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# From 'Greenest government ever' to 'get rid of all the green crap': David Cameron, the Conservatives and the Environment

by

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**Abstract**

The environment was David Cameron's signature issue underpinning his modernisation agenda. In opposition the 'Vote Blue, Go Green' strategy had a positive impact on the party's image: the environment operated as a valence issue in a period of raised public concern, particularly about climate change, and Cameron's high-profile support contributed to the cross-party consensus that delivered radical change in climate policy. Although the Coalition Government has implemented important environmental measures, the Conservatives have not enhanced their green credentials in government and Cameron has failed to provide strong leadership on the issue. Since 2010, climate change has to some extent been transformed into a positional issue. Conservative MPs, urged on by the right-wing press, have adopted an increasingly partisan approach to climate change, and opinion polls reveal clear partisan divisions on climate change amongst public opinion. As a positional issue climate change has become challenging for the Conservatives, showing them to be internally divided, rebellious and inclined to support producer interests. This article makes a contribution to our understanding of Conservative modernisation, whilst also challenging the dominant assumption in the scholarly literature that the environment, particularly climate change, is a valence issue.

**KEYWORDS: Conservative Party; Modernisation; David Cameron; Environmental Policy; Climate Change; Valence issue**

The environment was one of David Cameron's signature issues underpinning his modernisation project for the Conservative Party. The selection of this 'Vote Blue, Go Green' strategy was underpinned by the widely-held assumption that the environment is a valence issue, characterized by a consensus across parties and the electorate about the need to protect the environment (Dunlap 1995; Johns et al 2009; Clarke et al 2011). Party competition over the environment would therefore be about performance: the perceived competence of the parties to deliver environmental protection policies. However, in this article we argue that although in opposition the environment did operate as a valence issue and contributed positively to the modernisation project, after the Conservatives entered government the impact of the green strategy was shaped - and often undermined - by the transformation of *climate change* into a positional issue, characterised by growing disagreement between political actors and the wider electorate over this issue.

The 'Vote Blue, Go Green' strategy accrued some benefits in opposition because it was a time of relatively high public concern about the environment, particularly climate change. The initial green rhetoric and symbolic gestures were soon reinforced by policy substance. Indeed, Cameron's support for progressive climate policy helped stimulate a cross-party 'competitive consensus' over the need for radical climate policy that contributed positively to the Labour Government introducing the path-breaking *Climate Change Act 2008,* followed by several policies first proposed by the Conservatives, including reforms to air passenger duties, smart meters and feed-in tariffs (Carter and Jacobs 2013). Subsequently, there was little difficulty agreeing a progressive environmental agenda with the Liberal Democrats for the coalition government that built on this legacy (Laws 2010). Several important environmental commitments were implemented. However, it soon transpired that environmental policies were an area of recurrent tension between the parties in the coalition and, significantly, a major source of discontent on the Conservative backbenches, particularly in the wider context of austerity and the need to prioritize economic growth. Gradually, the apparent consensus began to break down. Conservative backbenchers, urged on by the right-wing press,

adopted an increasingly partisan approach to climate change, and opinion polls revealed clear partisan divisions on climate change in the wider electorate. Consequently, with Cameron failing to provide political leadership on this divisive issue, the Conservatives have been unable to enhance their green credentials in office.

This article challenges the dominant assumption in the electoral literature that the environment is a valence issue and makes a contribution to our understanding of Conservative modernisation. The next section outlines the role of the environment in the Conservative modernisation strategy in opposition, followed by an examination of its reception in the Conservative Party and the electorate. Attention then switches to the Coalition's environmental programme and the problems the Conservative Party encountered in delivering it. The final sections assess the emergence of a partisan divide on climate change in the Conservative Party and the wider electorate. The conclusion sets the findings in the wider context of Conservative modernisation and environmental politics.

## 'Vote Blue, Go Green'

David Cameron identified the environment as a central part of his strategy to transform the Conservative Party primarily because he saw it playing a tactical role within the wider modernisation strategy, with its objective of 'detoxification' or 'brand decontamination' (Carter 2009; Bale 2010). By prioritising the environment using language such as 'I think of a cleaner, greener world for our children to enjoy and inherit' (Cameron 2007, p.15), party strategists were hoping to expunge the image of the 'nasty party'. Cameron and other modernisers were careful to embed this rediscovery of environmental protection in traditional conservative values. In his 2007 Green Alliance essay he located his environmentalism firmly in Burkean concepts of stewardship - of responsibilities to past and future generations - themes that were still present in the 2010 Conservative Manifesto, which emphasized 'the inherent value of conserving things' and providing 'a good quality of life for future generations' (Conservative Party 2010, p.95).The selection of the environment as a signature issue

represented a very visible break with the past: Conservative governments had a poor environmental reputation and none of his predecessors as party leader had made a concerted attempt to strengthen Conservative policy on this issue. Very little was said about the environment in previous Conservative manifestos and it received minimal attention in election campaigns (Carter 2006).

Conservative strategists anticipated that the environmental message would accrue mostly indirect electoral benefits, by helping to alter the image of the Conservative Party, rather than by directly winning support from an environmental 'issue public'. But by strengthening the party's green credentials, the Conservatives might also become more attractive to Liberal Democrat voters. The Conservatives had generally trailed the other major British parties, particularly the Liberal Democrats, in embracing environmental concerns. Although the environment had low political salience amongst the overall electorate, polling evidence indicated that it had greater resonance amongst Liberal Democrat voters. An ICM poll in February 2006 found that Liberal Democrat supporters (37%) were more likely than Labour (32%) and Conservative supporters (24%) to think that taking action to address climate change should be a top government priority. A later YouGov poll, from December 2009, found that more Lib Dem supporters (31%) said environmental concerns were one of the three or four most important issues facing the country, compared to Labour (23%) and Conservative (10%) supporters. Cameron hoped that the green message would help persuade Liberal Democrat voters to transfer their allegiance to the 'new Conservative Party' (Bale 2010: 290). In addition, the Labour Government was looking increasingly vulnerable over its mediocre environmental record, with the Prime Minister in waiting, Gordon Brown, having shown little interest in promoting a green agenda as Chancellor (Carter 2008).

