

Notes on second Environmental Forum with Anthony Browne

8 October 2020

Present: Anthony Browne and Chloe Rennard; 24 attendees

Questions

(Editorial comments in red italics in parenthesis)

Chat points made at the time

If farmers are expected to implement the necessary and urgent need to reduce their carbon footprint the costs of their products will rise and so how are they meant to survive if cheap imports are allowed to enter the UK? The worry is that once again economics will win over the environment - how do you propose we move urgently towards a more sustainable agricultural system?

AB: I have been visiting nature friendly farms in Cambridgeshire who are working out how to go carbon neutral. Hope Farm already done this and is profitable, as is the National Trust farm at Wimpole, which shows that it is possible to be carbon neutral AND profitable. I agree on Claire's broad point and it is unacceptable that we undermine farmers. I want to support sustainable agriculture, and will be talking to George Eustice about this. I'm supporting border adjustment payments which mean that those who accept imports that aren't carbon neutral or which don't meet UK standards will have to pay tariffs. But there are issues with this. This will be a big issue in the aluminium and steel industry.

(When AB said that tariffs could be applied to imports that aren't carbon neutral or 'that don't meet UK standards', it wasn't clear whether he was including food and welfare standards in that).

Will you write a letter to the Chancellor asking him to prioritise green, low-carbon investments in the Comprehensive Spending Review? Would you be willing to post a copy of this letter on social media to publicly show your commitment? Or if you are unwilling to write a letter yourself, would you be willing to forward a letter from me to the Chancellor with a cover letter from yourself, asking him to prioritise climate change projects?

AB: The Comprehensive Spending Review is where the Government sets out what it will spend over the next 3 years and people put in bids for it. MPs have already put in a letter asking Rishi Sunak to prioritise green, low carbon investments. But what does prioritise mean in cash terms - £5m, £10m,? Electric cars, green bonds, home insulation are already in the CSR. I will speak to Rishi about it (again) but if you've got a letter then I'm happy to forward it to him. Generally the thrust for a green recovery is there, e.g. subsidy on electric cars, but the question is how much to spend on it. The CSR will probably be in November so it would be a good idea to get letters in quickly.

How do we persuade the government and the planning authorities that development isn't always a good thing?

AB: South Cambs has a disproportionate amount of development, and was the 7th most highly developed region of the UK last year. We have full employment; it's flat and easy to build on. I am against over development and have campaigned about this, particularly from the point of view of water resources and the need to retain the character of our villages. Also we need to

plan for infrastructure before the development, not afterwards. I am making the point to government but not pushing too hard as the development numbers for South Cambs have recently been reduced by 30%, while some areas have doubled in numbers. The planning system is to change.

I support proper transport links, eg an East-West rail link, and am talking to government about that.

Rather than relying on European companies, could the government support a wide variety of UK based industries around energy efficiency, insulation, heat and ventilation by committing more funding and allowing a retro fitting industry to develop properly to scale, creating thousands of genuine (non-cowboy) post-covid jobs?

Please can you ask the Chancellor what investment has been allocated on this front in the Comprehensive Spending Review for 2021-24?

AB: 'Yes', is the answer to that. This is something the Government is very aware of. You may have seen Boris Johnson's recent speech. We require a quadrupling of wind power in the next 10 years. This sounds a lot but we have multiplied it by 6 over that last 10 years. Wind turbines have got a lot larger. When I wrote for the Observer the UK was having to import wind turbines from Germany. But now we have a UK based company. We can now put British technology wind turbines on floating platforms further out to sea. Absolutely, to your point about retrofitting. It's about getting people trained up. Governments over the past 20 years have had a similar rhetoric about this. Those countries that are ahead of the curve can export their technologies. The UK Government is hopeful that this will become a big export industry.

Concern about lack of road sweeping in Sawston leading to litter, blocked drains and flooding. Could people be asked to be responsible for cleaning an area near their home?

AB: Council Tax should fund street cleaning; would the public support an increase in the tax to pay for better cleaning?

(Later the questioner asked for a show of hands of who would be willing to clean near their house – most, including AB, raised their hands. AB promised to visit questioner and do some litter-picking with him.)

Do you have plans to speed up and increase the installation of electric vehicle charging points to encourage the switch over to electric...

