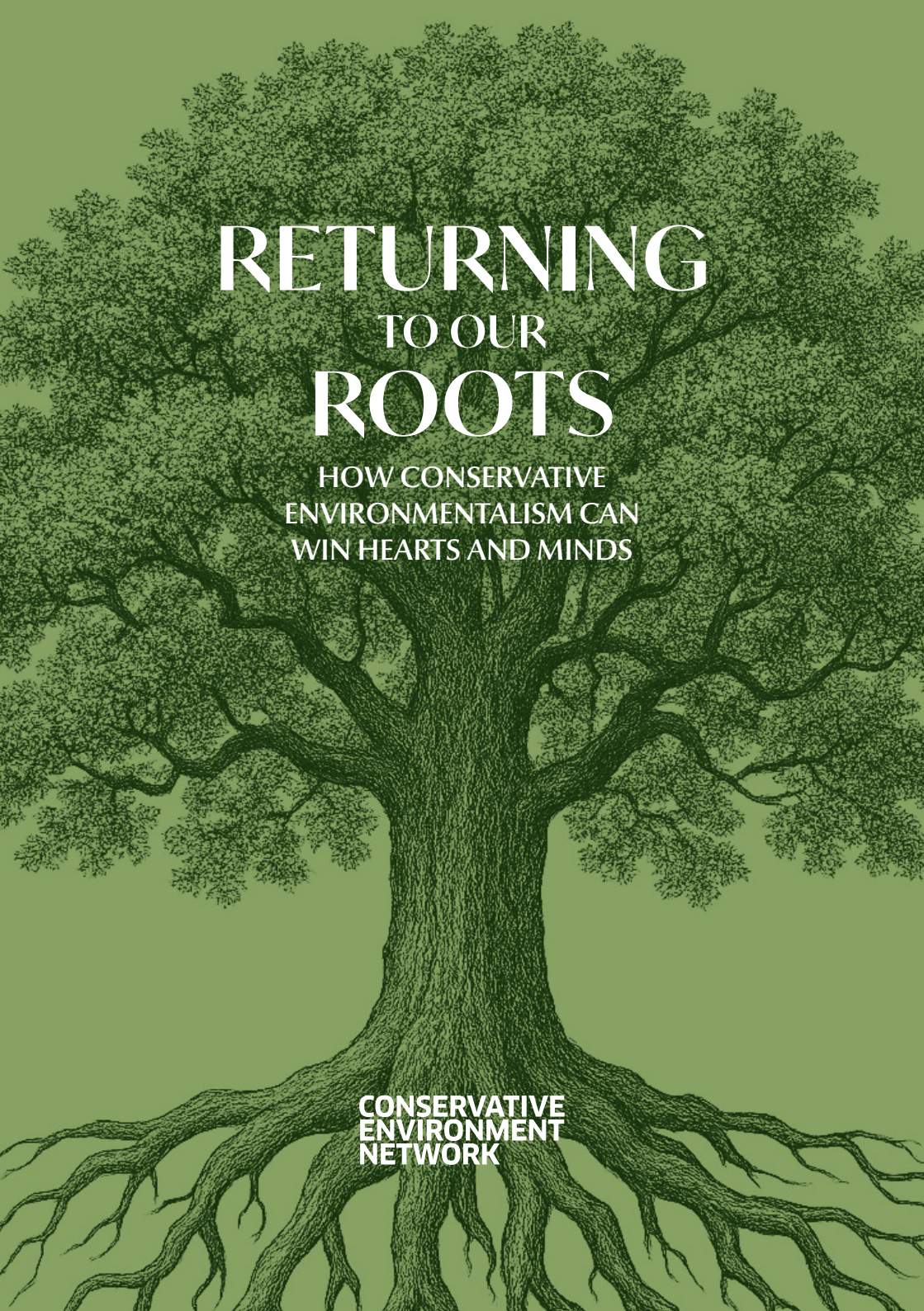

RETURNING TO OUR ROOTS

HOW CONSERVATIVE ENVIRONMENTALISM CAN WIN HEARTS AND MINDS

CONSERVATIVE ENVIRONMENT NETWORK

CONSERVATIVE
ENVIRONMENT
NETWORK

The Conservative Environment Network (CEN) is the home for conservatives who support responsible environmental leadership.

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Lord Gove is the Editor of *The Spectator*. As the former Member of Parliament for Surrey Heath and UK Government Cabinet Minister, he served in Cabinet across five government departments for more than a decade, from the 2010 Coalition government onwards. In May 2025, Michael was made a peer in Rishi Sunak's honours list and joined the House of Lords choosing the title Lord Gove of Torry.

Foreword

Lord Gove

The Conservative Promise is rooted in nature. To be a Conservative is to understand human nature, to shape politics in accordance with the impulses of the human heart, and to appreciate the beauty, wonder and importance of the natural world.

Conservatives recognise that our identity depends on an understanding of home – the environment in which we and those we love are safe and valued, the place where the relationships which give our life meaning are nurtured, the inheritance which we strive to enhance for those who succeed us.

There can, therefore, be no true conservatism which does not respect the natural world and recognise our duty to creation. For Conservatives, real environmentalism means honouring home, recognising the importance of prudence, restraint and respect for limits, and celebrating beauty.

And for environmentalists, Conservatives are not just natural allies but the strongest champions. An environmentalism which is abstract, statistically–driven, dictated from a distance and flatteningly universalist

is unmoored from the enduring attachments which give our lives meaning and motivation. There is an approach towards nature found among some deep greens, and many on the left, which seeks either to erase the human or treat individuals as units of consumption and communities as entities to be regimented.

Of course, there are those on the right, many of whom might call themselves Conservatives, who do not recognise the importance of nature – who see human flourishing in narrow economic terms and chafe against any restraint, who do not see the value in beauty, wonder and awe. That perspective, which takes a valuable element within the Conservative tradition, economic liberalism, and allows it to trump all other instincts, is an impoverished vision of Toryism.

That is why the work of the Conservative Environment Network, and the contributions to this collection, are so valuable. They remind us that Conservatives have been, and will be, at the heart of protecting and improving our environment and the reach of Conservative arguments is all the greater when Conservatives comprehend the full range of arguments within our movement.

Conservatives in government have, since Victorian times, acted and legislated to enhance the environment and to ensure that economic growth does not come at the expense of wider human welfare. Acts to improve water and air quality, develop new homes sensitively, support farmers thoughtfully and steward land carefully have been introduced by successive Conservative administrations since Disraeli. And environmental concerns are not the property of any one wing within the party. Margaret Thatcher was the first world leader to emphasise the need to deal with climate change. Supporters of Brexit were concerned about animal welfare, the failures of the Common Agricultural Policy and the depletion of fish stocks under EU control. Since 2016, the UK has introduced world–leading legislation to protect

wildlife habitats, improve marine conservation and direct support for farmers and land managers to environmental improvement.

Conservative writers and thinkers, from Burke and Coleridge to Jimmy Goldsmith and Roger Scruton, have written powerfully in the past about what a truly environmentalist Toryism should mean – the writers in this collection continue that tradition, now more important than ever.

PART ONE

WINNING HEARTS: WHY CONSERVATIVES CARE ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT

"The true environmentalist is also a conservative. For the desire to protect the environment arises spontaneously in people, just as soon as they recognise their accountability to others for what they are and do, and just as soon as they identify some place as "ours"."

ROGER SCRUTON

Nicola Procaccini MEP is a member of the European Parliament and Co-President of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group. He is the President of the New Direction think tank. He also is the Head of the Department of Environment and Energy Policy for the Brothers of Italy.

The ecology of conservatives

Nicola Procaccini MEP

I consider myself far more of an environmentalist than Frans Timmermans, Greta Thunberg and others who, having lost an ideology defeated by history, have rebranded themselves through a form of pseudo–environmentalism. I am an environmentalist because I believe that preserving the land of our ancestors is one of the essential duties of European conservatives. The late British conservative philosopher Sir Roger Scruton expressed this clearly. He argued that ecology, or environmentalism, is the essence of the conservative cause and the clearest expression of a living alliance between those who came before, those alive today and those yet to be born.

This view of ecology connects the physical beauty of nature with something transcendent. I sense a divine breath even in a single blade of grass, and even more so in human and animal life. My spiritual understanding of ecology leads me to what is often called the “ecology of creation”. Since

humanity is made in the image and likeness of God, we are not merely one species among others. We are called to actively protect creation and to defend life, from conception to natural death. This is a defining belief for us as conservatives and one that I often highlight.

Over time, this view has been deepened through the teachings of several popes, including Pope Benedict XVI, Saint John Paul II and Pope Francis. They have all reminded us that, created in God's image, human beings have a duty to care for creation. This requires active responsibility rather than passive observation. If nature is sacred, then so is life, especially human life, from its beginning to its end.

No one can be a true environmentalist while ignoring the earliest and most fragile stages of human life. Yet left–wing environmentalism frequently does this, showing concern for wildlife but disregarding human life, which it often seeks to eliminate through measures such as euthanasia.

This demonstrates that environmentalism has never been a side issue for our political identity. It has always been central. I say this because our commitment to environmental concerns predates movements such as Fridays for Future. At that time, the left was not speaking about the environment, since it was focused on building a socialist model of society. Only when that model failed did it begin searching for a substitute. Its version of environmentalism became a replacement for an ideology already discredited by history.

The European Green Deal was created in this ideological context, without enough attention to the daily lives of families and businesses. The consequences are now becoming clear, particularly in the industrial sector. The automotive industry, for example, is experiencing serious decline. Decarbonisation goals are important, but they must be pursued gradually and pragmatically, with a balanced focus on environmental, economic and social sustainability.

In the European Parliament, both as representatives of Brothers of Italy and as members of the European Conservative group, we are working to reduce the harm caused by a Green Deal that threatens not only Europe's economy but also its most vulnerable citizens. I refer to those who, for example, cannot afford a new electric car because they simply do not have the resources.

Our approach to environmentalism is grounded in everyday life. If I think back to my first environmental campaign, I have to smile. It was against plastic cotton buds. It was not a glamorous cause. But when someone like Paolo Colli explained the environmental damage caused by disposable plastic, and how easy it was to replace such items, you came to understand that this was a real ecological issue.

Paolo Colli, the group Fare Verde and other right–leaning environmental associations in Italy began their work with waste management. For young people focused on other political causes, it was not easy to care about waste. Yet that experience taught us a fundamental truth: great ideals must begin with simple, tangible actions. Change starts with the world just outside our door.