It is important to note that the assumption underpinning all these points is that the environment is a valence issue: a consensus issue on which all voters and parties are agreed about the desired outcome (Stokes 1992). Consequently, where an issue is salient, party competition will be about performance - which party can best deliver that desired outcome.

Cameron was therefore keen to establish the new green credentials of the Conservative party. He frequently mentioned the environment during his leadership campaign in Autumn 2005 and the opening months of his leadership saw several high-profile gestures. These included Cameron's trip to a Norwegian glacier to observe the effects of global warming at first hand; his weekly cycle to work; and the replacement of the Party's red, white and blue 'torch of freedom' logo with an oak tree, to symbolize solidity, tradition, friendliness towards the environment and 'Britishness' (Browne 2006). This symbolism was reinforced by sustained rhetorical commitment. Cameron delivered several keynote speeches specifically on the environment and consistently included lengthy discussion of the issue in his more general speeches. A new statement of Conservative principles, *Built to Last*, published in August 2006, placed environmental protection third in the list of eight aims. Perhaps the most visible element of this new strategy was the decision to contest every local election campaign in opposition under the slogan *Vote Blue, Go Green*.

Cameron backed this new green image with substantive policy proposals. He established a Quality of Life policy group, led by John Gummer and Zac Goldsmith, to help develop the Party's environmental programme. In September 2006 he shared a platform with Tony Juniper, Director of Friends of the Earth, to announce his support for FoE's 'Big Ask' campaign for a Climate Change Bill. Meanwhile George Osborne, the Shadow Chancellor, promised that a Conservative Government would increase the share of taxation raised by environmental taxes.

Not surprisingly, this level of proselytising about the environment was not sustained. Cameron devoted less attention to the environment after Gordon Brown became Prime Minister in June 2007. The immediate catalyst was the need to shore up Conservative support to deter Brown from calling a snap election that Autumn, which prompted a shift back to a familiar Conservative agenda of crime, traditional family values and immigration. Subsequently, Cameron seemed more reluctant to discuss the environment in his speeches and he omitted it from a May 2008 press conference spelling out the priorities for a future Conservative Government. Yet a series of policy initiatives, including green technology start-ups, a Green Deal on energy efficiency, smart meters

and feed-in tariffs, indicated it had not been forgotten. Significantly, Cameron took strong pro-environment stances on two high profile issues. He opposed the construction of a third runway at Heathrow Airport, promising to overturn the Labour Government's authorisation of the project, and the application by the energy utility, E.ON, to build Britain's first new coal-fired power station in three decades at Kingsnorth, Kent (Carter and Jacobs 2013). Cameron was again demonstrating how far the Party had changed by deliberately positioning himself alongside the green lobby in opposition to the pro-business interests that, historically, the Conservative party would be expected to support. One former Labour Government advisor observed that the environmental NGOs, 'almost had carte blanche to persuade the Tories to adopt pro-climate policies' to maintain the Party's green image and keep up the pressure on Labour (personal communication, July 2010). Accordingly, the 2010 Conservative Manifesto contained a larger and more progressive environmental section than its predecessors (Rootes and Carter 2010, p.993-4).

## The Environment and Conservative Modernisation in Opposition

It is very hard to evaluate the impact of the 'Vote Blue, Go Green' strategy because it is impossible to isolate the impact of the environment within the modernisation strategy. Several commentators have suggested, tentatively, that the modernisation did deliver some benefits, particularly for Cameron, less so for the Conservative Party (Bale 2010, Bale and Webb 2010, Kavanagh and Cowley 2010). This section examines the reception of the environment's central role in the modernisation project when in opposition, focusing on the Conservative Party and the electorate.

### The Conservative Party

When Cameron and his advisors identified the environment as a core element of the modernisation strategy they probably anticipated that the wider party would be reasonably receptive to the green message. After all, as a valence issue, even if members didn't regard the environment as a priority,

they were unlikely to oppose the strategy. Cameron and other modernizers missed no opportunity to remind his audience that ideas such as ‘conservation’ and 'stewardship' were core Conservative values (Cameron 2007). Similarly, two members of the Conservative Environmental Network argued that Cameron’s focus on the environment was not a conversion but, rather, a ‘homecoming’, and that ‘The Tories have a long and proud history of environmental preservation’ (Caldecott and Dick 2010).

Initially, many party members were prepared to see where the leader’s green path would lead, albeit large sections of the party appeared to be unconvinced by what was sometimes disparagingly referred to as the outbreak of ‘bunny-hugging’ (Bale 2008) within the leadership. Disgruntled party activists used the growing range of political blogs to vent their feelings, and negative stories were frequently picked up in the right-wing press. Osborne’s declaration that a Conservative Government would increase green taxes, albeit with no rise in the overall tax burden, provoked widespread anger on the backbenches. When the Quality of Life Policy Group reported in September 2007, in the middle of the phoney election campaign, the mood had shifted. The launch of the report was a fiasco (former Conservative advisor, personal interview, September 2014) and it was widely criticized by Conservative MPs and the right-wing press. This discontent prompted the leadership to issue an immediate public rejection of two controversial proposals for new green taxes on supermarket parking and on short flights - and the document was quickly shelved. After the onset of the financial and economic crisis in Autumn 2008 helped solidify opposition to green taxes (on the grounds that it would reduce the competitiveness of British business), the Shadow Chancellor quietly dropped the idea and there was no mention of green taxes in the 2010 Conservative manifesto.

