

Red, blue and yellow – but are they green?

The media and most voters may not notice, but in this election the main political parties are making more green promises than ever.

Nicholas Schoon examines their manifestos

Never has the environment featured so strongly in the main parties' general election manifestos. Whole chapters are devoted to it. Take the Conservatives. "Green", "environment", "climate" and "carbon" appeared roughly once in every thousand words in their 2001 and 2005 manifestos. But in 2010 the Conservative document uses those four key words 4.4 times in every 1,000 words (see Figure 1, p32).

All three parties promise the huge changes required to start seriously decarbonising the UK economy. Yet despite it all, the environment is once again taking its traditional back seat in the 2010 campaign. The politicians and the media hardly mention it. Not one of the leaders referred to it in their first televised debate. Taxation and the deficit dominated the first fortnight of electioneering.

The average voter does not seem too interested, either. For decades, pollsters IPSOS Mori have been asking people what they think are the most vital issues facing Britain (see Figure 2, p 32). For the past three years, only about 8% have been mentioning issues relating to the environment, climate change and pollution.

Unemployment, the economy, the health service, crime and immigration are more prominent concerns. In IPSOS Mori's latest April poll, the percentage mentioning green issues fell to just 5%.

Environmental NGOs, several of which have supporter and membership bases far greater than the three main parties, have tried to raise the profile of green issues (see box, p34). As in previous elections, they appear to be making no noticeable impact.

CONDENSER

- In the 2010 general election manifestos, the three main parties devote more words and pledges to combating climate change and protecting the environment than ever before.
- Despite that, green issues barely registered during the first half of the campaign. That is partly because there is much consensus between the three parties.
- Of the three main parties, the Liberal Democrats once again have the most ambitious and broad ranging environmental policies.
- The prospect of the UK's first Green Party MP being elected, and of Liberal Democrats having greater influence in a hung parliament, could give environmental issues and green-minded voters greater leverage in UK politics.

Yet perhaps the glass is half full rather than half empty. On 6 May there is a real chance of the Green Party entering Parliament for the first time. Party leader Caroline Lucas is the bookies' favourite to win the Brighton Pavilion seat from Labour.

Many would argue that the party lacks practicable, implementable policies. Yet a House of Commons Green toehold would probably push the mainstream parties, including the one in power, to give more weight to environmental and carbon issues.

In addition, two of the main parties favour reforming the voting system for general elections, moving towards more proportional representation in Parliament. If that happened, it would probably lead to more Green MPs and give environmental concerns even greater weight in Westminster and Whitehall.

Of the three main parties, it is the Liberal Democrats that offer the greenest manifesto. This is normal. For a couple of decades now, the third party has positioned itself as the most environmentally friendly. That, sneer its opponents, reflects the fact that it will never have to run a government. It can dream green dreams because of its remoteness from power.

But after the Liberal Democrats' post-leaders TV debate surge in the polls, the possibility of a hung parliament – present before the campaign began – has risen. The party has its best shot at influence and even power in almost 20 years. And that, too, raises the green bar a little higher.

Here we examine the green manifesto policies of the three main parties. They have plenty in common.

First, all three give unprecedented attention to the environment. Their green policies have not melted away in the wake of the recession, the UK's vast fiscal deficit and the "climategate scandal" (see pp 28-29). The UK Independence Party and the BNP are left to condemn man-made climate change as dangerous eco-propaganda.

Second, they share key policies (see box, p5). All back the new system of carbon budgets under the Climate Change Act. All see the low-carbon transition playing a lead role in reviving the economy and driving the needed growth in non-financial-sector exports.

All plan a green investment bank, with public-sector money leveraging larger private-sector funding for major green infrastructure. All promise a home-eco-upgrade loan scheme, with reduced domestic fuel bills covering the cost of repayments. And all would retain the newish Department of Energy and Climate Change.

Third is the absence of surprises. The manifestos reiterate green policies announced well before the election. For Labour, these took the form of various government consultations and strategies.



Lib Dems' leader Nick Clegg MP visits a wind farm; his manifesto promises £400m to convert shipyards to build offshore turbines

Former Sustainable Development Commission chairman Jonathan Porritt, campaigning for the Green Party, says one reason the main parties said so little on green issues in the campaign's first fortnight is because they now have so much in common.

"It's disappointing that they give the environment second-division status but that's partly because it isn't a political football. They all support the main thrust of action on climate change."

