

MARKUS VARESULO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

DEFRA caused a public outcry when it was revealed that the department had plans to allow the culling of Common Buzzards on shooting estates.



NO Minister



Greenest government ever? What exactly is so 'green', asks *Bill Oddie*, who lambasts the Conservative-led administration on its highly damaging anti-wildlife policies.

A week rarely goes by without someone in the media asking me "Why is it important?", the 'it' often being bird related.

"Why is it important to breed Spoon-billed Sandpipers?" "Why is it important to grow reedbeds for Bitterns?" "Do White-headed Ducks really matter?" I often sense an accusatory implication that we conservationists have got our priorities wrong. "Surely if we didn't waste all that money on Spoon-billed Sandpipers, we could end starvation in the Congo?"

Of course, that's just being silly, but the question remains: why are birds important? Indeed, why is nature important? Go on, ask yourself. Ask your friends. Ask your enemies! Whatever the answer may be, it's an important question.

Let's also ask the government, or at least see what its utterances and attitudes imply. Prime Minister David Cameron famously announced: "This may be the greenest government ever!" Not a lot of competition there, of course, but what's his record so far? He has stated: "No one is keener than me to see the hunting act repealed, because I believe in the management of wildlife."

Do I detect the whiff of euphemism? 'Management' often equals control, hunt, cull, kill.

Let's be fair, environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are no



PAUL HOWELL



DAVID PEARSON

DEFRA's London headquarters at Nobel House, Westminster.



David Cameron
Prime Minister

“I want us to be the greenest government ever – a very simple ambition and one that I'm absolutely committed to achieving”

STATE CHANCELLERY, RIGA, LATVIA (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)

strangers to such measures, but I suspect the motivation is a little different. Conservationists have the welfare of wild creatures in mind. Ministers have more vested interests. For example, what possible reason could Cameron have had for blocking the ban on neonicotinoids when they had been proven to be so detrimental to bees, except to protect the income of insecticide and pharmaceutical companies?

Perhaps mindful of his 'greenest government' boast, Cameron has probably wisely mainly left it to his ministers to illustrate just what twaddle that was. None has relished the role more than Owen Paterson, Minister for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. He was reported as having shown to colleagues a rather disturbing photo of himself brandishing

the corpses of two Grey Squirrels which he had trapped in lethal, though legal, devices. Defending Red Squirrels, or showing off? Even one of his Tory comrades commented to the *Mail on Sunday*: "I'm not sure what was more shocking – the dead squirrels or the smile on Owen's face."

Paterson has, of course, frequently been seen and heard defending the Badger cull and avoiding any reasoned explanation why years of authoritative scientific research has been ignored in favour of perhaps the most publically abhorred measure many of us have ever known. Incidentally, I totally refute Paterson's claim that he qualifies as a Badger expert because he kept two when he was a child – doing so, incidentally, was both unwise and illegal.

“Paterson has been seen and heard defending the Badger cull”



LEFT: HEHADEN. RIGHT: DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDTINGETC.COM)

The Badger cull is one of the government's most unpopular moves, sparking protest marches (right) and attracting the support of well-known names like Brian May.





“Lack of expertise and experience seems to me to be one of the most disturbing aspects of this government”

Lack of expertise and experience seems to me to be one of the most disturbing aspects of this – and indeed any – British government. Maybe I have seen too many episodes of *Yes, Minister* and *The Thick of It*, but I get the impression that ministers are allocated to a department regardless of whether they know anything about it or not, and every now and then they are swapped around in a Cabinet reshuffle. It even sounds like a folk dance, with the Prime Minister calling out the moves. “So, who fancies transport? No one? OK, the environment?” “Oh, me sir, please sir, let me!” “Paterson? Do you know any country stuff?” “Oh yes PM, I’ve just ordered some really expensive squirrel traps. And I’m pretty good in the saddle. And when I was a boy, I had two pet ...”

“Yes, we know, we know, we don’t want to hear about your



FIELDSPORTCHANNEL.TV

bloody Badgers. Actually, talking of bloody Badgers, you know we are thinking of killing quite a lot them. Will that upset you?” “No, no – got to be done!” “Has it? Why?” “Er ... no idea.” “Neither have I. Managing wildlife?” “By killing it?” “Whatever. Now, anyone want Education?”