Climate change proved particularly divisive. Cameron identified it as the most important contemporary environmental challenge and focused his efforts on it. Yet a significant number of Conservative MPs remained sceptical about climate change: a ComRes survey found that one third of Conservative MPs still questioned its existence and its link to human activity (Adam 2008). Despite

Cameron's strong support for a Climate Change Bill, three Conservative MPs voted against it on the third reading in 2008, and many abstained. Significantly, party managers set a low priority one-line whip in order not to provoke a backbench rebellion that would have highlighted divisions in the party. In the run up to the 2009 Copenhagen summit, especially after the 'Climategate' affair, Conservative sceptics became increasingly vocal. Senior Conservatives, including David Davis, Ann Widdecombe and Peter Lilley, expressed their doubts in newspaper articles and interviews. By the 2010 general election it was clear that although Cameron's claim that a strong commitment to the environment was core to Tory values met little outright opposition, it had not been fully embraced by the wider party, particularly with regards to climate change.

**The Electorate**

Another reason why Cameron stopped talking as much about the environment, particularly as the general election approached, was that there was limited evidence that his enthusiasm for the issue was securing electoral benefit. Cameron's green strategy does seem to have bolstered his party's image on the issue: before he become leader the public regarded the Conservatives as relatively weak on environmental issues, but by March 2010 none of three major parties was seen as significantly better than any other (ICM March 2010). But the Conservatives were still no better than neck-and-neck with the other major parties in a contest - that included the Green Party - for a diminishing environmental issue public. Moreover, private Conservative polling indicated that his green message was not popular with core supporters, and focus groups criticized Cameron for 'just going on about the environment all the time' (Environmental non-governmental organisation (ENGO) lobbyist, personal communication, February 2010).

It is clear that Conservative (and Labour) strategists calculated that the environment promised limited direct electoral benefits, so the issue returned to its normal peripheral role during

the election campaign. Data from the BES 2010 post-election survey show that tiny proportions of those voting for three main parties rated the environment as the most important issue facing the country at the present time: highest at just 2.0% for Liberal Democrat supporters.[1] More broadly, Cameron's modernisation strategy, with the environment at its core, was adopted and developed when public concern about the environment was at its zenith, with around a tenth of the public perceiving it to be one of the most important issues facing the country (see Figure 1), particularly in the period surrounding the publication of the Stern Report on climate change in 2006 (Stern 2006). In May 2010 the proportion perceiving this was 4-5%, which arguably weakened its potential effectiveness in convincing the wider public that the party's image had changed as it entered office.

Overall, it appears that while the environment generally functioned as a valence issue during this period, and as part of the wider modernisation strategy it probably had some benefits for Cameron and the Conservative Party, the germs of future division over climate change were already visible.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

## The Environment and Conservative Modernisation in Office

If the environment played a significant role in the modernisation strategy whilst the Conservatives were in opposition, it failed to do so after the party entered government in May 2010. Cameron may have identified the formation of the Coalition Government not merely as a device to secure office but also as a means of continuing the modernisation project. The implementation of a progressive and wide-ranging coalition environmental programme would have allowed Cameron to demonstrate the Conservative Party's commitment to the issue, and provided him with a strong basis to resist the discontent on the backbenches and beyond. However, this aspiration foundered in large part

because of growing partisanship over environmental issues, especially climate change, in the Conservative Party and the electorate.

## The Greenest Government Ever?

There was little difficulty agreeing a progressive environmental agenda with the Liberal Democrats for the Coalition Government (Laws 2010). *The Coalition: Our Programme for Government* promised to 'implement a full programme of measures to fulfil our joint ambitions for a low carbon and ecofriendly economy' (HM Government 2010). Indeed, Cameron was famously bold enough to promise to be the 'greenest government ever' (Randerson 2010). In practice, given the degree of pre-election cross-party consensus, the climate and energy policy commitments largely echoed those of the outgoing Labour Government, with the focus shifting from policy design to the implementation of the low carbon strategy. The one significant area of difference within the Coalition was over nuclear power, with the Liberal Democrats forced to drop their outright opposition to the construction of new reactors. However, they secured a commitment that new reactors would receive no public subsidy and their MPs would be allowed to abstain in any parliamentary vote on the issue.

Since 2010 several important environmental policies have been implemented, including most of the key commitments in the Coalition Agreement. Crucially, the Government accepted the 4$^{th}$ carbon budget, which reaffirmed the commitment to the ambitious carbon emission targets set out in the Climate Change Act. Other notable policies included the establishment of a Green Investment Bank, the Green Deal to encourage household energy efficiency, a minimum floor price for carbon, the roll-out of 53 million smart meters by 2019 and turning down the proposal for a third runway at Heathrow Airport. The wide ranging *Energy Act 2013* seeks to drive billions of pounds of investment into low carbon electricity generation and ensure security of supply.

Yet the Conservatives have received few plaudits for their environmental policies; on the contrary, the promise to be 'the greenest government ever' has become the target for criticism - and ridicule - in the media, the green business community and ENGOs (e.g. Porritt 2011, Green Alliance 2013). If Cameron's aim was to demonstrate that he was leading a modernized Conservative Party which, building on the work in opposition, had established its green image in office, then he seems to have failed.

## Problems in Delivering the Coalition's Environmental Commitments

Although most of the environmental policies in the 'Programme for Government' were eventually implemented, the manner in which several were either agreed or delivered did little to enhance the Conservative Party's environmental image.

Arguably the most important environmental decision taken by the Government was its acceptance in May 2011 of the recommendation by the independent Committee on Climate Change for a 4th carbon budget designed to keep the UK on track to meet its emission reduction targets up to 2027. However, with several cabinet ministers pushing for weaker targets, the Chancellor insisted that the Liberal Democrat Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, Chris Huhne, accept a compromise that the carbon budget be reviewed in 2014 in case the UK was found to be moving faster to reduce emissions than the rest of the EU. Thus, even though Cameron stepped in to resolve the row, thereby ensuring that Huhne could announce a pace-setting 2025 reduction target of 50%, the positive green message was distorted by the media coverage of the Cabinet row.