Another essential aspect of our environmentalism is love for our homeland. The word patria – which means *fatherland* in Italian – is neither outdated nor dull. It conveys a sense of duty to both the past and the future. Patria represents culture, people, and land. It is the place where we first opened our eyes, and it is our responsibility to protect and preserve it. This challenge goes beyond Italy; it concerns the entire Western world.

Roger Scruton preferred the word ‘ecology’ to ‘environmentalism’ because of its Greek origins. The word ecology derives from oikos, meaning ‘home’, and logos, meaning ‘study’ or ‘care’. Ecology, in its truest sense, is the thoughtful stewardship of our shared home.

That is where our environmentalism begins: with our homes, our neighbourhoods and our cities. Only afterwards should attention turn to the Amazon rainforest. It makes little sense to campaign for distant ecosystems while ignoring the street outside your own home. This does not mean rejecting global concern, but it establishes a clear order of responsibility. We must first protect what has been passed down to us.

Freud said, "We are what we are because we were what we were." Conservatives believe in defending those who have lived in and worked with nature for generations. These are people who do not need lessons in environmentalism from those who only experience nature on holiday. Human beings have a duty to safeguard nature. We defend farmers because they are our roots. Alongside herders and fishers, they do not simply take from nature; they care for it and keep it alive. Without them, nature declines rather than flourishes.

Some suggest that nature would be better off without humans. That is a tragic mistake. It is one of the ideas that separates us from the theatrical posturing often seen in left–wing environmentalism.

I want to conclude with one last topic, which is the great innovation of our age and which excites me particularly. What is the mechanism that generated the universe, that released the energy which then allowed human life to come into being and to take shape? It was nuclear fusion. It was the creation of the stars. The energy that was released in the formation of the stars, when elements collided and unleashed the force that created the entire universe.

Now, without going into the details of nuclear fission or the technologies of next–generation reactors like small modular reactors or advanced modular reactors, our approach is pragmatic: we must use the best energy technologies that are available to us now. However, it is right to invest in research, and it is important and right that Italy, by promoting the G7 agreement on nuclear fusion, has committed itself

to investing in humanity's most thrilling dream: to have clean, infinite energy drawn from the stars.

I believe that if there is one vision that can in some way unite and inspire our entire generation, it must be that of nuclear fusion. I cannot say how many days remain until the commercialisation of fusion reactors, but I know that now we can see it in front of us. We see that light ahead of us. And how can we not feel, deep within ourselves, the urge to run towards that light, to seize it, a little like Prometheus, and make it available to all of humanity?

I believe that this is our mission.

Tom Coke succeeded to the title of Earl of Leicester in May 2015. He has overseen the diversification of Holkham Estate away from its dependence on agriculture and chairs Wildlife Farms and Estates England. In 2021 he was voted into the House of Lords taking up a seat as a Hereditary Peer and currently sits on the Environment and Climate Change Committee.

The beauty of nature

The Earl of Leicester

I love the big skies and light here in North Norfolk, part of God's own county! Even, almost especially, in winter, at dusk or at dawn, it's magical. Particularly on Holkham beach, beneath a leaden sky at sunset, when the sea is a darker shade of grey and the sand is a little lighter.

This might sound somewhat melancholic, but I am a fan of German romantic painters, like Caspar David Freidrich (1774–1840), whose work conveys a subjective and often emotional response to the natural world. You get a great sense of that, particularly on a moonlit night.

The immense beauty of our natural landscapes inspires a sense of awe and a profound, intrinsically conservative sense of duty to conserve our natural world for future generations.

This most manifests itself for me in the protection of the Holkham National Nature Reserve (NNR), which stretches across nearly 10,000 acres of marshland and foreshore from Burnham Norton to Blakeney. It's wild

and rich with flora and fauna and is the largest NNR in Norfolk and arguably the most important in England.

The central part of it is situated on the estate and has been managed in–hand by our Holkham team since 2012 when Natural England's license expired. As it was the most visited location on our land, we felt strongly that we should take responsibility for its management, and we were confident that we would be more effective for a number of reasons.

Prime amongst them was that, as a small organisation we could, and would, make decisions. Too often large third sector NGOs or government departments prevaricate over making decisions. But in so doing they should realise they have made a decision not to make a decision. We have a small but well–informed management team who generally make the right calls. On the odd occasion we make the wrong decision, we soon know about it and take immediate steps to rectify it. The worst thing is to make no decision at all, that simply leads to stasis and is terribly morale sapping for members of the team. From the days of my military training it has stayed with me that it is far better to be a leader motivated by hope for success than by fear of failure.

We made the decision early on, that all legal methods of predator species control would be undertaken on the NNR, in an attempt to ensure over wintering wildfowl and waders, but particularly the fledglings of springtime breeding birds, had the best chance of surviving through to adulthood. We don't try to hide this fact lest we upset people's sensitivities, but we add it to the narrative as part of the continuous education of our visitors. It always perplexes me that many conservation organisations talk in terms of the number of nests. That counts for nothing if the young are all predated which is so often the case. It is fledglings that survive to adulthood that count.

I don't think anyone benefits from a plethora of signage in the countryside, but where we do have interpretative signs we credit our visitors with intelligence and do not dumb down messages. When I talk to visitors I sense this is always appreciated.

The importance of these conversations is only growing. We live in an increasingly urban society with less than one percent of our population living and working in the countryside. The knowledge gap is cavernous and social entitlement to land is increasing. However, at the same time, there is at last a growing awareness of the benefits nature and the countryside can have on our health and wellbeing. There certainly is a newfound appetite to connect with nature and our work highlights the role private enterprise can play in this. We do our best to welcome visitors and encourage them to learn about nature, and crucially to respect it.

As a farmer it's not surprising that I also love the working landscape. Norfolk is the 'bread basket of England'. I appreciate the farmed landscape for its mosaic of hedges, field margins and the patchwork created by the increasing variety of crops grown here. We operate a six–course rotation system with all the cereals, but also featuring sugar beet, potatoes, onions, beans and have recently introduced 18 and 24 month grass and clover leys into the arable rotation.

More and more farmers are transitioning to regenerative agricultural practices, the sort of farming pioneered in the Agricultural Revolution toward the end of the 18th century. Increasingly the fields are not solely yellow with cereals, but filled with a spectrum of colour, from the vibrant crimson clover to the delicate lavender blue of phacelia. And, because we follow a regenerative agricultural system, there's more green cover throughout the year, thanks to cover (or catch) crops with a mix of carbon sequestering and nitrogen catching plants, such as vetch, buckwheat and oilseed radish. I believe in

generating natural capital and allowing a variety of plants to thrive and complement each other, rather than a monoculture, in one field. It is this variety that helps to promote biodiversity, nature loves "edge" – where different habitats meet. This system also restores our natural landscapes to how our ancestors would have experienced them, with the diversity adding to the interest and beauty.

As part of this, we've also reintroduced livestock into the landscape, with almost 1,000 beef cattle from spring to autumn grazing on the nature reserve's freshwater marshes. It's so peaceful to sit and watch these colourful, large ruminants, peacefully grazing their way across the landscape. And that is what we must encourage visitors to do, to stop, sit quietly and watch the view. When you do that, things start to happen. You start to notice tiny songbirds flitting between branches as they deliver their shrill yet melodious songs, and butterflies blown on the breeze as they search out nectar from multivarious flowers.

The cattle and our flock of 600 sheep grazing on the cover crops not only evoke a pastoral scene that's remained unchanged for centuries, they also provide all sorts of biodiversity benefits, not least as they are returning goodness to the soil through their muck which is so beneficial to the invertebrates at the bottom of the food chain. It's no wonder that my four–times–great–grandfather, Coke of Norfolk, a pioneering agriculturist of the Agricultural Revolution and Whig MP for 50 years, described sheep as 'the golden hoof'.

But behind all these pretty quilted patchworks of fields, of wildlife corridor hedges and margins, and of the bucolic beauty of gentle ruminants, there is a very progressive farming business that is data–driven and science–led. We are not organic farmers, indeed organic farming only accounts for two to three percent of the famed land in Britain, but we are reducing our use of artificial nitrogen without significant yield penalty, and in 2021 didn't use any insecticides. The latest "toy" on the farm is a huge 36 metre wide sprayer that has

cameras on the boom next to the spray nozzles that we are training to differentiate between crops and weeds. This is saving (depending on crop) up to 70 percent usage of agri–chemicals. An economic saving and a biodiversity gain.

But all is not rosy in the countryside. There are increasing political threats. This ideological Labour Government's tax policies are becoming more punitive, and vindictively directed at people they either do not like and certainly do not seem to understand. They are threatening long–term stability which is never good for anyone. Regulations are becoming more top–down and restrictive, reducing autonomy and decision making and are often conflicting. Government green economic incentives to farmers, land managers and landowners are being cut and lack consistency, creating competition for bottom line value propositions.

Sadly current legislators believe that environmental regulations and enforcement are the quick route for the Government to tick a box for nature and climate targets. But just because land is designated doesn't actually mean it is going to remain in good order, it is voluntary, bottom–up action that will deliver.

Managing the landscape properly takes real dedication. I'm particularly proud of the way we manage forestry on the estate. The woodland is well looked after with 80 percent in continuous cover forestry. Forestry and the landscape doesn't happen by accident.

The management of deciduous forestry in England is generally not a money–making exercise, though I'm pleased that our seven man (in fact five men and two women) team washes its face as we prune and thin our woods on a regular seven year cycle, usually taking 30 percent of the mass of the trees out with each thin. This creates butterfly glades, excellent for letting light into the ground storey, encouraging biodiversity and, crucially from a forestry point of view, encouraging quicker growth of the remaining timber, which of course

captures carbon in the growing wood of the tree, and sequesters more in the ground through its huge root system.

A good thin also promotes increased ventilation through the remaining trees which reduces the chance of disease. This process of regular thinning encourages a multi–aged, more "natural" wood. A few of the trees will be mature and worth good money and will be used in construction or furniture making and they help pay for the whole process. All of the above leave a well–managed and attractive wood which will sit in the landscape for hundreds of years.

That is of the utmost importance to custodians of the countryside, people like me, who want to leave a legacy. Our sense of connection to those who lived before and who will come after us is at the heart of conservatism, a philosophical underpinning present in the works of great thinkers from Edmund Burke to Roger Scruton. When I think of an appropriate homage to my ancestors and a legacy to set my descendants on a prosperous and secure path, there are few things more vital, beautiful and sacred to bequeath than a flourishing natural world.

Senator Andrew McLachlan CSC CStJ is a Senator in the Australian Federal Parliament. He previously served in the South Australian Parliament.