The three parties' manifestos also raise two big questions. First, the four departments that matter most to the environment – business, energy and climate change, environment, food and rural affairs and communities and local government – will not be protected from public-spending cuts. The same goes for grants to bodies they sponsor, such as the Environment Agency and the Carbon Trust. Given the severe financial curbs to come, will government have the capacity to deliver policies that bring about the enormous changes required, cost effectively, on time and without sparking any political crises?

The second question concerns rising energy bills for households and businesses. Meeting UK carbon budgets implies massive investment in renewable energy plant, nuclear power, low-carbon transport, improved energy efficiency and carbon capture and storage (CCS) for coal-fired power stations. Those investments will ultimately be paid for not by taxpayers but by energy consumers, through increased bills that rising global energy prices may inflate still further. The parties fear the resulting unpopularity and worry that more than three million low-income and pensioner households already struggle to keep warm in winter.

So while one part of their manifestos implies increasing fuel bills, another part spells out their determination to keep bills down. Which will prevail?

Conservative manifesto

The Tory vision is for Britain to be "the world's first low-carbon economy". The party promises to provide "the greenest government in our history". It thinks it can do better than Labour by relying more on incentives and market signals to change consumer and business behaviour, less on rules and regulations.

The manifesto restates the Tory commitment to increasing the proportion of total tax revenue raised by environmental taxes.¹ This currently stands at 7.1%, having fallen from 9.3% in 2000.

Yet the very same paragraph states that any extra revenue from new green taxes "principally designed... to change behaviour" will be used to reduce the burden of taxation elsewhere.

However, the Tories say this does not apply to the new carbon tax they plan for power generators (see pp 14-15). The party wants to reform the government's existing climate change levy (CCL), to compensate for too-low carbon prices in the EU's troubled emissions trading scheme and guarantee a minimum price per tonne of CO₂ emitted. This floor carbon price for fossil-fuel generators would drive investment into low-carbon energy infrastructure.

Instead of the CCL being paid by businesses on their electricity consumption, the Conservatives want it to be paid by electricity generators per tonne of CO₂ they emit. The generators would then pass on the costs to all electricity consumers, households as well as businesses, via power bills. If current low-carbon prices persist in →

POLITICS

GREEN MANIFESTOS

the EU ETS, then within a decade this new carbon tax could raise billions of pounds a year over and above what the CCL brings in.

Yet the Tories say it is a reform of the CCL, so the manifesto strictures on using revenue from new green taxes do not apply. In any case, this reform will be revenue-neutral. If it does raise any more money than the CCL the proceeds would be rebated to energy consumers in general; the details of how are undecided.

Conservative plans for a “fair fuel stabiliser”, cutting petrol and diesel duty when oil prices rise and increasing them when they fall, are also a challenge for the Treasury. Fuel duty is the UK’s largest eco-tax and further increases in global oil prices are likely. Cutting duty rates would only deepen the deficit, although increased VAT revenue from pricier petrol and diesel would offset some of this.

The Tory manifesto says people will be encouraged to support onshore wind farms and other renewable energy plants near their homes because local communities will retain the additional business rates they generate for six years. And government departments will have to cut their emissions by 10% within a year of the Tories taking power. On waste and recycling, the manifesto says a Tory administration would negotiate “a voluntary arrangement among producers to cut back on the production of waste and improve its disposal, as we move towards our goal of a zero-waste society”. And it will set a floor price for the landfill tax, guaranteed until 2020.

The water sector will face an unspecified reform “to encourage businesses and households to value this precious resource... and protect poorer households from excessive rises in water bills”.

The Conservatives say they will “pioneer a new system of conservation credits to protect habitats” – something first promised by David Cameron in 2009 (ENDS Report 412, p 7). Companies whose developments cause loss of green space or habitats could pay for conservation credits to be spent on creating habitat elsewhere.

The manifesto repeats the Tories’ time-honoured quango-cutting pledge. The government’s Sustainable Development Commission is anxious about its survival prospects under a Conservative government. And the party promises to bring in regulatory budgets, forcing any government department or agency planning a new regulation “to reduce regulation elsewhere by a greater amount”.