Similarly, the Green Investment Bank was launched with £3 billion support from the Treasury to leverage private sector capital to fund projects in renewable energy, waste and energy efficiency, that would boost the green economy. However, despite delivering on its promise to set it

up, the Chancellor's refusal to allow it to borrow money until 2015 - and then only if the national debt is falling - again attracted considerable negative coverage.

The Conservative's flagship manifesto policy to improve energy efficiency, the Green Deal, has attracted extensive criticism. The Green Deal replaced the previous policy of using a public subsidy in the form of an obligation on energy utilities to supply energy saving measures funded by domestic energy bills. Instead, the Green Deal provides householders with a privately financed loan fixed to the building and repaid through energy bills. Unfortunately, at the Treasury's insistence these loans are at an unattractive commercial rate. Perhaps more importantly, the financial and non-financial barriers to householders embracing energy efficiency measures have been underestimated. Consequently, the press reported with glee figures suggesting that, eight months after its introduction, only four people had signed up to it (Gray 2013). By the end of 2013, 1,030 households had been recruited, compared to the target of 10,000. However, over 117,000 green deal assessments had been made, leading the Climate Change Minister, Greg Barker, to speculate that people were seeking expert advice on what measures were needed, but then choosing to finance them without signing up to the Green Deal loan scheme (Hansard, 16 January 2014, column 975). Either way, the Green Deal was widely regarded as a policy failure.

The green image of the Conservatives has also suffered from policy measures that were widely regarded as damaging to the natural environment. Almost immediately the Government seemed perversely keen to undermine its 'greenest government ever' boast. In 2010, as part of the wide-ranging 'cull of quangos', the Government disbanded the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) and the Royal Commission for Environmental Pollution (RCEP), thereby removing two of its main sources of independent advice on environmental issues. Whilst the SDC, formed by the Labour Government in June 2001, had struggled to carve out a clear role for itself, the RCEP was a long-established and well-respected independent body. The closure of both organisations prompted criticism from opposition parties and considerable dismay in environmental circles

(Vaughan 2010). Significant funding cuts were also announced for the Environment Agency and Natural England, as part of the broader deficit reduction agenda.

In Autumn 2010 the Secretary of State for the Environment, Caroline Spelman, announced plans to privatize around 15% of the national forestry estate. This proposal provoked huge criticism across the political spectrum. A campaign group, 38 Degrees, published a petition against the sell-off that quickly attracted over half a million signatories. A YouGov poll found that 75% of respondents opposed the sale and just 6% supported it, with large majorities against it amongst supporters of all the main parties (YouGov 13-17 January 2011). Discontent on the backbenches saw a handful of Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs vote against the government in a forestry debate. Consequently, having opened a national consultation on the plans in January 2011, Spelman soon terminated the consultation and announced she was withdrawing the proposals, admitting in the House of Commons that the government had 'got this one wrong' (*BBC News* 17 February 2011).

Subsequently, several controversial policies generated negative environmental headlines. First, the Government's commitment to the construction of HS2, initially from London to the Midlands, generated considerable hostility from local residents' groups and ENGOs, concerned in part by the damage it will cause to precious habitats. The route passes through several rural Conservative constituencies, which has prompted opposition to the scheme from Conservative backbenchers. In April 2014, 34 Conservative MPs rebelled against the government's HS2 policy during the second reading stage in the House of Commons (*BBC News* 29 April 2014). Surveys conducted by YouGov from 2012-2014 show that that while overall negative sentiment has fluctuated, opposition has generally been higher amongst Labour supporters than Conservatives, with large majorities of UKIP supporters consistently against HS2. Overall, by generating vocal and sustained opposition on the Conservative back-benches, HS2 has done little to strengthen the Conservative's green image.

Second, DEFRA's decision to carry out a cull of badgers in an attempt to control the transmission of tuberculosis amongst cattle has been a policy disaster that, in the eyes of environmentalists and animal rights campaigners, has placed the Government firmly on the side of farmers. The Government has faced a genuine dilemma: TB is a major problem for the livestock farming industry that is driving many farmers to bankruptcy (or close to it), but the badger is a popular and iconic creature. Yet the Government's response has been extraordinarily incompetent. It has ignored clear scientific advice from leading animal disease experts, drawn from its own pilot study, that culling could worsen rather than improve the spread of TB by encouraging infected badgers to move further afield (Carrington and Doward 2012). Initially delayed by problems in counting the badger population, the cull in Somerset and Gloucestershire commenced in 2013, but the marksmen failed to shoot anywhere near the required targets of 70% of the badger population despite an extension to the cull. When the Government's own independent panel of scientific experts found that the cull was neither effective nor humane - and also very expensive (DEFRA, 3 April 2014) - another embarrassing climb-down followed. Plans to extend the cull nationwide were dropped - although the pilot culls would continue in Somerset and Gloucestershire for three more years - to be replaced by vaccination projects around the edge of the most badly affected zones. YouGov polling has shown that a plurality of the public oppose the cull. It was another high-profile policy that had a negative effect on the green image of the Conservative Party.

Third, the Chancellor and the Prime Minister have both declared their strong support for exploiting the extensive deposits of shale gas underneath large parts of mainland Britain. Proponents of fracking argue that it will bring energy security, jobs and, possibly, cheaper bills. Shale gas also emits fewer greenhouse gases than coal, so it may help the UK to meet its emission reduction targets. Opponents point to a range of environmental harms, notably damage to the water aquifers, despoilment of the countryside, earthquakes and an influx of heavy lorries transporting water, sand and drilling equipment. By attracting the majority of available energy investment, fracking may also lock the UK into a fossil fuels trajectory by reducing investment in

renewable energy, just when that nascent sector is becoming established. Osborne announced generous tax breaks to encourage shale gas development and, fully aware that fracking may be locally unpopular, financial incentives to the affected communities. Fracking has received extensive criticism. An attempt to drill exploratory wells in Balcombe, Sussex, attracted high profile celebrity protesters, leading to the arrest of Green MP, Caroline Lucas. Such protests are likely to become common place as the momentum behind fracking increases. Meanwhile, in January 2015 the Environmental Audit Committee called for a moratorium on all fracking on the grounds that it could derail efforts to mitigate climate change and, to ward off a rebellion by Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs over a clause in the Infrastructure Bill, the Government accepted a Labour amendment imposing a new set of conditions preventing fracking in a many areas, including National Parks and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (*BBC News* 27 January 2015).

