and the campaign on the doorstep. But, when it comes to the hard choices, it's vital that the conversation recognises the common language around the Cabinet table, of people and growth and society. If it tries only to speak about nature, assuming its importance is taken for granted, the benefits could be lost in translation or left waiting indefinitely for those far off sunnier days to get the political attention it needs.

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Green Alliance

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