AB: Yes, we must massively increase the number of charging points so that no home is more than 24 miles from a charging point on a major road (*local councils to pay for this?*). The government is subsidising the installation of home charging points. I support bringing the date forward from 2040 to 2035 for the phase-out of petrol and diesel vehicles; and support all new homes having charging points as standard.

Please would you commit to asking the Chancellor at Treasury Questions this two-part oral question regarding bus services and incentives:

- **The investment of £220 million in 'A better deal for bus users'² during the Spending Round for 2020-21 was very welcome. In the Comprehensive Spending Review for 2021-24 what funding has been allocated to create new frequent bus services for**

villages that currently have no or minimal bus services connecting to their nearest towns or cities?

- **What new financial incentives are being introduced for people to leave their cars and travel on new or existing bus services? Incentives could include free public transport schemes like those in the French town of Dunkirk (Nord) and nationwide in Luxembourg or perhaps a 'Ride Out to Help Out' 50% discount scheme similar to your successful 'Eat Out to Help Out' scheme in August this year (in this case it would be to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions in line with the Government's Transport Decarbonisation Plan).**

AB: I can't commit to asking that question in Parliament as there are currently a limited number of people allowed in the House and fewer opportunities to put questions in person. But I'm happy, if you send me a letter, to forward it to the Chancellor. Then you will get a written reply. The Treasury allocates the money; subsidies are put in place by the local mayor (James Palmer) who decides on local priorities - but the Department of Transport also has a say in it.

Will you ask Robert Jenrick, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, to make a requirement that all new housing and business developments, where possible, harvest, store and re-use rainfall, include greywater recycling schemes, and incorporate sustainable urban drainage systems (SUDS), building on the good practice demonstrated in the Eddington development in Cambridge?

AB: Current limit is 110 litres. *(?? Not sure what is meant by this – at present we use an average of 150 litres per household per day; the current proposals to reduce this are fairly modest eg Anglian Water aiming for 120 by 2045; Cam Valley Forum point to Eddington Development which is aiming for 80 litres mains water plus greywater use)* I've had meetings with Water Resources East and Cam Valley Forum and arranged for them to see Rebecca Pow, who's the MP responsible. We put together an 8-point plan to restore water in Cambridgeshire, some of which the Government are doing and some not. The licensing regime from the Environment Agency is archaic. One of the problems with the regulation is that it is there to ensure taps keep running for consumers rather than to keep water in streams. There are measures that water companies can bring in like hose pipe bans etc, but this is for customer reasons rather than to help the environment. It needs a change of the rules. This is essentially what we are working with Defra on. We need a long-term solution. One that the water industry is keen on, and which I support, is to have a reservoir between here and the Wash to capture winter water and pump it back in the summer. But there are planning issues around reservoirs because people don't like them.

From Chat:

I am concerned about just building reservoirs to match demand instead of making water companies responsible for not extracting more than an aquifer can afford. Pumping winter flood waters back into aquifers has been shown to work but in the end it needs behavioural change. We just cannot support daily power showers for everyone any more.

I'd like to talk more about "net zero" and "carbon neutral". We are seeing extreme events and environmental destruction at the current level of atmospheric carbon dioxide. Both of these terms imply remaining at this current state for a long time to come, given carbon capture technologies are scalable yet - or do they?

AB: Before life on earth, CO2 levels were at 4,000 ppm. Reduced to 280 ppm by 20,000 years ago. Now 415 ppm – there has been a massive recent acceleration. The Government is committed to the IPCC target of being carbon neutral by 2050. I agree with MG that we need to go 'carbon negative' to achieve this – eg emergent Carbon Capture and Storage (20 active projects around the world), although carbon capture is not a fully formed technology. The Government is interested in nature-based solutions, eg increasing the organic content of soil; more tree planting.

From Chat:

This article is very relevant. Wind turbines are no longer the issue, it's creating low carbon heat sources for homes that matters. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/oct/08/uk-will-take-700-years-to-reach-low-carbon-heating-under-current-plans?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

The conservatives cancelled the low carbon initiatives established in 2006.

Greening agricultural practices, legislating and giving support to farmers to change would help hugely in carbon reduction.

Peat bogs are still being dug up. Shouldn't they be protected?

AB: I don't know why the Government hasn't yet banned the sale of peat. We are going to do a section on this with the Conservative group. Peat is an important habitat. We need a ban on the extraction of peat.