Thus, despite heading a coalition government responsible for several progressive environmental measures, the Conservative Party has struggled to establish its own green credentials. One factor has been a lack of prime ministerial leadership. Many of the problems identified above, particularly the often visible arguments within Cabinet, could have been dealt with by decisive interventions from the Prime Minister, as eventually happened in the case of the 4th carbon budget. However, having championed the environment, and especially climate change, in opposition, Cameron was strangely silent on the issue once in power; for example, by January 2015 he had not yet delivered a keynote speech on the environment or climate change.[2] Cameron has appeared inconsistent on the environment: sometimes identifying climate change as a government priority and lauding the Government's green achievements; at other times appointing an opponent of wind farms (John Hayes) as junior energy minister and reportedly demanding that officials 'get rid of all the green crap' (green levies and regulations) that he regarded as responsible for pushing up energy prices (Sparrow 2013). In particular, Cameron seemed reluctant to challenge 'the growth of climate science denial in his own party' (Green Alliance 2013, p.10).

## Conservative Party Partisanship on Climate Change

In this section we argue that the Conservative Party, urged on by the right-wing press, has adopted an increasingly partisan approach to climate change. Despite the clear policy impact of the 'Cameron effect' while in opposition, Cameron never succeeded in persuading the parliamentary party that the environment, especially climate change, should be a priority issue. Most Conservative MPs were prepared to lie low in the hope that Cameron would deliver a majority Conservative Government in 2010; but when he failed to do so and had to join forces with the traditionally 'green' Liberal Democrats, vocal opposition became more widespread. This opposition was motivated by two distinct, albeit overlapping, concerns: pragmatism and ideology.

*Pragmatism* was driven by the economic priorities of the coalition government, which was committed to austerity and deficit reduction. In such circumstances climate change and the environment were always likely to receive lower priority than economic concerns. From this perspective any environmental measures that involved significant public expenditure or potentially made the UK less competitive than its trading rivals would be resisted. Not surprisingly, the Chancellor himself quickly became the leading exponent of this view when he declared at the Conservative Party conference in September 2011 that 'We're not going to save the planet by putting our country out of business. So let's, at the very least, resolve that we're going to cut our carbon emissions no slower but also no faster than our fellow countries in Europe. That is what I've insisted on in the recent carbon budget' (Osborne 2011). Osborne was clearly unconvinced by green growth arguments and, in various inter-departmental disputes, he lobbied hard against key measures. Thus he resisted pressure to allow the Green Investment Bank to borrow before 2015. He also blocked the inclusion of a 2030 decarbonisation target in the Energy Bill, despite it being recommended by the Climate Change Committee and supported by the House of Commons Select Committee on Energy and Climate Change, MPs from all parties and many business leaders. This decision prompted an active campaign by a coalition of major ENGOs to secure an amendment to

the Bill - proposed by Conservative Tim Yeo - that would insert a decarbonisation target. Eventually, this amendment was narrowly defeated in the Commons and the Lords in June 2013 (Harvey 2013).

The second factor is *ideology*. The Conservative right has developed a deep partisan hostility to climate policy by framing it 'variously as a "green tax", as "subsidies", as an unwarranted intervention by the state, and sometimes as associated with Europe – all frames which connect with wider Conservative political values' (Lockwood 2013, p.1344). At the extreme end of this position is a core group of climate sceptic MPs. One (admittedly small) survey of MPs found that 18% of Conservative MPs (10/57) agreed with the statement that 'Manmade climate change is environmental propaganda for which there is little or no real evidence', while 53% (30/57) acknowledged that 'there is a widespread theory that climate change is largely manmade but this has not yet been conclusively proved' (Populus 10 September 2014). It seems likely that the Global Warming Policy Foundation (GWPF), a right-wing think-tank, has played an important role in promoting climate scepticism in right-wing circles. Beyond the hard core climate sceptics there is a larger group of 'climate go-slowers', who may not be outright sceptics but regard action on climate change mitigation as a low priority issue, especially in times of austerity.

As the opponents grew in number and volume, they became more confident, especially after Osborne's 2011 conference speech. They were also encouraged by the decision to allocate the cabinet position at DECC to the Liberal Democrats. Chris Huhne was a powerful advocate for the climate portfolio, a Liberal Democrat protagonist in inter-party disputes in cabinet and someone who reportedly had a 'spiky' relationship with George Osborne (Chorley 2012). Consequently, Conservative dissidents probably felt less constrained criticising climate and energy policies as they could direct their anger at a political opponent (albeit a coalition partner).

Discontent towards Coalition climate policy among Conservative backbenchers coalesced in increasingly vitriolic opposition to onshore wind farms, which became a symbol of the perceived malign influence of the environmental lobby. This almost visceral hatred of wind turbines has been

fanned enthusiastically by sections of the right-wing press. An early indication of potential trouble on the backbenches was a candidate survey prior to the 2010 general election, which found that 54% of Conservative Party prospective parliamentary candidates (n=76) disagreed with the statement that 'Expansion of onshore wind is essential if the UK is to deliver on its renewable energy targets' (ComRes 2010). By February 2012, concern was sufficiently high to prompt 101 Conservative MPs (several of whom were mainstream loyalists) to sign a letter to the Prime Minister urging him to remove or 'dramatically cut' the subsidies paid to wind farm developers (Hennessey 2012). Although Cameron initially responded with a letter setting out his support for wind farms, such was the growing political pressure on him that in the summer 2012 ministerial reshuffle he appointed an opponent of wind power, John Hayes, as junior energy minister and another, Owen Paterson, as Secretary of State at DEFRA. The appointment of Hayes rather backfired when, in an interview he complained that the country was 'peppered' with onshore wind farms, that 'enough is enough' and stated that 'we can no longer have wind turbines imposed on communities' (Winnett 2012). After Nick Clegg blocked a proposal from Cameron and Osborne to place a cap on the construction of onshore wind farms, it was reported that Cameron was considering including a promise in the next Conservative election manifesto to curb further construction of onshore wind turbines (Mason 2014).