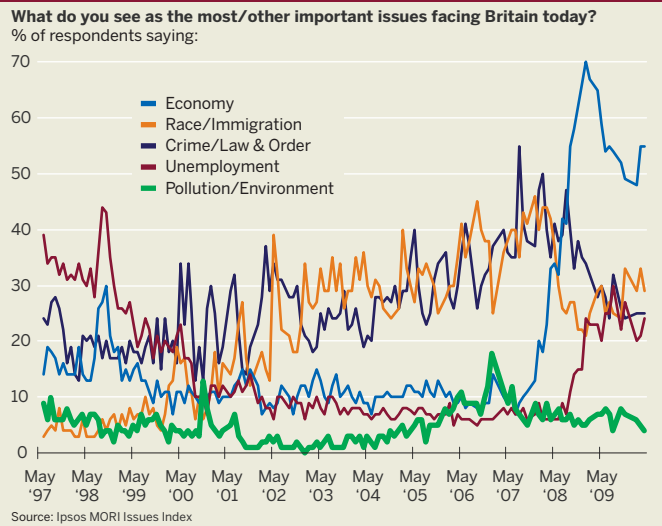
The Labour government consulted on a version of this idea, but withdrew it after meeting strong opposition (ENDS Report 411, p 44). Peter Young, chairman of the Aldersgate Group, said he was disappointed to find the idea reappearing in the Tory manifesto.

Labour manifesto

One of the Labour manifesto’s ten chapters is devoted to environmental protection; it is one of the shortest.² The chapter on economic growth comes first and is the longest.

Manifesto co-author Ed Miliband, the energy and climate change

FIGURE 2 ... BUT DOES THE ELECTORATE CARE?



secretary, has not given any special favour to green issues. And there is almost nothing here not already proposed by Labour in government, some of it in the last budget (ENDS Report 422, p 6).

It was not until the party’s third term in office, starting in 2005, that Labour began serious work on the policy framework needed to eliminate the great bulk of UK greenhouse gas emissions in just four decades. Now it has the skeleton of a programme for achieving this, much of it accepted by the other main parties. Now Labour is asking for another chance of power to start delivering it.

“Our vision is of a society where economic prosperity and quality of life come not from exploiting the natural world but from its defence,” says the manifesto. “This is a huge challenge... living within our environmental means will require a dramatic shift using resources more efficiently and reducing waste.”

In a swipe at the Conservatives, it insists that “only active government can shape markets to prioritise green growth and job creation... environmental sustainability cannot be left to individuals and businesses acting alone”.

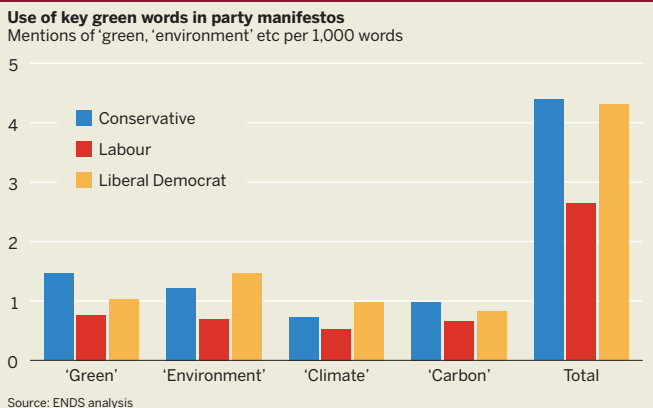
The party says its policies will create 400,000 “new green jobs” by 2015. By 2020 about 40% of UK electricity will come from low-carbon sources. This implies that as well as a massive expansion in renewables, one nuclear power station and/or several coal-fired power stations with CCS will be operating by then – a tall order. Like the Tories, Labour promises four coal-fired plants with CCS.

The manifesto says the UK’s densely populated land resources are increasingly stressed by competing pressures for food production, new housing and flood protection. It then sets out one of its very few new green commitments. “We will introduce a new framework for managing our land that more effectively reconciles those pressures... putting forward new areas for protected landscape and habitat status, focusing on green corridors and wildlife networks to link existing sites.”

Labour made three major reforms of land use planning during 13 years in power, including the infrastructure planning commission and national policy statements (see pp 57-59). Yet it still feels further change is needed, although the manifesto gives no further details. The government’s horizon-scanning body Foresight recently called for a new land use framework (ENDS Report 422, p 36).

Labour also wants major reforms of water and energy regulation “to deliver the fairest deal for consumers”. As well as ensuring greater competition among energy suppliers to drive down prices, this reform has to give investors in low-carbon energy plant “the certainty they need” – which usually implies higher prices.

FIGURE 1 GREEN WORDS APLENTY...



To boost local support for new renewable energy schemes Labour will encourage “community organisations, co-ops and social enterprises to provide energy services, meaning lower prices through bulk purchasing and the development of small-scale renewables”. Labour promises to ban recyclable and biodegradable material from landfill. And it will stick with its target, hit long ago, that 60% of new homes should be built on previously developed brownfield land.

The manifesto rules out introducing national road pricing in the next parliament, suggesting Labour has not entirely given up on the idea. It promises “targeted motorway widening” plus increased use of motorway emergency lanes for normal traffic during busy periods (ENDS Report 409, pp 34-38).