He is guided in public life by his love of the natural world, his faith, and his professional experience in finance and law.

Fortifying freedoms

Senator Andrew McLachlan

When asked to contemplate the future of 'freedom' in a world ravaged by the effects of a changing climate, I am always reluctant to paint a dystopian future. My natural disposition is to live with a degree of optimism and hope. Besides, my bookshelf is littered with serious tomes from the sixties and seventies by intellectuals far more gifted than myself, picturing a doom awaiting us that is yet to transpire. However, I confess that rising geopolitical tensions, regional conflicts, supply chain disruptions and the recent pandemic have tested my optimistic disposition.

My use of the word 'freedom' is not just confined to civil rights, but also the liberty we enjoy to live our lives free from unnecessary state interference in affluent nations, such as Australia and the United Kingdom. Further, this missive is penned from the perspective of a Federal Senator from the State of South Australia. This perspective is most relevant when I touch upon the Australian experience during the COVID–19 pandemic.

As a parliamentarian, my thoughts have increasingly turned to the extent of state intervention needed to not only avoid the irreversible denigration of our natural inheritance, but to adapt to climate change. In response to climate change, we need co-operation between nations, co-operation between all levels of government, and co-operation between and within communities. Even a cursory read of history provides insight into the magnitude of the challenge to overcome layers upon layers of vested interests and ideological differences.

The King (then a Prince) in his speech at COP26 made the point that, while global pandemics are devastating, climate change and biodiversity loss present an even greater existential threat. He argued that we must respond with collective action, as if on a military campaign. The King was not calling for us to relinquish our freedom. Rather, to marshal our resources and talent, and work together to build a better future.

Nevertheless, there are growing schools of thought that democratic government is unfit to tackle a climate crisis. Elected representatives yield to public unwillingness to make sacrifices and demonstrate inability to resist powerful interest groups. It is argued by some that an authoritarian government is best to implement the economic and social transformation needed to save the planet.

One must acknowledge there is a longstanding practice in the Westminster tradition that in times of crisis, the workings of parliamentary democracy can be partially or completely suspended. The obvious examples are in war, combating terrorism and responding to public health risks.

This tradition, that the state can take extraordinary steps to save itself, has been adopted by Australia. In my lifetime, we have experienced profoundly interventionist state government action in South Australia – ranging from water restrictions during drought to the use of emergency powers during the pandemic.

An Australian Government report indicates that “climate change is exacerbating threats and risks to Australia's national security. These include sea level rise, bushfires, droughts, extreme rainfall events, and higher–intensity cyclones.”

We have already witnessed neighbouring Pacific Island nations experience the more immediate impacts of our changing climate, where rising sea levels and extreme weather events have led to the evacuation of some communities.

While climate risks are being considered at the whole–of–government level and by individual agencies, including Defence and Home Affairs, I question whether our longstanding arrangements for states, territories and the Commonwealth to respond to extreme weather events will be sufficiently robust going forward.

It may be that more ‘aggressive’ government interventions into the lives of its citizens will be required into the future, particularly as the impact of climate change places pressure on our capacity to manage these weather events.

We witnessed the impacts of strong state interference throughout the COVID–19 pandemic, with the Federal Government controlling the national borders, and the states controlling their own borders and the liberties of their citizenry. The usual deliberations of both Federal and State Parliament were curtailed with responsibilities devolved to committees or key individuals. Students of French revolutionary history would have recognised some of the structures of arbitrary governance.

As far as I could discern at the time, the justification was the scale of the threat to life and that the measures would be temporary. By and large, the public accepted infringement of their liberties; of concern was the lack of widespread debate regarding this assault on democracy. I suspect this was because it was a public health

response, and the restriction of liberty was such a new experience for everyone. Those who sought to question the public health dictates or measures themselves were ridiculed and silenced. In my view, our community took its democratic processes and freedoms for granted and surrendered them willingly without a real debate.

The ambition of government must be the provision of high living standards, and the opportunity for both present and future generations to live a satisfying and rewarding life. Conservation is key to sustainable productivity, as it requires planning the rational use of the entire environment. Yet the pace of the decline of biodiversity tells us we may be facing a critical point of no return for the planet. While we have the means to face the challenge, our respective communities and their institutions must also have the confidence, commitment and willpower to act with sufficient urgency.

Transforming our respective nations' economic endeavours to a sustainable footing will be a long march. By implication, governments will need to consider greater market interventions and the restrictions of people's freedoms. The scale of intervention in fighting climate change is one of the most important policy questions, especially for democracies.

Conservative parliamentarians must be vigilant that a declared 'climate emergency' could automatically shield governments from opposition to legislating oppressive measures that suit and underpin the ideologies of the left. There is many a Marxist seeking to hide their revolutionary ambitions beneath a green flag.

Yet we are experiencing a systematic failure of leadership across government and business. We seem unable to contemplate the unthinkable or imagine a new future. As Kenneth Clark noted, civilisation is always at risk of being diminished by a lack of confidence. "We can destroy ourselves by cynicism and disillusionment." He

further argues that the moral and intellectual failure of Marxism left us with no alternative but to worship heroic materialism.

Even when political discourse does acknowledge the anxieties of the day, it is accompanied by little or no emphasis on the real costs. This type of debate is described by some as 'trade–off denial'. The complex and difficult nature of the issue is used to justify postponing or compromising any response.

As conservatives, we must strive to make our democratic structures fit for purpose. The left denigrates our existing institutions. Conservatives, by contrast, value and improve them. It is the role of the conservative to act as a steward, not as an environmental chauvinist.

Market and societal intervention must be carried out with a mindfulness that temporary measures risk becoming permanent. For a fatigued or resigned population may come to accept ongoing redundant restrictions. This poses a threat to liberty and the vitality of democratic life.

The changing environment has already begun to test our governance structures, regardless of whether democratic governance cares to impact it. It is affecting (inter alia) national security, food security, water supply, migration and disaster management. Western economies may require a scale of mobilisation not experienced since the last world war.

The response of democracies cannot be a series of independent initiatives. However, any slide into oppression will not release the creativity needed. A well–led democracy is best placed to nurture, engage and encourage its peoples. Our uncoordinated, democratic governance structures must be adapted to avoid short–term decision making captured by vested interests and weak accountability mechanisms.

The scale and urgency of the response needed to address climate change presents a considerable challenge to our democratic institutions and the culture of the body politic. We can only protect our natural inheritance if we have a clear vision of what action must be undertaken, the real costs associated with said action and who is responsible for underwriting those costs. We must revisit our idea of how we address problems, and from there, take renewed purpose.

There is cause to be optimistic that we can achieve genuine sustainability. We can draw strength from our western inheritance, that communities have survived the plague and industrial–scale wars.

This means placing faith in our people's ingenuity and the robustness of our democracies. We will need leadership to galvanise the commitment of our peoples. That commitment will come when they feel they can trust the institutions of state and its leadership to serve them and their interests into the future.

Ben Goldsmith is the former chair of the Conservative Environment Network. He has worked in sustainable investing for two decades and is co-founder of Nattergal Ltd. Ben was a non-executive director of the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs from 2018 to 2022. He founded and chairs Conservation Collective, a network of locally-focused environment foundations.

Nature's stewards

Ben Goldsmith

It is interesting to see how people are willing to pay twice the amount for an apartment which overlooks a park, or a hotel room which has a sea view compared to one which doesn't; or that people are drawn to urban green spaces like bees to a honeycomb as soon as the sun makes even the most cursory of appearances. In Britain, waiting lists for vegetable allotments are now decades–long. People love their cats and dogs to the point of absurdity. We humans seem to yearn for connection with the non–human world around us. The writer E.O. Wilson coined the term 'biophilia' to describe this universal phenomenon. And increasingly there is data to back the idea up.

The health benefits of time spent in nature are numerous. Improvements in mental and physical health, reduced loneliness and enhanced wellbeing are increasingly well documented. Activities such as community gardening, conservation volunteering, or nature walks have been shown to improve recovery rates following physical illness, and to lower stress, anxiety and depression levels.

Unsurprisingly, these positive outcomes have led to a growing emphasis on green social prescribing in the NHS. This is the practice of encouraging people to engage in nature–based activities to improve their mental and physical health. Initiatives like the £5.77 million Green Social Prescribing Programme, launched under the last government, have started to embed nature–based interventions in patient care. Doctors and link workers increasingly refer patients to these programmes, reflecting a shift toward holistic, non–clinical care to ease pressure on healthcare services. Similarly, prisoners are shown to be less depressed, less violent and less likely to reoffend if they are given the chance to spend a little time each week growing their own potatoes. And of course, anyone with experience of raising children knows that all problems vanish once you take them outdoors.

Children and adults alike are mesmerised by the natural world, whether they know it or not. Nature heals us, enlivens us, fills us with joy. The need we feel to be in nature is visceral. Which is why, throughout the great mosaic of human history, our bond with the natural world has been central to human existence. From the earliest times, throughout millennia of ancient shamanistic spirituality across the world, and within each of the major modern–day religions today, there is a common thread: humanity's role as stewards of Earth.

From Christianity to Islam, Hinduism to Judaism, there's a compelling narrative of guardianship of creation. Genesis 2:15 lays out the directive, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” It's not just labour; it's a sacred duty. The notion that Christians and Jews are mandated to exercise dominion over nature oversimplifies the scriptural context. Old Testament teaching advocates for nurturing and protecting nature, not asserting unchecked dominance over it. The Hebrew term “kabash” (subdue) and “radah” (rule) in Genesis suggest responsible management, not exploitative control. Furthermore, Leviticus 25:23–24 frames land as God’s possession, with humans as temporary

stewards tasked with preserving its goodness. “The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me. And in all the land of your possession you shall grant redemption of the land.” Similarly reverence for the environment can be found in the New Testament, albeit it placing Jesus Christ as an agent of the creation: “For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on Earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him.” These teachings advocate for the creation and environment to be honoured and respected by mankind.

In Islam, the Quran (6:165) positions humans as vicegerents of Allah on Earth, charged with its management and protection. Hinduism, through texts like the Bhagavad Gita, advocates for Dharma, which encompasses the duty to sustain nature. And in Judaism, the Torah repeatedly speaks of the land as God's gift, to be preserved for generations yet to come. This shared ethic across religions is a cultural unifier, breaching political, national and cultural divides, offering common ground where all people can agree: we are stewards, not owners.

The beauty of nature is a shared inheritance which matters deeply to people, individually and collectively. Nature is central to our own personal and collective sense of identity and meaning. As conservatives, our approach to the natural environment must, by definition, comprise core values of stewardship, responsibility and legacy. What could be more meaningful and joyful than restoring and protecting our most cherished and vital asset?

