

Speech by Rt. Hon. Charles Kennedy MP  
To Green Alliance - Royal Society of Arts, Carlton House Terrace, London  
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Ronald Reagan once famously remarked, "A tree's a tree. How many do you need to look at?" when told of plans to expand the Redwood National Park in California. Thankfully most people's attitudes towards the environment have changed since then.

I welcome this. It is now almost a truism, at least in progressive politics, that a healthy natural environment should not just be something we gratefully inherit from our parents it should also be something that we work hard to ensure we leave to our children.

For many people in Britain today environmental considerations are an important element of their day-to-day lives. People understand that they can make a difference. They know that through buying 'environmentally friendly' products, or using public transport, or recycling waste, that small actions make a big difference. Increasingly, green issues are an important factor, in deciding how people cast their vote.

This is obviously something that the Prime Minister has realised himself recently. I read his speech to the World Wide Fund for Nature earlier this month with great interest. I am happy to welcome his new-found concern for the environment. And I'm sure it's completely unrelated to the impending General Election campaign.

While the Prime Minister's apparent conversion to the cause of the environment is very recent, the Liberal Democrats have long been committed to this agenda, even if it has not always been at the forefront of our campaigning. I want to call that agenda 'Green Justice', because it is closely tied to our social justice agenda.

And I also want to say that the Liberal Democrats are determined that the environment and environmental issues are put firmly at the heart of the General Election campaign. In our pre-manifesto document Freedom in a Liberal Society we listed policies for 'green action' in every single section – whether that be health, education, law & order or whatever. And that is why we will be campaigning hard on environmental issues in coming weeks. That is why every section of our general election manifesto, will contain policies for green action too.

But putting political considerations to one side for a moment I do want to say that I genuinely welcomed the fact that the Prime Minister made that environment speech a couple of weeks ago. But it is worrying that the Prime Minister had previously only made one speech on this subject in the four years since he came to office. Only time will tell us how long this newfound interest continues.

But we do have evidence now, of Labour's record. Before the last General Election the Prime Minister pledged to put the environment "at the heart of government".

Yet four years later – the number of car journeys has risen, fuel duty has just been cut, a massive programme of road building has been announced, the bio-tech industry seems to have been embraced almost without reservation, and the election pledge for a 20% reduction in CO2 emissions by 2010 has been downgraded to nothing more than an aspiration.

As a Liberal Democrat I view this as a worrying record. We believe that tackling climate change is one of the biggest and most important challenges facing government. Last year's widespread flooding in the South East of England large parts of the West Country and Wales was a very real and damaging sign of what climate change may already be doing to weather patterns in Britain. And climate change, if unchallenged, will only accelerate in years to come – more rainfall, more flooding, more misery.

That's why we are committed to making environmental policy, a core part of our foreign policy. Foreign policy has traditionally been concerned with threats to national security, and we have to recognise that climate change is a major threat to the security of all of us.

So the Liberal Democrats are committed to at least a 20% reduction in British carbon dioxide levels by 2010 – relative to 1990 levels. And we want to go even further, setting a target of cutting carbon emissions by an average of 1.5% each year up to 2050.

'Green Justice' means stopping a handful of powerful countries pumping out ever higher levels of carbon dioxide, while countries like Mozambique are devastated by the terrible impact of climate change.

The Rio+10 summit in 2002 is a tremendous opportunity to push forward this agenda, and to improve the international community's ability to tackle environmental threats. We want to place Britain at the forefront of climate change negotiations, pressing other nations to ratify and implement the Kyoto Protocol by the date of Rio+10. And we would then use that opportunity, to push for further targets on CO2 emissions.

Domestically we are proposing a series of policies to enable us to meet these targets. We want to encourage the British people to drive more fuel efficient cars by cutting Vehicle Excise Duty on less polluting vehicles. And we want to enable more and more people to get out of their cars by giving them public transport alternatives on which they can rely.

And that means tackling the fragmentation of the national rail network caused by privatisation and fighting to prevent further creeping privatisation of public transport such as the Government's PPP proposals for the London Underground.

Furthermore, we will urgently seek to replace the Climate Change Levy on business with a new 'Carbon Tax' on greenhouse gas emissions themselves which we would introduce over time. The Climate Change Levy is badly designed for business and the environment. We need to reform it as part of a wider process of shifting taxation away from people and onto pollution itself. On energy, we have set a long-term target of 60% of energy to come from renewable sources by the middle of this century.

Tackling 'fuel poverty' is also a major concern for the Liberal Democrats. Its eradication is essential to achieving sustainable development as well as reducing CO2 emissions.

So we will introduce a national 'homes insulation programme' targeted at the lowest income households and funded by the energy utilities to provide decent levels of home insulation for all in our society within 15 years. A Liberal Democrat Government would provide help to all households in 'fuel poverty'. We have no truck with Labour's attempt to cut the level of 'fuel poverty' by simply redefining it.

All of these measures are crucial for cutting our domestic carbon emissions to meet the targets that we have set ourselves. But policies introduced to cut CO2 are almost meaningless if confined to national boundaries. Climate change is a global problem and it must be tackled on a global scale. The failure of negotiations over ratification of the Kyoto agreement on climate change in The Hague last year illustrates the scale of this challenge. In the short-term the Government must redouble its efforts to ensure international ratification and enforcement of the 1997 Kyoto protocol particularly by the United States which was widely perceived to have scuppered any ratification agreement in The Hague last year.