Subsequently, when domestic energy prices became politically contentious in 2013, the criticism of wind power expanded to a broader assault on the 'onerous' green levies that contributed to increased consumer prices. The Coalition Government, facing criticism from both the right and the left - in the form of Ed Miliband's promise of a price freeze on energy prices - scrapped environmental levies amounting to £50 a year per household, providing the cuts are passed on by the energy utilities (although this effectively represented a shift from individual consumers to general taxation).

Significantly, there has been no sustained attempt by Conservatives sympathetic to the green agenda to resist the growth of this critical discourse or to offer an alternative centre-right,

pro-green growth discourse that is positive about action to prevent climate change. One short-lived initiative saw 12 'Turquoise Tories', including several MPs from the new 2010 intake, meet the Prime Minister to urge him to stem the anti-wind and anti-climate change rhetoric from Conservative ministers (Merrick, 2012). Perhaps it is significant that of the three Conservative MPs (all 2010 intake) who contributed to a Green Alliance (2013) booklet, 'Green Conservatism', two (Laura Sandys and Dan Byles) stood down at the 2015 election. It seems that the environment - particularly climate change - has real flaws as a core Conservative issue upon which to build a modern party. The right is climate sceptic or 'climate go-slow' because it is anti-regulation, pro-market, anti-state, anti-EU, anti-taxes, so it is very hard to construct a 'conversation' or 'narrative' where positive action to mitigate climate change fits comfortably. Indeed, following his sacking from the Cabinet in July 2014, Owen Paterson launched a vitriolic campaign against the 'powerful, self-serving' environmental lobby, which he dismissed as the 'Green Blob', and in a speech to the GWPF he called for the repeal of the Climate Change Act (*Mail*, 15 October 2014).

To summarize, since 2010 climate change has become an increasingly partisan issue within the Conservative Party and the right-wing press. While only a small group of Conservative MPs are outright climate change deniers, a much wider group of MPs has been willing to embrace a critical discourse on climate policy, for a combination of ideological and pragmatic reasons.

**Party Supporters' Attitudes towards Climate Change and Wind Farms**

This section examines the opinions of party supporters on green issues and shows the existence of a partisan divide in public attitudes towards climate change and wind farms. Existing research has shown that Conservative supporters and people holding right-wing ideological beliefs tend to exhibit more sceptical views about, and show less concern for, climate change in particular (Clements 2012; Humphrey and Scott; 2012; Whitmarsh 2011; Taylor 2011) and environmental issues in general

(Clements 2014). Liberal Democrats, as befits their party's traditional green credentials, tend to be more pro-environmental in their attitudes and behaviours (Clements 2014).

YouGov surveys provide an extensive set of data on climate change, most of which has been collected during the period of the coalition government.[3] Table 1 presents the results from a question on whether climate change is occurring and whether human activity is the cause, with data available for 2008-2014. Alongside the views of Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters, data for UKIP supporters are available for the more recent surveys. It is clear that Conservative and UKIP supporters are generally more likely to believe that climate change is not occurring or, if it is, that it is not caused by human activity. Scepticism on the part of UKIP supporters is generally higher than that registered by Conservative supporters.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 2 reports surveys conducted in 2013-2014 showing that when asked whether the effects of climate change are exaggerated, again, Conservative and UKIP supporters are much more likely than Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters to offer more sceptical responses, believing that the effects are overplayed (a majority in each case for UKIP supporters, and over two-fifths for Conservative supporters).

A more recent ComRes (2015) survey from January-February 2015 shows a similar patterning of attitudes for party supporters, this time in relation to concern for climate change. Conservative (54%) and UKIP (51%) supporters are much less likely to be very or fairly concerned about climate change compared to Labour (71%), Liberal Democrat (77%) and other party supporters (78%). Nearly half of Conservative and UKIP supporters said they were not very or not at all concerned about climate change compared to around a quarter of Labour supporters and a fifth of Liberal Democrat and other party supporters (ComRes 2015).

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The previous section discussed the widespread opposition amongst Conservative MPs and the right wing press to wind turbines. Table 3 reports YouGov data for two questions asking about the government's usage or encouragement of wind power, again showing party supporters' attitudes.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Conservative supporters are less favourable towards wind power compared to Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters. Generally, strong majorities of Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters are in favour of government backing for wind power, reaching around three-quarters of the latter in some surveys. Where separate data for UKIP supporters are available, they hold views similar to those expressed by Conservative supporters. Another YouGov survey, from July 2012, asked several questions about wind power and, across-the-board, Conservative supporters were less likely to give positive assessments that the other main party supporters. Conservatives were: 1) *less likely* to think wind turbines could make a positive contribution to the reduction of CO2 emissions and that wind was a viable source of green energy; and 2) *more likely* to think the government was over-subsidising wind power and to believe that the negative impacts of wind farms (their appearance and noise pollution) outweighed their positive contribution to the generation of green energy. An April 2014 YouGov survey also found lower support for onshore wind power among Conservative and UKIP supporters with, respectively, 55% and 48% in favour, compared to 69% of Labour supporters and 77% of Lib Dem supporters. Overall, Conservative and UKIP supporters are less likely to favour government support for wind energy, are more sceptical about its efficacy as a source of green energy and more likely to regard turbines as a blot on their 'green and pleasant' landscape.