Translating this ancient wisdom into modern solutions must begin with redefining what progress really means. Progress need not simply be the process of exploiting nature, but of reinserting ourselves into the miracle and fulfilling our role as its guardians. Recognising

our current impact is unsustainable, conservatives must advocate for policies that reduce pollution and waste, as our grandparents' generation once did, promoting instead circular economic models. This doesn't need to be at the expense of economic growth. Using resources more efficiently should naturally align with capitalism.

Instead of shovelling taxpayer subsidies into economically non–viable, environmentally–ruinous ways of producing food and other commodities often in the wrong places, conservatives should champion and incentivise new approaches which regenerate the natural systems on which we depend for everything we have and everything we do. We've disrupted ecosystems, for example by the removal of keystone predators such as wolves, leading to significant ecological disequilibrium. Wolves regulate prey populations, such as deer, preventing overgrazing and the loss of vegetation, as well as regulating disease in the deer themselves. Nothing could be more important now than putting the pieces back together.

Rewilding, bringing back nature and rehabilitating landscapes must be our most important legacy, ensuring our children inherit a world more vibrant than the one we've ourselves come to know. Education must integrate teaching about environmental stewardship from various perspectives, fostering a new generation that views environmental care as integral to their cultural and spiritual identity.

Our personal connection with nature is of profound spiritual importance, as anyone who has suffered – for example through grief – can confirm. Time spent close to nature fosters introspection, connection, and peace, elements which are so often missing from our urban lives.

For conservatives, for whom tradition and the past matter greatly, nature may elicit feelings of timelessness, and a link to a grander mystery. By encouraging nature experiences, we're not just promoting environmental awareness but also personal wellbeing. Nothing

resonates more with the conservative values of community and self–reliance than being surrounded by beautiful nature in which everyone has a stake.

Policies which embody stewardship while upholding economic freedom, such as tax incentives for green practices and support for sustainable local industries, ought to be central to a conservative agenda today.

We must challenge the notion that only the Left cares for the environment. In fact, throughout modern history, the opposite has often been the case. By highlighting how conservation aligns with conservative principles such as family, legacy and responsibility, we can reshape public perception, as well as promote dialogues across faith lines, focusing on environmental ethics, using these platforms to inspire unity and action.

A new vision of conservative environmentalism has the potential to win hearts and minds by tapping into the spiritual roots of our caretaker role. By advocating for sustainable yet freedom–preserving policies, and recognising the spiritual healing nature offers, conservatives can once again lead in a global movement towards a balanced, respected and cherished world. Let this be our generation's legacy.

Alexander Marshall is a Young Conservative activist and Next Gen CEN member. He will shortly start work as a nuclear manager apprentice, driving environmentally-friendly solutions in the British defence and energy sectors.

The survival of conservatism

Alexander Marshall

If conservatism is to survive the coming years, it must attract young devotees. This is a line oft–repeated in Conservative circles, yet the question of how this might be accomplished remains as yet unanswered. I believe environmentalism must form a part of the solution.

Let us be clear from the start: environmentalism is conservatism. All that climate change threatens – our economy, our natural heritage, our very way of life – lies at the core of what conservatism proposes to conserve. There is no coherency in pontificating about protecting families without ensuring the planet stays usable for posterity, no sense in fussing about green spaces just to blanket them in smog. Environmentalism requires no great reinvention, no desertion of our philosophy. Rather, it offers an opportunity for our party to return to first principles, live out our convictions and move toward developing a more cohesive identity.

That identity necessarily includes the young. The charge is to adapt or die. With

only two percent of our membership belonging to our youth arm, and less than 15 percent of 18–24 year olds etching a cross next to a Tory candidate on election day, it's clear we will falter in the coming years and decades if we do not change how we connect with younger voters. Pensioners alone do not a winning coalition make. How to win the youth? It's time for Conservatives to talk conservation.

20 percent of voters between 18–24 rate the environment as one of the key issues driving their voting choices. For reference, the same amount are influenced by housing. Only the economy, health and cost of living are considered more important – and even here, it only takes a quick glance at modern academic literature to see profound links between levels of pollution and an increased burden on the NHS, or climate change driven natural disasters and subdued economic growth. A proper environmentalist conservative argument thus provides at least some small part of an answer to all the chief concerns currently bothering the young.

The above said, there remains a question why an environmentalist – and, particularly, those too young to remember the leaps of faith made by the likes of Margaret Thatcher, that first Western leader to properly warn of climate change's perils, or of David Cameron's 'vote blue, go green' agenda – might feel inclined at all to support a fiscally restrained and cautious Conservative Party when the Green and Labour parties, by their nature, are inclined to spend more and make more radical arguments. Part of the answer to this question invariably comes down to the fundamentals of political philosophy. Conservatives should not, for example, abandon the argument that market–led solutions tend to perform better than state–led ones, particularly in the world of cutting edge, fast–innovating green technologies, or that community–generated contributions may well work best of all. Another part comes from emphasising the impressive record we hold on climate change, as referenced above.

The other part requires us to go on the attack. It is absurd to me that the Greens can oppose nuclear energy, reject local solar farm construction due to visual impacts and/or localised opposition and historically oppose any HS2 initiative at all (not merely the part scrapped by Sunak), whilst still clinging on to any serious climate credibility. Theirs is a party built on the back of making an awful lot of noise about a problem whilst opposing any meaningful solutions, and it is flabbergasting that the mainstream parties – Labour and us – are not, at very least, joined in condemning their hypocrisy.

But then Labour aren't much better, are they? They failed to expand our nuclear initiatives, piggy–backing off the work already done by us whilst taking their own share of the credit. They immediately moved to sacrifice the green belt on the altar of housing, never taking a moment to consider sensible alternatives like densification or the construction of new urban centres. All the while, their climate strategy is underpinned by Great British Energy, a statist government–run company straight out of the socialist sixties. We know the free market works better than the government. We know corporations innovate where bureaucracy stifles progress. We should be pointing this out, in the process developing a conservative approach to ending emissions (an argument CEN is at the forefront of constructing).

Recognising these deficiencies in our competition and the past successes in our record, it is easy to see that the Conservative Party has as much opportunity to capture the climate vote as any of our alternatives. Effort should be made to liaise with influential NGOs and voluntary groups, all the while emphasising the conservative focus on charity and community. This unlocks, at quick arithmetic, a group of at least 22 million involved in the Climate Coalition. Meanwhile, existing theoretical conservative environmentalist frameworks (such as those found in the works of Roger Scruton) should be mobilised to begin moving the needle toward conservatism in the left–wing dominated

universities and academia. This can be combined with a healthy dose of political attack on our competitors and renewed, strong climate policy commitments led by the shadow cabinet.

One potential problem with this, as with many contemporary Conservative questions, is Reform. The biggest strategic consideration presently faced by the Conservatives is which group of departing 2019 voters to attempt to recapture – those who voted Labour, those who voted Liberal Democrat, those who stayed home or those who went with Farage? The latter group, alas, is not quite as climate conscious as the first two, and indeed contains a not–insubstantial number of people who believe climate change isn't caused by mankind at all. There is a genuine question to be asked if pursuing a strong climate policy isn't tantamount to pursuing centre–right deserters at the expense of the true blue disenfranchised youth inclined to Reform.

The answer to this is no. Reform voters did not abandon the Conservatives because of our net zero strategy, even if it might not have been a policy they were particularly upset to lose; they abandoned us because of our poor record on immigration, perceived economic mismanagement, awful cost of living crisis and a general anti–incumbency feeling. There is room for a platform built on tackling immigration, returning to economic sensibility, promoting the free market, protecting free speech and taking steps to conserve the environment. We can – and, in my view, should – be aiming to learn from our failures over the past fourteen years and patch up the holes poked in our record by our friends to the right of us, *whilst* continuing to emphasise the philosophically conservative missions of conservation, community and charity. It is insufficient to only pursue one group of those who abandoned us. If we are to return as a relevant political force, we need to work to reclaim them all, and strive for this with vigour.

In any event, it is clear that the opportunity for a coherent, cohesive, Conservative platform containing a holistic and sensible approach to tackling climate change and winning over new voters, particularly younger voters, is both present and significant. Should we care to seize it, we may begin to start the arduous task of redefining our party in the eyes of the public, away from a fossilised and callous club back to an organisation tackling the most pressing issues of the day. This will not be easy, but it will be worth it. It will be worth it for the votes, yes, but worth it also for the good we can do – for our people, for our country, for our planet. I end on Mrs Thatcher's words said to the UN, urging action on this same crisis thirty years prior, as a reminder that the battle for conservation is neither new nor unconservative.

> "*We are not the lords, we are the Lord's creatures, the trustees of this planet, charged today with preserving life itself – preserving life with all its mystery and all its wonder.*
>
> *May we all be equal to that task.*"

PART TWO

WINNING MINDS: A BLUEPRINT FOR CONSERVATIVE ENVIRONMENTALISM IN PRACTICE

"But as well as the science, we need to get the economics right. That means first we must have continued economic growth in order to generate the wealth required to pay for the protection of the environment. But it must be growth which does not plunder the planet today and leave our children to deal with the consequences tomorrow."

MARGARET THATCHER

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Thinking the unthinkable on climate change

Dr Anatol Lieven

As the Spanish Armada was preparing to set sail, one of its captains was asked about the expedition's chances. Foreseeing accurately its failure and his own death, he replied with stoical humour, "We are sailing against England in the confident hope of a miracle."

That pretty much goes for the struggle against anthropogenic climate change as presently conceived and conducted. The effort to keep the rise in global average temperature below 1.5 degrees is now extremely unlikely to succeed. Furthermore, there is also no chance – none whatsoever – that the effort to keep the rise below two degrees can succeed on the basis of existing policies. We urgently need a stronger and different course of action if we are going to tackle this serious existential threat.

However, even before Trump's election and the European move to re–armament, political pressure on energy corporations to

shift to renewables was waning. Fewer and fewer are now claiming that net zero by 2050 is a serious goal. We are already trapped in a 'feedback loop', whereby rising temperatures drive increased demand for air conditioning, and therefore for electricity which in most of the world is still chiefly dependent on fossil fuels.

Consider the figures. Between the Paris Agreement of 2015 – the first really serious international agreement to limit carbon emissions – and 2024, annual emissions actually rose from 35.4 billion tonnes to 37.4 billion; and the rise would have been even greater had it not been for the economic downturn produced by the COVID pandemic.