Labour is alone in planning a new runway and terminal at Heathrow, infrastructure that would lead to a significant rise in UK CO₂ emissions. But it promises no new runways at any other airport during the next parliament.

Liberal Democrat manifesto

The third party’s manifesto has more ambitious green plans and goals than either the Tories’ or Labour’s, a lead acknowledged by Jonathon Porritt and Aldersgate group chair Peter Young.³

The Liberal Democrats have also done most to align themselves with ten manifesto demands put forward by leading green NGOs last autumn (see box, p34).

Environmental protection is one of the party’s four key campaign themes, along with improving education and reforming politics and taxation. Environmental policies, marked with green tabs, are scattered through the manifesto because “concern for the environment is important in every part of people’s lives” and “protecting the planet... requires action across government”.

The Liberal Democrats propose a 100% cut in UK greenhouse-gas emissions by 2050, going beyond the 80% offered by Labour and the Conservatives. Emissions would be cut by 40% by 2020. As for the EU, it should move immediately from its current target for a 20% emissions cut by 2020 (from a 1990 baseline) to 30%.

Like Labour, the Liberal Democrats see 40% of UK electricity coming from low-carbon energy sources by 2020. But their manifesto rules out any new nuclear power stations. And new coal-fired power stations will only be allowed “if accompanied by the highest level of carbon capture and storage” covering all, rather than part, of their CO₂ emissions.



Greens’ leader Caroline Lucas and Jonathon Porritt campaigning

The party wants three quarters of UK renewable energy to come from offshore infrastructure, removing some of the controversies caused by building wind farms and other renewable energy plant on land. It would abolish the Infrastructure Planning Commission, the government’s main weapon for speeding up planning decisions on major energy developments.

And it pledges to spend £400m on refurbishing shipyards to manufacture offshore wind turbines and other marine renewables. This is part of a green economic stimulus that would eventually create 100,000 jobs, financed in its first year by £3.1bn obtained by savings elsewhere in government.

For one year only, households would be offered £400 towards cutting their energy consumption to pay for insulation, boiler replacement or installing microgeneration. The Liberal Democrats promise higher feed-in tariffs for microgeneration, even though the government’s new tariffs have been widely criticised for being too generous. Household energy saving would also be encouraged by compelling electricity suppliers to bring in block tariffs, in which unit costs rise after a set level of electricity has been used.

Like Labour and the Conservatives, the party plans to facilitate private-sector loan schemes financing refurbishment to cut household energy consumption. But the Lib Dems want a similar public →

MORE OF THE SAME

MERE WORDS?

Dotted among the manifestos are some acutely vague green pledges. They sound good but what do they actually mean and how might the party in government be held to account for them? Here are some examples.

The Conservatives say they will:

- “Work to reduce litter, which spoils too much of our countryside and urban environment.”
- “Give the concerns of cyclists much greater priority.”

Labour says it will:

- “Make a decision early in the next parliament on the feasibility of the alternative options for a tidal energy project on the Severn.” But if it is feasible, will you actually get on with building it?

The Liberal Democrats say they will:

- “Introduce a new strategy to bring the UK back on target to halt the loss of habitats and speceis and as far as possible restore biodiversity by 2020.” How far is that?

NO CONFERRING, PLEASE

The three main party manifestos share some almost identical green policies, which ought to mean that they will be implemented whoever wins.

They are motherhood and apple pie-type ideas, which nearly everyone likes the sound of. Or they are deeply sensible policies that should have been implemented years ago. Or perhaps some are merely fashionable.

- Here they are:
- Develop a loan scheme to finance major energy-efficiency refurbishment of UK homes (see pp 36-40).

- Set up a green investment bank, using government money to lever much more private-sector investment into low-carbon infrastructure projects.
- Make the import and possession of illegally logged timber a criminal offence in UK law.
- Retain Energy Performance Certificates for selling or renting homes.
- Plan and hopefully build a high-speed rail network.
- Encourage local councils to get involved in microgeneration and district heating networks.

loan scheme to accelerate the rate at which schools and other public buildings cut their CO₂ emissions.

The government's new CRC Energy Efficiency Scheme, which covers a large chunk of the public and private sector's energy use, would also be strengthened. This pledge was warmly welcomed by the Environmental Industries Commission.

Some of the money to finance the party's green economic stimulus would come from new taxes on flying. Like the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats would change air passenger duty from a tax paid by individual passengers per seat to one paid by airlines per flight. This should provide stronger incentives to improve aviation's fuel efficiency. This tax change was considered but then rejected by government because of the likely damage to airlines in a recession.