Our data does not show that the partisan divide has definitely increased since 2010, because there is insufficient systematic data available pre-election, particularly before 2008, to be able to draw any robust comparisons over time. However, it is does seem reasonable to conclude that Cameron was influenced by the pressures and dissent from within his own parliamentary party, egged on by the right wing press, and underpinned by a more sceptical Conservative-supporting base.

## Conclusion

It is not clear whether David Cameron's rash promise to be the 'greenest government ever' represented a serious intention to restore the environment to the forefront of the modernisation project or was simply a rash moment of bravado, which has repeatedly come back to haunt him. Either way, rather than demonstrating how far the Party has changed, the environment has shown the Conservatives to be somewhat internally divided and rebellious (as well as bickering with their Liberal Democrat coalition partners), and inclined to support producer interests (oil and gas companies, energy utilities, farmers) rather than environmentalists.

If Cameron did initially hope that the environment could play a positive modernising role, he seems to have been quickly disabused of that notion. After stepping in to broker a deal with Osborne and Huhne to enable the Government to accept the 4th carbon budget (a climb-down would have been politically damaging given his support for the Climate Change Act in opposition), Cameron effectively relinquished any leadership role in a policy area that was formerly one of his signature issues. He has offered no public encouragement to an alternative centre-right green growth discourse that might challenge the Chancellor's orthodox approach to the politics of austerity and deficit reduction that marginalized environmental considerations. Cameron did little to counter the increasingly hostile and vitriolic opposition to wind farms, environmental regulations and green levies amongst many Conservative MPs.

Thus the environment has arguably not played a significant role in the modernisation project *since 2010*, while it clearly did so *before 2010* during the period in opposition. Indeed, if anything, the modernising credentials of the Conservative Party have probably been undermined by its environmental record in office. Certainly, opinion polling testing Cameron's 'greenest government ever' claim and the sincerity of his support for green issues showed generally unfavourable evaluations on the part of the wider public (YouGov 2012, 2013, 2014; Opinium 2014). As Dommett (2015) observes: 'Whilst it is easy for politicians to deploy the language of modernisation and offer visions of change, delivering these shifts in practice requires significant skill. Not only must a leader secure consensus for change within their own party, they must consistently deliver on stated ends if they are seen to be successful' (p.XXX). In office, it became increasingly clear that Cameron had not secured an internal consensus on environmental issues, particularly in relation to climate change, because of both inter-party and intra-party tensions and fractiousness. The coalition government broadly delivered on its green pledges. Yet the environment was a presentational disaster for the Conservative Party, due to squabbling with the Liberal Democrats, backbench opposition to wind farms and green levies, and the wider context of austerity policies, which prompted Osborne's negative interventions and inconsistent growth-oriented measures, such as huge subsidies for fossil fuel exploitation. Cameron's vacillation hardly helped: thus his efforts to quell critics on the backbenches by appointing Hayes as Energy Minister and Paterson as Environment Secretary, were later undermined by swiftly moving Hayes elsewhere and later sacking Paterson - an act Paterson himself explained as an attempt to appease the 'Green Blob' (Milman 2014).[4] Cameron's despairing plea to 'get rid of all the green crap' simply cemented the image.

This unwillingness to pursue the green agenda reflected in part the lower salience of the environment and the economic realities of recession and deficit reduction. In addition, in a very significant development since 2010, climate change has become a more partisan issue for the political right in the UK. Whilst in the USA, Canada and Australia climate change had already become a positional issue characterized by sharp, and often fierce, political divisions, in Europe, where

climate scepticism is generally lower, several right-wing leaders including Chirac, Sarkozy, Merkel and Cameron have in recent years supported strong climate change mitigation targets and policies, although subsequently they have all reined in many progressive measures. However, the shift away seems to have gone further in the UK where a significant body of Conservative MPs is now vehemently opposed to progressive climate policy, as are UKIP and large sections of the right-wing press. Perhaps Cameron's (probably unavoidable) mistake was to emphasize climate change as the key contemporary environmental challenge that his modernisation project had to embrace, because climate change policies - by invoking EU targets, introducing new regulations or imposing green taxes - frequently confront some of the most powerful shibboleths of the modern Conservative Party. Specifically, opposition to action on climate change has become a key component of the populist right wing Eurosceptic discourse.

We have presented evidence to show that in opposition the environment acted as a valence issue to make a positive contribution to Cameron's modernisation project, but since 2010 climate change has become a positional issue in British politics, with large sections of the Conservative Party, UKIP and their supporters in the wider electorate, holding sceptical views on climate change and opposing government action to address it. However, it may still be the case that the natural environment remains predominantly a valence issue. After all, most Conservatives also retain a strong concern with the natural environment: that is why so many opposed the proposed sell-off of the national forests, why many criticize the environmental damage that HS2 will wreak and why there is such dislike for wind turbines as 'blots on the landscape' . Interestingly, a recent public opinion survey shows that, amongst those intending to vote for the Conservatives, the highest levels of concern for climate change are found amongst women and those aged 18-24 (ComRes 2015), which suggests that the weakening of the Conservatives' green credentials may have a detrimental impact on their support amongst these groups. Indeed, the announcement by the three major party leaders of a pre-election pledge to work together to combat climate change (BBC News, 14 February 2015) suggested that Cameron recognized the continuing political importance to the Conservatives of

avoiding appearing too far out of step with his rivals on this issue. However, it is doubtful whether Cameron could deliver on this commitment in the face of the growing partisan hostility to progressive climate policy within his own party.

Overall, our findings suggest that the traditional perception of the environment as a valence issue needs to be revised. One inference is that the environment has the potential to play a positive role in a Conservative modernising agenda only when it operates as a valence issue.

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[1] The BES 2010 in-person survey was obtained from the BES 2009-10 website: http://bes2009-10.org/bes-data.php.

[2] A search of prime ministerial speeches on Gov.UK revealed a short speech on climate change to the 2012 Clean Energy Ministerial Summit, and a short address to the UN Climate Summit, 23 September 2014, and no speech on any wider environmental issues.