China has pursued a far more determined and comprehensive alternative energy strategy than the West; but it is still falling far short of its declared aim of reducing carbon intensity by 18 percent by 2026. Whilst China is ramping up and investing heavily in renewable energy, it is also still continuing to expand its coal production. India too is greatly increasing its coal–based electricity generation.

Much of the world appears to be expecting that technological developments over the next generation will allow a less disruptive and expensive transition later on. In the meantime however, the resulting build up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is creating changes that subsequent reductions in emissions will not be able to reverse.

As far as the West is concerned, this is not a failure of individual governments or countries, let alone the "twenty corporations" that the environmentalist Left likes conveniently to blame for climate change. Our entire political systems, indeed our whole societies and political economies, have proved incapable of rising to this challenge. Our elites are deeply unwilling to make serious and proportionate sacrifices themselves. Not surprisingly therefore, their demands that ordinary people make disproportionate sacrifices have provoked populist reactions. If we are going to succeed in tackling this existential threat,

we need to substantially rethink how we build consensus to take the necessary and proportionate action needed.

President Macron has never really recovered from the *Gilets Jaunes* protests against his diesel tax; the Greens helped ruin the last German coalition with their attempt to mandate the adoption of domestic heat pumps; and the Biden administration's watered–down Green New Deal did not save the Democrats from defeat at the hands of Trump.

Are we then just waiting for a technological miracle? And in fact, we have already achieved three – nuclear energy, solar panels and wind turbines. Between them, these are technically capable of replacing the overwhelming majority of current fossil–generated electricity production.

Radical change requires an act of will by governments, and this will is also lacking in both authoritarian and democratic systems. In Europe, parties of both the centre–left and the centre–right have openly abandoned the idea of a 'Green Revolution' in favour of what has been called 'Military Keynesianism', the attempt to rebuild national industries through weapons production. Even the German Greens have gone along with this.

Nor is there any hope of more political oppositions producing change. Prospects of radical change today come not from the Left but the populist Right. Logically speaking, the menace of hugely increased migration, partly as a result of the climate crisis, should lead right–wing parties to recognise climate change as a fundamental menace. In practice, they have exploited and encouraged hostility to climate change action as part of their strategy of appealing to anti–elite resentments.

Of course, this does not mean that we should give up. If we can still keep the rise in temperatures to below 2.5 degrees, that is still a great deal better than three degrees. But every rise in temperature

increases the risk that climate change will cease to be incremental and escape from our control altogether; that we will reach 'tipping points' whereby a sudden change like the huge release of methane from the Arctic permafrost or the disruption of the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC, that powers the Gulf Stream) will create 'feedback loops'. These would mean that two degrees leads to a rise of three degrees and three degrees to four degrees until civilisation itself collapses.

This, not greater naval activity by Russia and China, is the great threat to Britain from the Arctic. The collapse of AMOC would radically transform the very face of Britain. Long before this however, the collapse of agriculture and states in Africa and South Asia would have set off a wave of migration that would end the existing British political system.

If we want to have any hope of preventing such disasters, we have to think the unthinkable and start planning seriously for engineering the climate to check the rise in temperatures. Geo–engineering must not be a substitute for action to limit carbon emissions. However, if present policies continue to fail, it may have to be utilised as an additional weapon in our arsenal in the battle against climate change.

On a planetary scale, engineering the climate is completely impossible, but also unnecessary. The Arctic is the region that threatens to generate these sudden and cataclysmic changes, and this danger is hugely increased by the fact that it is also the region where temperatures are rising fastest, at nearly four times the global figure.

Whilst still controversial, support for geo–engineering the Arctic is growing as the melting of the ice gathers pace and hopes of adequately reducing emissions fade. In September 2024, The *New Scientist* called it our "only hope" to prevent disaster in the region. However, the great majority of countries remain signatories to a moratorium on geo–engineering activities "until there is an adequate scientific basis on

which to justify such activities and appropriate consideration of the associated risks for the environment and biodiversity and associated social, economic and cultural impacts." If the result is to delay geo–engineering solutions until the damage from climate change has already become acute, then future generations are likely to find this a misplaced set of priorities; for after all, climate change, if it escapes from our control, poses not "risks" but certainties of acute social, economic and cultural impacts.

The biggest obstacle to geo–engineering may be the international co–operation required. For while the intrinsic dangers of geo–engineering may well have been exaggerated, it seems certain that if countries engage in their own separate, rival and competitive programmes, the results will indeed be disastrous. Such co–operation will depend on agreement between the other Arctic countries and Russia. At present, three of those countries (Norway, Denmark and Canada) are bitterly hostile to Russia. The Trump administration is seeking reconciliation with Russia, but denies that climate change is even happening. The impacts of climate change in the Arctic are already apparent and yet Western establishments are instead focused on the potential security threat from Russia and China in the Arctic.

The Trump administration's interest in the Arctic is in getting American hands on the mineral resources that would be opened by the melting of the Greenland ice cap – resources that would have to be huge indeed to compensate for the drowning of New York and Miami by the resulting rises in sea level. The Russian government also believes that on balance it will benefit from climate change.

Given that Britain is especially threatened by climate change in the Arctic and the resulting danger to the Gulf Stream, Britain should take the lead in advocating for more proportionate, ambitious global action to meet the threat of climate change and advancing this agenda. For while an excuse can be found for US Republican denial

of climate change on grounds of sheer stupidity, our descendants are unlikely to excuse the behaviour of the Labour government that has declared climate change an existential threat, yet is failing to take action remotely commensurate with that all too accurate statement.

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Policymaking for the long term

Tara Singh

I was the Conservatives' energy and environment adviser in Opposition, when we were hugging huskies, "Voting Blue to Go Green" and, most importantly, actively helping first David and then Ed Miliband pass the world's first Climate Change Act. I was also David Cameron's special adviser in Government, where we spent over a year arguing with the Treasury about carbon budgets, and then another year dismantling energy efficiency programmes to take £50 off bills during the last Russia/Ukraine crisis. In short, I have seen firsthand the story of Britain's climate action as one of pioneering ambition tempered by the realities of electoral cycles and shifting political winds, and below are a few thoughts on what this means.

First off, it's essential to grasp the unique political pressures that shape decision–making in the UK. While Westminster may appear highly centralised, with a majority government theoretically able to pass legislation swiftly, the reality is far more complex. The UK's First Past the

Post electoral system, where small swings in key constituencies can determine national election outcomes, makes ministers and departments acutely sensitive to media pressure and public opinion. This results in an endless array of initiatives, frameworks and policy reversals as politicians attempt to control the media cycle.

It was indeed precisely to mitigate these inherent political pressures that the world's first 2008 Climate Change Act was conceived. The Act sought to create a framework that transcended short–term electoral cycles, aiming to establish long–term, legally binding carbon budgets. By requiring governments to set these budgets 15 years ahead, the Act intended to foster cross–party consensus and provide the necessary certainty for business investment. In theory, this would insulate climate policy from the typical boom–and–bust short–termism that plagues other areas. On paper, it's been remarkably successful – UK emissions have fallen by approximately 48 percent since 1990, and the targets have been progressively strengthened from an initial 60 percent reduction to today's net zero commitment by 2050.

But dig deeper, and the picture becomes more complex. Much of this progress came from industrial decline alongside the scheduled decline of the UK's ageing coal–fired power stations, brought offline a little early primarily through air quality rather than pure carbon legislation, plus the EU Emissions Trading System. Where we've genuinely excelled – like offshore wind – it's been through sustained policy commitment rather than the structures of the Act itself. For example, the Contracts for Difference (CfD) scheme, which provided long–term revenue certainty for offshore wind developers, has driven costs down significantly, making it competitive with fossil fuels.

More tellingly, look at what hasn't been delivered: energy efficiency improvements in homes have consistently fallen short despite being one of the most cost–effective climate solutions. The UK's housing stock remains among the least energy–efficient in

Europe. This Cinderella area for government funding is a direct result of what I call "Siemens Law". Politicians are drawn to high–visibility, tangible projects like new factories, where they can don high–vis vests and hard hats for photo opportunities. Energy efficiency, on the other hand, lacks this political appeal and is almost always the first programme to be cut.

In sum, the fundamental challenge is that our political system rewards quick wins over patient investment. When I advised in Number 10, I saw how the relentless pressure of the electoral cycle pushed politicians toward eye–catching announcements rather than the unglamorous work of delivery. The media's focus on immediate costs rather than long–term benefits reinforces this dynamic. But is it any better elsewhere?

I used to point enviously to countries like Germany and the Netherlands, where coalition governments and more consensual political cultures seemed to enable more consistent policy–making. Germany's *Energiewende* (energy transition) aimed for a long–term shift to renewable energy, but even there, we're seeing climate consensus fracture in the face of sustained high energy prices. The reality is that if climate policies create too much short–term pain for voters, they become politically unsustainable regardless of institutional frameworks.

This also isn't unique to climate policy. The underlying dynamic – where electoral pressures lead to underinvestment in long–term outcomes – plays out across many policy areas, from HS2 to adult social care. In fact British–born Oliver Hart won the Nobel Prize for Economics a decade ago showing that private prison tenders are almost always a disaster because the government contracting the prison prioritise immediate cost reduction over quality of service. This tends to lead to poor staffing, crumbling facilities, prisoner discontent

and ultimately bail–outs at a much higher cost, but one to a future rather than current government.

So what's the answer? In my view, we need to be realistic about human nature and political incentives.

Yes, we can look at strengthening our institutional frameworks. Giving parliament a greater role in scrutinising not just targets but detailed delivery plans could create stronger accountability. Independent bodies like the Climate Change Committee could be given more teeth, perhaps with courts given greater power to force compliance with carbon budgets – not through ceding enforcement to unelected quangos but by requiring Ministers to meet their own legislation or else overturn it. This "put up or shut up" approach would help guard against the "virtue signalling" of setting long–term targets with no plan to meet them, as has rightly been criticised by Conservative Leader Kemi Badenoch.

And, yes, we should explore innovative financing mechanisms that spread costs more fairly between current and future generations, such as green bonds or carbon taxes with revenue recycling to support low–income households.

But ultimately, successful climate action requires building genuine public consent. Rather than trying to bypass political pressures, we need to work with them by developing solutions that deliver tangible near–term benefits alongside long–term climate gains.

Indeed, a key insight from another Nobel prize winner, Friedrich Hayek, is that written constitutions – and by extension, any laws – only work so long as they continue to secure the ongoing consent of the governed. Hayek argued that a constitution isn't a fixed, magical set of rules that guarantees order; its force depends on the public's acceptance. If the people no longer see the rules as legitimate or beneficial, those rules lose their effectiveness.