Whilst I believe the Government was genuine in trying to reach a deal at The Hague. I was seriously disappointed at their weakness afterwards in allowing the US to get away with having killed the deal.

And the situation is even more critical now. Last week, President Bush wrote to four US Senators spelling out his opposition to the Kyoto Protocol. I challenge the Prime Minister to make it clear to President Bush that his views are out of step with those of other world leaders. The Stockholm EU summit this week gives Tony Blair the perfect opportunity to take a lead on this with other European leaders – it is an opportunity the Prime Minister must not duck.

Furthermore, the Prime Minister said earlier this month that the UK would ratify Kyoto by Rio+10 even in the absence of US ratification. I welcome this statement. And I want to assure Tony Blair that the Liberal Democrats intend to see that he sticks to that pledge.

So I think we have to think differently on climate change. I want to flag up two areas, that I think we must consider ways of taking more effective action on climate change.

The first area embraces the principle of equity. On a planet where the most precious of commodities, a stable climate, is under threat, emissions could be rationed, through contraction of emissions, and convergence of national use of energy.

That means that every citizen could in the long run have an equal emission quota. There could hardly be a more obvious application of the notion of Universal Human Rights enshrined in the United Nations Charter. There are many different options for implementing a scheme. Quotas could be introduced gradually, and they could be tradeable. But whatever options are adopted, it is a proposal that may well offer the way forward.

The second area I want to flag up, is the role of Europe in climate change. Europe has shown the way before. In 1945, European nations realised that to revive yet also contain Germany there must be a community of equals.

Half a century later the key problem for the planet is climate change and Europe must again lead in the co-operative game. Europe should take the initiative to invite all the major nations and regions to form a Global Climate Community on the basis of commitments to reducing emissions and then ensuring that the emissions of different countries reach a happy medium. Contraction and Convergence.

To be useful such an initiative must include from the start, not only Europe but major developing nations such as India. America and some others may not join at first. But they will have a major incentive to join or they will be excluded from the massive emissions market which will develop. Britain is in a unique position to ensure that the project gets off the ground. Britain's own experience and Atlantic and worldwide links could make it a valuable initiator of such a scheme.

But climate change is only one of the challenges that Britain faces in coming years and I want to talk about another big challenge – preserving a financially viable and environmentally sustainable farming industry in Britain.

The current Foot and Mouth disease outbreak is just the latest in a string of disasters to have hit farmers in this country: salmonella, BSE, Classical Swine Fever and now this.

The Government has already taken action to try and deal with the current outbreak.. The Liberal Democrats have supported the measures that Nick Brown has introduced. I fervently hope that they will prove successful in turning the tide in the fight against Foot and Mouth.

At the present time all that we should be concentrating on is the fight against this disease. But in the future, once the current situation is under control, it is clear that there needs to be a serious debate about the problems caused by the intensification of farming in this country in recent years: larger mass production farms and fewer and fewer abattoirs. This means animals today

potentially travelling large distances from farms in one part of the county to markets in another part to abattoirs in a third.

This intensification has been forced on farmers themselves in large part by the supermarkets who have driven down the prices they are prepared to pay for farm produce. They have also insisted that they are only prepared to buy animals slaughtered in certain abattoirs forcing farmers to cut costs to the bone to survive. The role played by supermarkets must be looked at seriously in the future.

In a wider sense the Liberal Democrats also want to reform the whole system of farming support in Britain today. The role of farming in this country is about much more than the provision of food. Farming practice also shapes the very nature of our landscape, providing a vehicle for environmental stewardship.

At the moment the Common Agricultural Policy takes little account of the role that farmers play as environmentalists and managers of our natural resources. CAP payments are made as a production subsidy. Over time the Liberal Democrats want to turn the bulk of this assistance from production payments into rural development payments.

These payments would be administered through a Countryside Management Contract to allow farmers in future to be much better rewarded for the services they provide to the public outside the commercial market. Including support for agri-environmental and stewardship payments – rewarding farmers who engage in sustainable farming practice and environmental renewal.

We also want to give a boost to conservation schemes to protect the environment and create “green jobs” through enhanced woodland management and the encouragement of organic production. Indeed the Liberal Democrats have already made clear our support for greater organic farming. A Private Members Bill from my Lib Dem colleague Paul Tyler MP setting a target for 30% organic production by 2010 received widespread support.

Creating jobs in rural areas and protecting the environment. Protecting the environment and local people – that is what our ‘Green Justice’ agenda is all about.

But we want to go even further in our protection of our natural environment and rural heritage. Building on greenfield sites particularly in the South of England is eroding our countryside to a worrying degree. Most people agree that, as a nation, we should do more to discourage greenfield development and encourage building and regeneration in existing towns and cities.

Yet perversely the state actually does the reverse. At the moment regeneration of existing buildings is subject to VAT whereas new building on greenfield is not. We are committed to ending this anomaly and will work with our EU colleagues to zero-rate tax on brownfield development.

I believe that the Liberal Democrats will enter the forthcoming election campaign as the only major political party truly committed to ‘Green Justice’ in Britain. Committed to justice internationally on Climate Change. Committed to justice for our poorer communities – providing decent houses that are energy efficient and warm. Committed to justice by providing decent public transport. And committed to justice for our farmers and rural communities.

I do not pretend that we have all the answers. But I genuinely believe that the Liberal Democrats offer people a real chance to protect the environment – a real chance for real change.

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