[3] The data from the opinion polls presented in Tables 1-3 were obtained by the authors from the polling archive section on the YouGov website, available at: http://yougov.co.uk/publicopinion/archive/.

[4] Although others pointed to his incompetence in handling the floods during the winter of 2013-14 as a key factor in his demise (Lean 2014).

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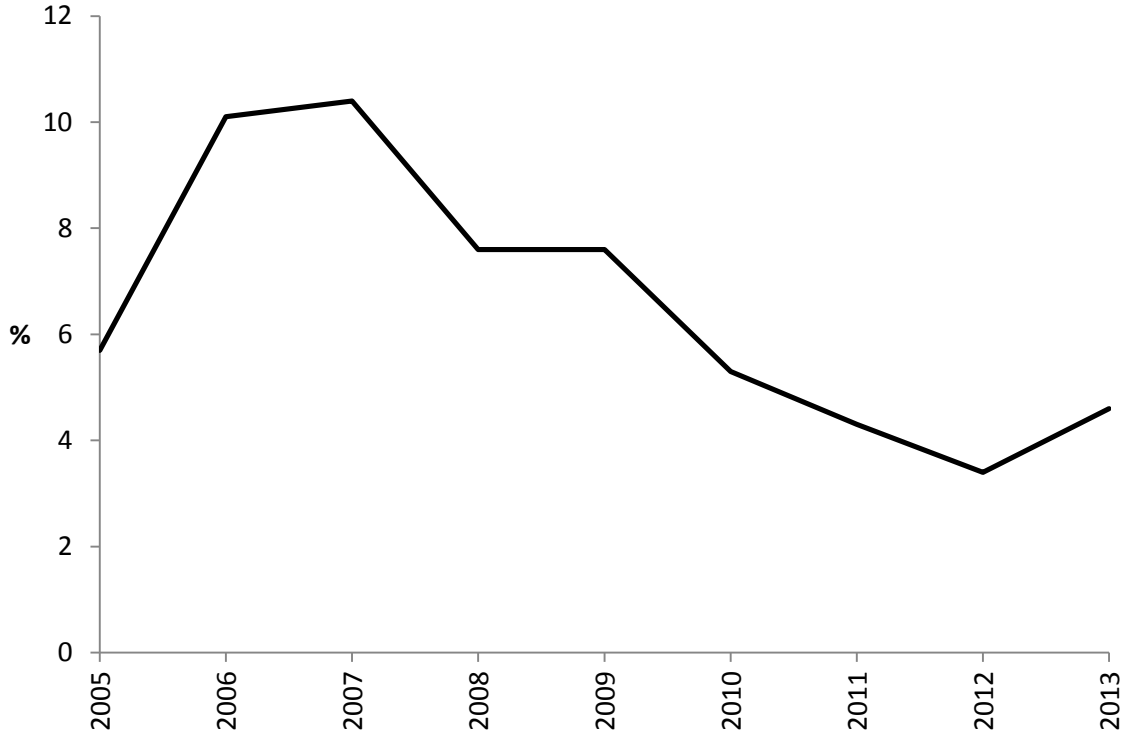
**Figure 1:** Issue importance of the environment/pollution, 2005-2013




*Source*: Ipsos MORI. Data compiled by the authors from: https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=2439&view=wide.

Note: Percentage for each year based on averaging across monthly data. Monthly data are based on combining (unprompted) responses to the following two questions: 'What would you say is the most important issue facing Britain today?' and 'What do you see as other important issues facing Britain today?'

**Table 1:**'On the subject of climate change do you think:'

Per cent saying 'The world is becoming warmer but not because of human activity' or 'The world is not becoming warmer'

| | 7-11 March 2008 | 25-26 October 2010 | 21-22 June 2012 | 26-27 March 2013 | 1-2 April 2013 | 20-21 June 2013 | 19-20 September 2013 | 17-18 February 2014 | 31 March-1 April 2014 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Con (%)** | 41 | 52 | 47 | 47 | 41 | 47 | 44 | 43 | 35 |
| **Lab (%)** | 27 | 40 | 31 | 40 | 25 | 29 | 19 | 22 | 24 |
| **Lib Dem (%)** | 18 | 33 | 19 | 29 | 18 | 25 | 13 | 28 | 14 |
| **UKIP (%)** | - | - | - | 75 | 59 | 61 | 46 | 59 | 49 |

*Source*: YouGov. Data compiled by the authors.

**Table 2**: 'Do you think concerns about climate change have or have not been exaggerated?'

Per cent saying 'have been exaggerated'.

| | 19-20 September 2013 | 17-18 February 2014 | 31 March-1 April 2014 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Con (%)** | 54 | 48 | 43 |
| **Lab (%)** | 28 | 24 | 25 |
| **Lib Dem (%)** | 20 | 30 | 22 |
| **UKIP (%)** | 62 | 54 | 52 |

*Source*: YouGov. Data compiled by the authors.

**Table 3:** Attitudes towards wind power by political party supported

Per cent saying 'more than present' (2011-2012) or 'The government is right to spend money encouraging this form of energy' (2013)

| | 24-25 November 2011 | 17-18 May 2012 | 18-19 October 2012 | 22-23 November 2012 | 7-8 February 2013 | 1-2 August 2013 | 24-25 October 2013 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Con (%)** | 43 | 44 | 49 | 38 | 48 | 52 | 42 |
| **Lab (%)** | 62 | 61 | 64 | 60 | 64 | 72 | 62 |
| **Lib Dem (%)** | 79 | 69 | 67 | 59 | 78 | 79 | 72 |
| **UKIP (%)** | - | - | - | - | - | 51 | |

Source: YouGov. Data compiled by the authors.

Questions:

'Thinking about the country's future energy provision, do you think the government should be looking to use more or less of the following?' [2011-2012]

'Do you think the government is right or wrong to invest money to encourage the development of the following forms of energy generation?' [2013]