Surely the most fatuous suggestion so far was the request by owners of Pheasant-shooting estates to be allowed to knock buzzards out of trees and destroy their nests in order to protect Pheasant chicks that were being raised purely to be shot in the name of ‘sport’. Not a huge challenge when they can hardly walk or fly. There was even talk of relocating the buzzards – but where? Or indeed how? Not surprisingly, there was a public outcry. Rather more surprisingly, the scheme was immediately dropped. Is it cynical of me to suggest that the proposal was deliberately ludicrous so that the government could execute another U-turn – a manoeuvre they are well



Richard Benyon
Recently sacked as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Natural Environment, Water and Rural Affairs

“This is a good opportunity to applaud gamekeepers for the wonderful work they do in providing excellent biodiversity across our countryside”

CHATHAM HOUSE, LONDON

Left and below left: DEFRA’s proposals to trial Common Buzzard management were allegedly to reduce the effect of buzzards on Pheasant numbers on estates where the gamebird is bred for shooting, despite there being little or no evidence to support the belief that the raptor significantly reduces Pheasant numbers.

practised at – and thus be able to boast “See, we do listen to public opinion?”

But, of course, they don’t. In the same way that they are ‘listening’ to opponents of the Badger cull, or to public reaction to the HS2 high-speed rail link, or to concerns about building on green space, or about fracking, or wind power, cuts in funding to reduce wildlife crime, and so on. The greenest government? Only if we define ‘green’ as ‘inexperienced’, ‘naive’, ‘unripe’ and likely to make you sick!

So let’s ask the government the big question: why is nature important? The truthful answer is that, to them, it isn’t. At least not as important as money. The growth they crave is not of trees, wildflowers or populations of species. It is economic growth. No doubt most politicians would say the same. Maybe we have ministers lacking in the relevant depth of knowledge and conviction, but there is one thing they do know about. Wealth. We are governed by people who are used to being well off. ■

BILL’S NOTES ON THE CABINET

Predominately male. Several educated at Eton College. High percentage are millionaires, some richer (much). Their fortunes were made from time ‘in the city’, or from inheritances. Many own at least two dwellings. Social connections include wealthy landowners (often farmland) who may well contribute to Tory funding. Leisure activities include shooting parties and hunting (if it were allowed).

May well lack the incentive or need to discover the peace and green-ness of the countryside, because they own quite a bit of it!

GREEN GOVERNMENT

Notable achievements ...

- Instituted a Carbon Plan, describing departmental actions to mitigate for climate change.
- Disgraced ex-minister Chris Huhne adopted forward-thinking climate change policies and fought for them at the Climate Change Conference in Cancun in 2010.
- Sizeable investment in Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) to reduce carbon emissions and create up to 150,000 jobs.
- Pledged measures to use recycled waste energy from anaerobic digestion.
- 53 million ‘smart’ energy meters to be installed in British homes.
- Created a new indicator statistic for priority species, described by conservationists as the FTSE Index for threatened wildlife (bit.ly/WildlifeDecline).

NOT SO GREEN GOVERNMENT

... and failures

- Secretly granted licences for Common Buzzard nest destruction on shooting estates, and attempted to begin a trial cull against scientific and conservationists’ advice (bit.ly/BuzzardCull).
- Natural England, the government’s advisor on the natural environment, allowed the culling up of 10,000 Lesser Black-backed Gulls per year on the 23,500-acre Abbeystead Estate, Lancashire, for more than 20 years (bit.ly/GullCull).
- Instituted the Badger cull, ignoring the recommendations of its own advisors and scientists, as well as the vast majority of published literature. Extended the cull by eight weeks when it didn’t work. It still didn’t work.
- David Cameron has publicly stated he has ‘sympathy’ for calls to relax the ban on hunting with dogs.
- Opposed an EU-wide ban on bee-killing pesticides containing neonicotinoids; after the European Commission instigated the ban the government said it accepted it but rejected the science behind it.
- Imposed big spending cuts on DEFRA and Natural England.
- Proposed reducing green energy levies, many of which the coalition imposed in the first place after calling for an increase.
- Other cross-the-board environmental taxes, such as a fuel hike, have been postponed.
- Rejected 2030 ‘de-carbonisation’ target, losing potential future jobs in consequence.
- Removed many regulations governing environmentally sustainable development and business.
- Promised cuts and targets in carbon emissions likely to be dropped owing to financial climate.
- Renewable Heat Incentive has no commitment to remove recyclable waste and not use unsustainable biomass.

- Coalition pledge that no public money would be spent on new nuclear power plants contradicted when Hinkley Point C in Somerset was given the go-ahead in October this year.

- Promotion of the controversial practice of fracking for gas, with a clear conflict of interest as figures from the industry have seats in parliament.

- £42 million Marine Renewables Development Fund scrapped, resulting in loss of an estimated £76 billion for the economy and 68,000 jobs.

- Zero Carbon Homes policy downgraded to include existing building regulations on heat and power only.



Owen Paterson
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

“The Badgers moved the goalposts. We’re dealing with wild animals”

POLICY EXCHANGE