Applied to climate policy, this means that even the most ambitious legislation, such as long–term carbon budgets or renewable energy targets, will only succeed if they resonate with and are supported by society. Without building a genuine social compact – where the public understands and consents to the trade–offs and benefits – climate measures risk becoming just another set of bureaucratic initiatives subject to reversal or neglect under shifting political pressures. Indeed, I would argue that our best chance of maintaining sustained climate action is by levering in the public and private investment required to ensure clean solutions become clearly superior to fossil fuels in terms of cost, convenience and capability. If UK energy policy continues to bet against the consumer – we simply won't get where we need to go.

The good news is that the path forward isn't about revolutionary new frameworks, but about pragmatic evolution of what we already have: strengthening political commitment to carbon budgets, creating financing mechanisms that fairly distribute costs between generations and, most importantly, focusing relentlessly on the delivery of clean energy solutions that outcompete fossil fuels on their own merits. By making climate policy work for people today, we create the political space for the deeper transformations needed tomorrow. This isn't settling for less – it's the only realistic path to achieving more.

The Rt Hon Sir James Cleverly MP is the Conservative Member of Parliament for Braintree, first elected in 2015. He currently serves as Shadow Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. Sir James has also held several senior ministerial positions, including Home Secretary, Foreign Secretary, Education Secretary, and Chairman of the Conservative Party.

Great Britain in a global world

Sir James Cleverly MP

In an age that is demanding immediate results and short–form content, how do we make the conservative case for environmental issues? How do we make sure that sensible, pragmatic solutions to both domestic and global problems don't get sacrificed in favour of shibboleths of the Left and the Right, respectively?

Now of course environmental issues are political issues. But we shouldn't let them become polarising issues. I fear at the moment that we are caught between two tribes of Neo–Luddites.

We have the negative right, Reform, for example, claiming that things are just fine the way they are. They claim that concerns about emissions, habitat loss, and falling yields are scaremongering. Their motto perhaps is that all change, even for the better, is a bad idea.

Then of course we have the negative left: Greens, Lib Dems and many on the Labour benches. They're suspicious of technology, believing things were far better before the invention of the car, before the internal

combustion engine, probably before even the invention of the steam engine.

The "let's not move forward" tribe is in a bidding war with the "let's move backward" brigade. They are, in fact, both wrong. But how do we win the arguments we need to win in an age of cynicism? Because "do as I say because I know best" will not work.

In order to win the arguments, we have to be honest, but we also have to be optimistic. The challenges are real and they are significant. There are many I could highlight, but one of the most pressing is the impact of environmental degradation and habitat loss on global stability. In many parts of the world, farmers are struggling to feed themselves and their families.

And as their land becomes less fertile, their choices become harder. Some turn to migration, understandably seeking better prospects elsewhere in the world. And we know what a sensitive issue mass migration is – not just in the UK and Europe, but right across the world. Those who don't move can easily fall prey to extremists. Not necessarily because they subscribe to extremist ideologies, but because it pays. And it pays a lot better than subsistence farming.

So it's no surprise that the band of instability running across the continent of Africa matches the band of increasing desertification. Because ground that is no longer fertile for crops, is ground that is fertile for violence.

But we also need to be optimistic. We should embrace the fact that there is a way forward. And it lies in rejecting both the luddite left and the luddite right. It lies in harnessing the power of technology, because the United Kingdom has a long and proud history of innovation.

From the Norfolk crop rotation system, to the steam engine, to the World Wide Web, we have been at the forefront of technological advancements. And today, we once again are in a leadership position,

but in the realms of green technology. Of course governments played a role, but the private sector has been, is, and always will be the most powerful driver of innovation. And that is true in the green revolution as well. Ecological sustainability must also be economically sustainable.

If we are going to encourage businesses to greener processes, we have to show them that they can save money doing so, otherwise, in an increasingly commercial and intensive world, they just won't do it. But reducing waste, reducing the amount of water used, and increasing the levels of recycled materials is helping businesses save money and operate more efficiently.

Pioneering innovation and technology, like the sodium–ion batteries being developed at the University of Strathclyde, are showing cleaner, cheaper ways to produce and store energy. These batteries are not small and they are not pretty, but in many parts of the world, robust and cheap energy storage is much more important than small and expensive. Furthermore, unlike lithium, cobalt and nickel, which are minerals concentrated geographically in a few areas, sodium is widely available. And this means that nations, particularly those in the developing world, can produce their own batteries without relying on foreign supply chains.

This technology has the potential to fundamentally change decentralised energy storage, and in doing so unlock the full potential of decentralised energy generation, reducing the need for, for example, the millions of dirty, diesel generators that are scattered all over the developing world.

We need to ensure that these innovative, new technologies are accessible, affordable, and scalable, because there is little point in the UK greening our own economy, if the developing world and the rapidly industrialising world doesn't do the same. It is not in our self–interest to hoard these technologies.

There have already been a number of success stories. Take Nigeria's Clean Energy Transition programme, where British expertise has helped roll out solar mini grids across rural areas. These offer stable electricity supplies to villages that have never been, and frankly will never be, connected to any kind of distribution. This kind of partnership empowers communities to escape poverty through new economic opportunities – whether it be refrigeration of fish in coastal fishing communities or internet access for remote schools. When you can make these goods sustainable, people are less likely to fall into the hands of extremists or terrorists.

Another example of Britain's leadership in Africa has been both the green growth and global security of the UK–Zambia Green Growth Compact. Zambia is home to some of the world's most valuable minerals, critical to the clean energy revolution. We are supporting Zambia to develop its renewable energy infrastructure and modernise its mining sector. This creates local jobs, but more importantly it dramatically reduces Zambia's dependency on foreign countries, particularly China. This is exactly the kind of partnership that demonstrates how Britain's leadership can drive both economic and environmental protection on the world stage and also help stabilise what is a very turbulent geopolitical environment.

This is about more than just cutting–edge technology; it's about creating the foundations for long–term, sustainable growth, here in the UK and in other parts of the world. As Foreign Secretary, I saw first–hand how Britain's global partnerships can deliver results. The UK holds a unique position on the world stage. We're a trusted partner, especially in regions where climate change threatens communities. We've built strong coalitions with countries like Indonesia and Bangladesh, providing technological know–how and financial backing to strengthen their climate resilience.

Britain must retain our leadership role, not because we want to lecture the world, but because we have something worth exporting. Not just goods, but ideas and innovation, experience and independence for those countries. This is a strategic vision which links energy policy with our economic and national security priorities. Our ambitious policies drove investment and positioned the UK as a global clean energy powerhouse.

We now need to invest in sodium–ion batteries, hydrogen technology, and British–designed energy systems that don't depend on the critical minerals that are being captured by regimes to use as leverage.

This isn't just climate policy. It is not even mainly about climate policy. It's about economic policy, foreign policy, and security policy. If we don't lead, other countries will – and they will do so on terms that undoubtedly we will not like. It's in our national interest to ensure no country – whether China or anyone else – monopolises the resources that will power today's and tomorrow's industries. Rare earth elements are imperative to clean tech and advanced manufacturing, and we must not allow them to become the tool of dependency or coercion. We've seen the consequences in Russia's invasion of Ukraine of what happens when we become overly dependent on energy supplies from one place.

The UK under Conservative governments has made major strides in offshore wind and next–generation solar technologies, making sure we are increasingly energy independent. We have laid the foundations for scaling up hydrogen production, vital for decarbonising industries from steelmaking to transportation. But we cannot afford to rest or wait for others – whether it be India, or China, or the EU – to catch up.

Britain must lead. We must keep pushing and go further, and go faster, and be smarter. We must set the pace, we must seize the opportunities. By investing in green manufacturing, we create

jobs, we stimulate growth, and we drive down costs. And thanks to Conservative–led policies, the UK hosts four of the world's largest offshore wind farms, providing abundant, clean energy, generated domestically, not in countries that do not share our values and should not be relied upon.

This is a fantastic achievement. And as conservatives we should be proud of it and of our strong environmental tradition which stems from Margaret Thatcher, one of my political heroes, right through to the last Conservative government.

But our approach should not be one of isolation. The UK is a proud member of the Commonwealth, and our membership has helped us to work with nations like India and Nigeria to help them develop climate–resilient infrastructure, to share green technologies, and drive investments in renewable energy projects. This is what global co-operation looks like. It's not just about setting goals, or dictating to others. It's about working in partnership to make sure action is taken and positive outcomes are achieved.

At a time when authoritarian regimes are seeking to export their models of dependency and control, Britain's approach stands apart. This is why I'm incredibly proud of my country and the work we have done. This is why other countries seek out UK expertise, not just for what we build, but for how we build it: with transparency, with integrity, and with a long–term vision for the ultimate energy independence of our partner countries. It is a stark difference of approach to those nations who use energy supply to entrap developing countries.

A strong, resilient UK energy system – one that is diversified and domestically powered – makes us safer. That is why investments in British offshore wind, in nuclear, and in hydrogen are not just climate commitments – they are defences against energy shocks and geopolitical instability. Conservative environmentalism doesn't

mean an artificial choice between growth and sustainability. It means creating policies that unlock the potential of new industries while ensuring that we simultaneously protect the environment. It's about finding practical solutions to achieve long–term growth without sacrificing our environmental obligations.

The Conservative Party has always been about empowering individuals, free markets, and innovation. And we must embrace a future where environmental policies encourage investment in new technologies, support the development of new industries, and create the jobs of tomorrow. We must ensure that these policies are grounded in the reality of economic growth and energy independence. They must support an agenda that combines sustainability with economic growth – that is essential.

The idea that we must choose between a strong economy and protecting our environment is outdated and wrong. The future that I believe in is one where these two aims go hand in hand, driving innovation and driving opportunity.

Sophie farms at Sundey Hill Farm where she hosts the annual Scrutopia Summer School which draws participants from all over the world. In addition, she works to provide community engagement events for the Holford of Westonbirt Trust, the Braydon Forest Farmers and the VWH Patrons Club. She is chair of the Brinkworth Branch of the South Cotswold Conservative Association.

Empowering the little platoons

Sophie de Courcy

Sundey Hill Farm is a 100 acre grassland farm in North Wiltshire that has been my home for the past 30 years, when I first moved here with my late husband, Roger Scruton. Back then, it was unusual for conservatives to be keen environmentalists, but, as you take care of the land and form strong relationships with your neighbours, the idea, as set out by Edmund Burke, of stewardship for both the living and the unborn, becomes an invitation to environmental action. For Roger, that led him to research and publish 'Green Philosophy – How to think seriously about the planet' in which he argues that the real custodians of the environment are to be found in the Burkean 'little platoons' that through local action and public spirit, work to protect their surroundings.