You've explained your objections to enforceable climate assemblies. How about scientific oversight of government schemes then? For example, I received a beautiful letter laying out why HS2 would create a net gain for the UK environment. If true, if verified, it would be great. But how can we be sure that government assertions are verified by disinterested experts? And how can that information, if true, be communicated more effectively to members of the public currently terrified by the escalating climate disaster?

AB: I have a science background – a maths degree. I believe in evidence-based policy making, not policy-based evidence making. I used to be Chair of the Regulatory Policy Committee - their job is to be quality control for Government decisions. There is a Committee on Climate Change, which is a very credible committee and well respected by environment groups. They are independent. On HS2 - I haven't gone through the details on HS2; I haven't got too involved in it as it doesn't go through South Cambs; but it is evidence based.

From Chat:

Route E of the EW Railway will cause too much damage to our farmland and diversity. The route further north would follow at least some old/disused track and cause less land loss.

Would planting more trees help rainwater to penetrate and refill the aquifer?

AB: There are lots of things we can do to ensure the aquifer fills up quicker. ELMS (Environmental Land Management Schemes) are replacing the CAP – part of that money should go to farmers to support land management priorities like using less water and making sure water doesn't run off. The Cam Valley Forum suggest that part of ELMS money should reward farmers for practices which help preserve water. Tree planting can also help. CAP gives £3billion per year to farmers - this is mostly about food production. The introduction of ELMS will reward farmers and landowners for environmental benefits. I will be arranging tours for people from Government to visit farms in South Cambs to make sure this is working with farmers and not against them.

From Chat:

Soil sequesters massive amounts of carbon - the wilding book explains this very well (towards the end) (*Wilding; the Return of Nature to a British Farm* by Isabella Tree, Picador 2018)

By keeping plants in the soil it helps the soil health protecting large trees, using crop cover; and see this on the Great Fen re protecting peat www.greatfen.org.uk/cy/node/198

Given the looming climate and environmental emergencies, why haven't you supported the Climate and Environment Emergencies Bill?

AB: some stuff is happening anyway. Our target, set by the UN, is to be carbon neutral by 2050. We are currently on track but we won't be soon. However no-one thinks we could be carbon neutral by 2025 without major change and damage to the economy; this would lose the support of the public.

(an extract from AB's website: It is a major priority of mine to urgently tackle climate change, and I have championed many actions to achieve this but I am afraid I cannot support the passage of this bill as I do not believe the protection of the environment is its primary aim. Clause 3, the purpose of this bill, is Extinction Rebellion's stated desire for a "Citizen's Assembly" which would, according to clause 4, have equal authority to Parliament in being able to coerce the Secretary of State. Whilst couched in pseudo-democratic language, it is nothing more than a demand for Government to cede Extinction Rebellion the power to write this country's environmental policy.)

We are in a climate emergency. We have committed to Zero Carbon by 2050. That means we must decarbonise 28 million homes as most are gas heated.

Developers are profiting more by putting in cheaper gas boilers instead of renewable heat sources, leaving the cost of decarbonisation to be picked up by future owners or (more likely, at least in part), the taxpayer. Piecemeal upgrades don't benefit from economies of scale that can be had by installing at the time a development is built. If one developer switches to installing heat pumps in new-builds then the extra cost (£8k) puts them at a disadvantage to competitors, therefore preventing even conscientious developers from doing it.

Is there a deliberate reason that developers have been given a free pass to install archaic technology in new homes? Can the government legislate to ensure that new homes are built to be zero carbon by 2025, ensuring that costly retrofits are not required down the line?

AB I totally agree with this concern. We should be building houses for net zero and not putting gas boilers into new houses. A new Heating Strategy will be published later this year (*the Future Homes Strategy 2025 will introduce rules for new builds*).

Can we have a constituency-wide move to get all our parish councils to manage the green areas under their control to promote biodiversity? Probably with help of local enthusiasts. For example stopping cutting the grass most of the time.

AB: Yes, we must stop over-frequent grass cutting. I will mention the parish council suggestion to Natural Cambridgeshire, who have the target of doubling diversity in the region. I support moves to create greater biodiversity, for example planting more trees: S Cambs has 3% tree cover; UK as a whole 11-13%; Europe 30-35%.