Sector leaders say all three manifestos lack a strategy to expand green industries

Unlike the Conservatives, however, the Liberal Democrats pledge to raise far more money from taxes on flying – £3.3bn a year as opposed to the £1.9bn that air passenger duty raised in 2007. To encourage people to switch from plane to lower-carbon rail travel, there would be an extra tax on many domestic flights.

The manifesto says a Liberal Democrat government would prepare to introduce road pricing within ten years of coming to power, with the money raised used to offset fuel and vehicle excise duty. The major roads budget would be cut and the savings used to increase rail capacity. A £140m bus scrappage scheme would replace older diesel vehicles with cleaner machines.

But these radical transport policies are marred by the promise of a fuel duty discount scheme for drivers in remote rural areas – a special favour for an important part of the party's electoral base.

Alone among the main parties, the Liberal Democrats say they will use the public sector's purchasing power to expand markets for green products and technologies. They would also make listed

companies report on environmental duties and performance in annual operating and financial reviews – a proposal scrapped by Gordon Brown when he was chancellor.

The Liberal Democrats are also alone in stating that they aim “to fully meet EU air quality targets by 2012” – and were praised by the Environmental Industries Commission for doing so.

They wants household water meters to be mandatory in shortage areas and cheap loans for farm waste digesters, part of a “huge increase in anaerobic digestion from food and farm waste”.

A new land designation “similar to site of special scientific interest” will be created to protect green areas most valued by local communities. UK woodland cover is to be doubled by 2050.

Reaction

The Aldersgate Group and the Environmental Industries Commission (EIC), leading voices for UK environmental industries, acknowledged the extensive green content of the manifestos. But both seemed disappointed overall.

Aldersgate's Peter Young said none of the parties had grasped the need to start planning for big increases in the efficiency of how critical natural resources are used. None had acknowledged the UK's huge CO₂ trade deficit, caused by its dependence on carbon-intensive imports from developing countries.

The EIC's concern is that the planned green investment bank is too focused on low-carbon infrastructure; it should have a remit to invest across all environmental industries. All three manifestos lack a convincing strategy to expand these industries, it says. And that makes it “likely we will have to make the transition to a low-carbon resource-efficient economy with technologies supplied from countries such as Germany, the USA, Japan and Korea.

“Based on these manifestos the next government will still be a long way from the policy framework we need to make the UK a global [green] leader.” ■

DOWNLOAD at endsreport.com/links

1. *The Conservative Manifesto 2010*
2. *The Labour Party Manifesto 2010*
3. *Liberal Democrat Manifesto 2010*

PRESSURE GROUP PRESSURE

Three noteworthy election initiatives by green NGOs:

- **WWF**, the **RSPB** and **Greenpeace** have joined with Oxfam, Christian Aid and other development charities to “ask the climate question” in 51 targeted marginal seats.¹

They are asking candidates whether their party will “commit to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40% below 1990 levels by 2020 through strong domestic action”.

There are two other questions. One seeks a commitment that at least 15% of UK energy comes from renewable sources by 2020. The other asks parties to

provide “the UK's fair share” of climate change finance to developing countries, above existing aid commitments.

- Think-tank **Green Alliance** set up a high-powered panel to draw up priorities for “the last parliament”, so called because it “has a historic responsibility... it is the last parliament that can take action to avoid runaway climate change”. The six-member panel included the chief executives of Oxfam and National Grid, Jonathon Porritt and ex-government chief scientist and ex-Royal Society president Robert May. Their five priorities for the new parliament were building

support for climate-change action, leading nations into a global deal on climate finance, setting out a road map for UK low-carbon infrastructure, unlocking finance for low-carbon growth and “greening our communities through an immediate drive to upgrade existing housing”.²

The launch of the panel's report in March featured a slight disagreement between Lord May and Sir Jonathon as to whether nuclear power is a good idea.

- Last autumn eight leading green NGOs including **Greenpeace**, **Friends of the Earth** and the **RSPB** combined

to set out ten proposals for inclusion in party manifestos at the forthcoming election (ENDS Report 416, p 8).

In April they duly compared the manifesto contents of the three main parties and the Green Party against their ten demands. They call this an assessment but it isn't; instead it is a simple checklist. Reason: the NGOs feel legally bound to avoid any suggestion that they are supporting any one political party.³

But of the main parties, the Liberal Democrat manifesto offers them most.

- ☞ 1. *Ask the climate question*
- ☞ 2. *The last parliament*
- ☞ 3. *Assessment*