In 2020 I threw myself into taking full responsibility for the farm and also started reading more about how farmers can protect the environment. The new farming biographies of Isabella Tree and James Rebanks, which told the story of habitat loss from the dire farming practices of the 70s,

80s and 90s, made me keen to speak up for my farming neighbours who have farmed in a relatively sympathetic way for the environment. As a result our area has a distinct character with extensive hedges and oak trees characteristic of the former Braydon Forest. With ancient hedgerows still in place and much of the land grassland pasture, the farms in the Braydon Forest have a good level of biodiversity and support some rare species.

A friend (who has since become chair of the Parish Council) and I distributed a survey to gather evidence from our farming neighbours about their farming practice and values. The response was fascinating. It showed that farmers like the chance to be heard, that they have deep knowledge, and that they would like to farm in a nature friendly way. As one farmer said, "I want to do my bit, and leave the farm better than it was before."

Their comments were inspiring and we were determined to find a way to encourage and protect our farmers as the new subsidy system came into effect. The seeds were sown to begin a bottom–up approach to environmental action where the conservative instincts of personal responsibility and the wisdom of the past were central.

Following the survey we began meeting to discuss the shared interest in 'doing our bit'. One landowner, interested in preserving the last few curlew breeding sites in the area, introduced us to the biologist Jonny Cooper who worked for the Swindon Biological Records Office and Wiltshire Wildlife Trust. Jonny was able to link us to people who could help give us a more scientific understanding of our environment. He also started to inspire us to do more to preserve habitat for wildlife.

The way in which our group was working showed that environmental activism, that starts with a small local group with a shared interest, is a fantastic way to do something for the environment,

and in our case to try to protect key species, from curlew to the marsh fritillary butterfly, and many less rare species benefit as well.

Our next step was to understand the new government policies known as environmental land management schemes (ELMs). These new post–Brexit subsidies arising from the Agriculture Act identified the environment as a 'public good' and the catch phrase 'public money for public goods' went into circulation.

The change away from EU funding based on the amount of land farmed, to a system that encourages nature–friendly farming is a good legacy of the Conservative government (when Lord Gove led the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)). ELMs reflected the general public's interest in conservation and provided farmers with opportunities to learn, conserve and restore their farms and thereby deliver nature as a public good.

Our challenge has been to keep our environmentally friendly farmers on board with the funding prescriptions, when others might be trying to undermine the new policies by criticising them as paying farmers to grow wildflowers. In fact, subsidising the preservation of nature is exactly what the subsidy system should be for, to compensate farmers for delivering something that prevents them from achieving the highest price for their asset, which is their land. It is also now known that a benefit of providing woody shelter on farms, and taking care of the soil, leads to better livestock performance for dairy, beef, and lamb production, and on arable land, protects the soil and can also provide shelter and stimulants for crops.

As a group of farmers, led by Jonny, myself, and a farming consultancy called Just Farm, we applied for the Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund to be recognised as a farm cluster known as the Braydon Forest Farmers. We have met regularly, often inviting expert speakers. Some of our meetings have maintained an informal roundtable style from which we have learnt from each other

and started to think about our area rather than just our individual farms.

We have also invited people from other local groups, such as the local Natural History Society and volunteers for the RSPB, to mix with us and to combine forces. This has led to farmers and volunteers working together to survey farms for rare species and increase our scientific benchmarking of habitats and nature. The 'little platoons' have stepped into action, and the grassroots approach means that people feel this is their initiative rather than one imposed from above.

Another challenge for the Braydon Forest Farmers is to explore ways to get their produce in front of consumers who are seeking food that is British, fresh, and meets high animal welfare standards. Our area was once known for its dairy farms, and although many have closed there are still around seven in the Braydon Forest. Interestingly many that survived are organic, and those farmers who made the switch to organic dairy farming about 25 years ago have found it easier to stay in business. This is partly because they broke the crippling cycle of spending money on fertiliser and sprays to make their pasture more productive.

It took a few years for the land to adapt to this low–input farming, but soon it recovered and yields were similar to previous levels. The new movement towards regenerative farming and grass–fed beef is another way in which farmers can increase their margins and meet consumer demand.

However, very few farmers have tried to sell directly to the consumer or to market their produce as special (with the notable exception cheese made at Brinkworth Dairy). From our survey work, we learnt that few farmers want to sell direct to customers. It would require new skills in terms of finishing the product and its distribution and marketing. Not many farmers are able to take this extra step. Some supermarkets however are working with farmers to ensure

animals stay on the same farm throughout the whole production process, which is a welcome business model that offers the public an easy way to buy food produced to a high welfare and environmental standard. New policy and business support needs to encourage more of this.

Connecting farmers with the general public requires mutual respect and interest. Open Farm Sunday is a positive experience. We have opened up Sundey Hill Farm for the last eight years and three of our neighbouring farmers have also helped host the day and are on hand to talk to visitors about their own farms. We have all been inspired by the conversations with visitors, who are all 'on our side'. Farmers who take part in Open Farm Sunday are rewarded with the public's enthusiasm for farming. This is encouraging and offers a sense of value in farming and stewarding the land.

In stark contrast to the grassroots cohesion generated by the work of farm clusters is the local antipathy to new solar farms. These go against the ethos of farming as a type of stewardship, severing the ties between a farmer, their land, and the wider community. The Conservative Party response must be to ensure that local democracy and local knowledge has a role to play in the decision–making process and to consider other business and subsidy models to deliver green energy in a way that does not industrialise the countryside.

In conclusion, a conservative approach to environmental action, that is from the bottom up, enables many people to get on board and work together in a way that is rewarding both emotionally and financially. It is in keeping with the conservative instincts of community and with a system of local democracy that starts at Parish Council level. We have to remember that independent–minded farmers also possess the local knowledge that can help protect the environment and nature, and the subsidy system should support them in their stewardship role and help them achieve conservation goals that are shared with the wider public.

Dr Gerard Lyons is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Policy Studies and has been described by the Times as 'one of the most influential analysts of the global economy'. He sits on the board of two firms in the City and has sat on the Advisory Board of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment since its inception in 2008.

Unleashing capitalism to ignite innovation

Dr Gerard Lyons

'Unleashing capitalism to ignite innovation' goes to the heart of the current economic debate. In the space of five words it confronts a key challenge facing the UK economy, as well as focusing attention on a major opportunity.

The opportunity is that innovation is necessary for economic growth and to address the green agenda, delivering stronger, sustainable growth. The challenge is to unleash capitalism at a time when intervention and the intrusive role of the state is increasing.

In the face of intense global competition the UK needs to be more competitive, with innovation and offering services and products that are better value for money. Instead of rewarding hard work, encouraging investment, and fostering innovation, the current policy environment stifles risk–

taking, overburdens businesses with excessive regulation and taxation, and fails to empower the private sector.

The UK has become a low growth, low productivity and low wage economy. That is despite having world class firms and sectors such as the arts, business, and financial services, and top universities, among others. It has also become an economy with high debt and an upward trend to public spending and taxes. This, and the direction of travel, is leading to a wealth drain, as people leave the country.

There is a necessity to turn this around and raise the economy's trend rate of growth. The immediate omens are not good.

The trend rate of economic growth has collapsed since the 2008 global financial crisis. In the two decades before that crisis, the UK grew by 2.75 percent per annum, doubling the economy's size every 26 years. Since then, despite cheap money and rising debt, growth has weakened. The Office for Budget Responsibility now estimates trend growth around 1.67 percent, meaning the economy doubles every 43 years. It may, however, be closer to 1.25 percent, a doubling every 58 years. To add to this slowdown, the surge in the size of the population has dampened the growth in income per capita.

We have to contend with a changing geopolitical landscape, as globalisation is replaced by fragmentation, free trade by protectionism, and national security is balanced alongside economic prosperity in decision making. Remaining outside the EU's single market gives the UK regulatory autonomy in growth areas such as artificial intelligence and being outside the customs union allows trade deals with fast growth economies, such as India.

The UK needs a supply–side agenda that boosts the economy's growth potential, supported by a credible macro–economic policy framework to reduce debt and keep inflation under control. This needs to focus on investment, innovation and the right incentives

for businesses to grow. Against the backdrop of a high debt level, supply–side measures to boost potential growth are as important as addressing the UK's fiscal problem.

If growth continues to disappoint, it is hard to imagine this Government stepping back and doing less. Instead there will be more intervention, with higher spending and taxes, and more regulations. This intervention is already apparent in terms of the UK's approach to the green agenda.

On the positive side the UK leads in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but the flip side has been intense regulation and some of the highest energy costs in the world. The latter is taking its toll on growth, including the UK's attractiveness for AI and tech investment, which are heavily energy dependent. So how then can the UK continue to address the green challenge, given the scale of global warming, while keeping energy costs down, to ensure competitiveness and growth? Green and growth need to be compatible, with a pro–business approach.

In particular, 'unleash' reflects that regulation, tax and attitudes may be holding back the economy and need addressing. Businesses, and especially smaller ones, complain about the myriad and level of taxes. Small firms also draw attention to the difficulty of raising finance to scale up and invest.

Simplifying the tax system is long overdue even before one starts to address the level of taxation. Recent policies towards non–doms and uncertainty about future tax policy have exacerbated the problem and could dampen the UK's attraction for entrepreneurs, the aspirational and to inward investors.

For business it's a similar story with corporation tax now high and the regulatory burden is high and complex.

The net zero timetable is too inflexible and has contributed to current high energy prices. Gradualism is needed as we must have energy prices, at the least, equivalent to European peers. The focus should be on energy addition, not energy substitution, like many other countries who are also moving to renewables.

The economics are that renewables are added to the current mix. Then, as their cost falls, and technology advances, including storage, this allows their reliability to improve, then renewables will displace fossil fuels, eventually substituting for them. In contrast, the UK is moving towards substitution now, when the base load of renewables is low and at the expense of high energy costs. There is a strong case for renewables but the energy mix needs to be diversified and that includes adding to our supply with nuclear.

An energy addition not substitution approach is more gradual than our current policy. It would allow renewables to grow in use. It would allow the domestic supply chains to adjust and that may create more business opportunities to build the green infrastructure such as turbines in the UK, as opposed to imports. The UK sees its energy costs determined by marginal cost pricing determined by global gas prices. Zonal pricing in the UK market has been suggested to avoid nationwide high energy prices, but that can only be temporary and would likely see higher prices in the South East.

Attitudes matter. A mindset change is needed, away from an interventionist approach. Even the International Monetary Fund has been critical of the global shift to industrial policies, which can be expensive and unsuccessful.

Part of a necessary shift is to alter our terms of reference for the performance of the economy, comparing ourselves more with the fast–growing economies across the Indo Pacific, and not just with economies in Western Europe, the world's slow growth region.

'Capitalism' goes right to the core of the present debate, for it is a word that even its supporters seem afraid to use and there is a need to address why that is the case and to put the record straight. Adam Smith, in the *Wealth of Nations*, talked of the 'invisible hand' and the power of the market to deliver. Incentives matter. Smith, also, in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, stressed the 'visible hand', namely the importance of moral and ethical behaviour. It is important for the environmental agenda to recognise that the market is efficient, as opposed to a complex regulatory state, and helps minimise inputs in order to maximise outputs.

The importance of the private sector and of the market mechanism in driving future growth and improving living standards should be the focus. It means getting the balance right between the public and private sector.

In the 1980s, public spending fell from 40 percent to 35 percent of GDP. Today, it is over 45 percent and rising as the state intrudes more. After the war, we had a successful mixed economy: a capable state focused on public goods like education and defence and a private sector driving growth.

The state consumes resources, it does not create them. It must rely on a productive private sector to fund it. When the state grows too large, taxes and regulation rise and the private sector is undermined.

Importantly, this is not to deny the role of government. A healthy, educated population is essential, public R&D can crowd in private investment and fiscal policy can stabilise an economy, but the size of the state needs to be kept in check, to allow the private sector to grow. A one–third, two–thirds mix in GDP may be best, but it is hard to be precise.

This leads, naturally, into the priority ahead, 'to ignite innovation'. We know the criteria that need to be in place for investment, such as

more finance and lending for firms, sound macro–economic policies, a skilled workforce, a lack of bureaucracy, the level, predictability and simplicity of tax, future expected demand, plus functioning and supportive infrastructure. These same factors are critical for innovation, too. UK business research and development (R&D) investment has stagnated, lagging behind global competitors.

The City of London has a vital role to play. First, and foremost, it must take a more dynamic role in financing innovation, providing funding to small and medium–sized enterprises, and helping scale up UK businesses. To address UK short–termism, the City needs to close the patient capital gap.

The City has a great opportunity, too, to become the global centre for green finance, particularly when the US appetite for this may wane during President Trump's second term. There is a large pool of funds looking to invest in green assets, at a time when there is a shortage of these.

Deep liquid markets are needed. London can play a global role too, in the environmental space, being the place to raise funds and to direct money from. For many emerging economies addressing environmental challenges is tough, because of the high cost of capital.

The stakeholders in the City are aligned, in terms of the government, regulators, banks and financial institutions and clients. There is transparency, in terms of the metrics relating to the green agenda and it now fits into risk management, strategy and governance.

Too often innovation is talked about solely in terms of STEM areas and manufacturing, and, while they are important, innovation is an economy–wide issue, not sector specific. The UK, after all, has one of the most powerful service sector economies.

It used to be said that governments didn't pick winners, the losers picked the government as loss–making firms sought support and

intervention. Thankfully we have moved on, but there is no reason to expect the Government's policy approach will address Britain's low growth, low productivity problem. As the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) outlined in a timely recent analysis of industrial strategies, the eight sectors chosen are the most productive ones anyway, although interestingly it noted their investment is low. We must avoid a move towards micro–management as an alternative to the supply–side agenda which is needed.

Regulatory burdens also weigh heavily on SMEs, with compliance costs disproportionately impacting them. Tax complexity, employment law and business rates present ongoing obstacles, while the administrative burden of meeting these requirements diverts time and resources away from growth and profitability. Like larger firms, too, SMEs would benefit from policy predictability.

Without bold reform, the UK will continue to underperform. We must avoid being dragged too much in the wrong direction by state micromanagement. Instead there is the necessity to create an environment where businesses drive innovation, entrepreneurship is encouraged and the City provides the capital needed.

The green agenda allows us to see the role of the private sector at work. The government needs to move towards energy addition, and allow energy prices to subside. In turn the private sector can lead the green transition, powered by innovation, investment, and a City well placed to mobilise capital at scale. Opportunities abound from clean energy and smart infrastructure, to low–carbon transport and circular supply chains. It is profit, not subsidy, that will align incentives, unlock enterprise, and drive the innovation needed to deliver a green agenda alongside growth.

Baroness Prentis of Banbury is a Member of the House of Lords. Victoria was the Conservative Member of Parliament for her home town of Banbury from 2015 to 2024 and her family farms in the area. She held ministerial positions including Attorney General for England and Wales, Minister for Work and Welfare, and Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food.

Conserving our institutions

Baroness Prentis of Banbury

I recently visited Paris, and a highlight of the trip was a visit to the wonderfully restored Notre Dame. We marvelled at the light–filled nave, bursting with a combination of modern and medieval craftsmanship combined in one perfect whole. How had they achieved this in the five short years since the catastrophic fire? Why can't we do the same and for example restore the Palace of Westminster?

I started to wonder if I was part of the problem. Like so many of us, I got into politics through local campaigning: saving the local hospital, preventing inappropriately sited wind turbines, stopping HS2. I used my public law knowledge to protect the causes and the places I love. I have always considered these triumphs to be those of the righteous individual pitted against the might of the state. But have we now reached a state where we simply cannot build or restore anything major? Does our current system really work to protect individuals? And should conservatives be advocating staunchly for individual rights and a limited state, or

for a paternalistic state acting in what it believes to be the long–term national interest?

Many are seeking to identify the root cause of our keenly–felt planning deadlock. The press is very focused currently on the perception that lawyers are in charge of government decision–making, even when this is contrary to the interest of the nation as a whole. Our common law tradition does rely significantly more on judicial precedent than the legal systems based on civil law of our European neighbours, making judges and lawyers more of a focal point for discontent. But it is too simplistic to see planning stasis as a product of our overweening legal system. Parliamentary sovereignty should always be a safeguard to ensure that it is democratically–elected representatives who have the final say.

I'm also not sure that we can blame our adherence to the various international treaties to which we are signatories. For many years we have seen the 'rule of law' and the 'rules–based international order' as the solution, but these forces are clearly struggling to contain worldwide turmoil. International laws, so long lauded by green groups as useful to encourage other nations to protect the environment together, are now sometimes seen as a threat to our national interest. In fact, international law can effectively regulate many interactions between nations, particularly in the environmental space. For all the press around Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, it remains a landmark climate accord, with the only countries outside the agreement being the USA, Iran, Libya and Yemen. It provides a crucial framework to bring international partners together to strengthen their response to tackle the global threat of climate change. However, it does demonstrate that whilst difficult to reach, international consensus can be even harder to maintain, making the enforcement of international law increasingly challenging.

As a serious partner, we of course try to comply with the rulings of international courts and tribunals to which we are signatories, but if we really feel our national interest is not served by whichever rule is in play, we are free to walk away. These decisions should be seen as what they are, fundamentally political rather than legal.

Instead, the problem seems at heart to be one of our love of proper process, and our very strong adherence to the concept of individual rights.

France has for centuries enjoyed strong central government. The centre of Paris is planned and coherently laid out. There is a good TGV network and adequate nuclear power. By contrast our tradition is much more sceptical of the centre.

Of course, there were many difficulties and regulations standing in the way of the rebuilding of Notre Dame. Anyone who has had any passing dealings with French municipal bureaucracy can imagine the plethora of rules which would be invoked. The French Government did not have the executive power to decree it should be done, but its parliament did have the ability to pass a law in mid–2019 to override obstacles. By contrast in the UK such a bill would have to have gone through the hybrid bill procedure. In fact, it would still be going through the hybrid bill procedure. Hybrid bills are changes to the law that affect the general public but would also have a more significant impact on specific individuals or communities, meaning there are some additional requirements from normal public bills. They have been used to secure parliamentary approval for major infrastructure projects, such as the High Speed Rail. Our enthusiasm for process and consultation is not just present in the planning process but also in the legislative mechanism for overcoming it.

But we are coming to see how the keenness to consult does not necessarily work for the affected individual. Yes, your views are heard; yes, you can slow the build, and you can slow it further by judicially

reviewing flaws in the process; but in fact a duty to consult is not a duty to listen or to compensate.

The French have a more practical attitude; it is a French constitutional principle (so parliament is unable to legislate it away) that if you are made to bear a disproportionate loss for the sake of the national interest then you are owed generous compensation. Contrastingly, our core principle of parliamentary sovereignty allows our parliament to legislate away any rights to compensation, with real accountability doled out at the ballot box every five years.

In my view we do need a sensible discussion about how we move forward with the planning system, and this appears to be a core priority for the Labour Government. We live in a country with around the same population size as France, but half the landmass, and it is bound to be difficult to get this balance right. That the Government is taking forward proposals to streamline the process for legal challenges to nationally significant infrastructure projects, following the recommendations of the Banner Review, is a good sign.

The Planning and Infrastructure Bill which was brought before Parliament in March 2025 is the Government's attempt to rectify these problems. The bill would restrict the ability of local councils to refuse planning permission and narrow the opportunities for communities to oppose developments. There are some obvious causes for concern, not least in rural communities which are feeling particularly alienated at the moment following a series of decisions which threaten family farms and put food security at risk. Farmers are worried that their land may now be bought from them at cheaper than market value.

The bill gives local authorities the power to pay less for land, by excluding the increase in value which might attach to an area following the grant of planning permission. The legislation would also reduce inconvenience payments caused by compulsory purchases.

A concern is that councils may now find it easier to purchase by compulsion rather than by agreement.

Undoubtedly, getting the balance right between local views and the wider public interest is not going to be easy. We need to rethink what constitutes proper consultation and compensation and ensure this is enshrined and protected in our political and legal systems. This will enable our system of parliamentary sovereignty and common law to utilise its flexibility to unlock the planning backlog and enable individuals' voices to be heard and accounted for. As conservatives we should advocate for a pragmatic approach which protects the rights of individuals, the family, and the community, whilst acting strategically and limitedly in the long–term interests of the nation.

This seminal book brings together esteemed conservative thinkers and politicians from across the world to set out how environmentalism is deeply rooted in conservative philosophy and practice. It challenges the assumption that environmentalism is a left-wing agenda and sets out a blueprint for how a conservative approach to the environment can win both hearts and minds.

WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK OUR ESTEEMED AUTHORS:

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