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Environmental priorities for the Conservative Party's new leader

As Prime Minister how did Boris Johnson do on the global challenges of climate change and nature? And what environmental commitments should those seeking to succeed him make as they launch their leadership campaigns?

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Before we look at what pledges candidates for the next Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister should be making, it is worth reflecting on how well Boris Johnson did as PM.

Boris Johnson's record

Perhaps unexpectedly, when he became Prime Minister, Boris Johnson initially made addressing the climate crisis a significant part of both his personal and the Conservative Party's public narrative. His rhetoric at moments such as the UN climate negotiations in Glasgow did not shy away from acknowledging the level of catastrophe the world is facing nor the urgency of action. So it was a tragedy that he was incapable or unwilling to turn this into decisive and consistent domestic action across government to address this crisis. The later stages of his premiership were marked by a series of damaging and unnecessary concessions that benefited the fossil fuels industry and removed vital protections for nature and biodiversity.

Under Johnson's watch, key departments acted as if the climate crisis was an optional extra or in the case of Rishi Sunak's Treasury, actively undermined efforts with tax breaks for short haul flights, cuts to insulation programmes and a road building bonanza. Even the welcome windfall tax on energy firm's profits contained a massive tax break for the oil and gas industry. Meanwhile despite spiralling energy bills, onshore wind - the cheapest cleanest power available - remains blocked.

Tackling the greatest challenges the planet faces needs commitment and consistency, but it got neither. His failure to show respect for the rule of law, human rights and international treaties undermined the UK's standing on the global stage at a time when we need to secure delivery of the promises made by rich countries.

The planet deserves better than Boris Johnson could manage, but whether we get that is up to his successor. We need a government that spends less time trying to curb environmental protest and more time stopping environmental breakdown.

Many decisions that were due imminently have been left hanging by the collapse of Boris Johnson's government, as has the pressing need to cushion people from the cost of living crisis as the colder months approach.

The last few months of Boris Johnson's tenure will be remembered for eroding the climate progress he promised. The next premiership must put climate and nature at the very top of the priority list.

Below we outline what the next leader's priorities should be.

Summary of environmental priorities for the next leader of the Conservative Party

Earlier this year, Pakistan and India suffered record-breaking 50°C temperatures. The extreme heat and low rainfall caused deaths, crop losses, forest fires and cuts to water and power supplies. Bangladesh was hit by the worst flooding for more than a century. More than 100 people died and hundreds of thousands of people lost their homes.

If global temperatures continue to rise because of climate change large parts of the world may become uninhabitable. The UK is also facing more extreme weather, such as the severe storms earlier this year that left many without power for weeks.

Across the UK, 10 million people live in neighbourhoods that are deprived of adequate green space. Around one million children live in areas where the average annual concentration of the air pollutant nitrogen dioxide is twice World Health Organisation recommended levels, of which two-thirds are under 12. Tens of millions of householders will face financial hardship through further punishing increases in energy bills this autumn, in large part because the UK's housing stock is so badly insulated.

The people hardest hit by environmental harms are low-income families, people of colour, children and young people. If levelling-up is to mean anything it must ensure that everybody can live in a safe and healthy environment, now and in the future.

The next leader of the Conservative Party and the next Prime Minister must aspire to make the UK a global leader on climate change, nature restoration and environmental health. The environment needs to be centre stage in their campaign. Below are 10 commitments that a candidate, who's genuinely committed to the environment, should be comfortable in making. If delivered, they would make a substantial difference to people's lives and the environment and demonstrate global leadership.

1. Invest in the biggest ever UK-wide home insulation programme through a council-led street by street programme and provide additional financial support to low-income households.
2. Reject calls for the scrapping of the moratorium on fracking and the development of any new oil, gas, or coal extraction and instead say 'yes' to the rapid growth of onshore and offshore renewable energy.
3. Accept the Office for Environmental Responsibility's recommendations for stronger targets for nature restoration and air quality, reverse plans to weaken habitats and environmental assessment laws, and swiftly implement the Environmental Land Management Scheme to reward nature-friendly farming.
4. Support calls for the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment to be recognised by the UN General Assembly and put this into UK law, as an essential part of

protecting people's health and eradicating environmental inequalities.

5. Fix the Net Zero Strategy so it delivers on legally binding carbon reduction targets and the commitments made at COP26, ensuring all departments in Whitehall deliver their part, including the Treasury.
6. Decentralise power and resources to devolved nations and councils so that they can properly eradicate environmental inequalities, deliver on the Climate Change Act, restore nature and ensure planning rules are in line with the climate and ecological emergency.
7. Introduce a new UK Business, Human Rights and Environment Act to make companies accountable for environmental damage and human rights abuses in their overseas supply chains and to eliminate the UK's role in global deforestation.
8. Follow through on the UK's world-leading commitment to ending the financing of fossil fuel projects abroad by speeding up the decarbonisation of the UK Export Finance agency's portfolio. This must include withdrawing funding from the Mozambique gas project and switching financial support to renewable energy.
9. Ensure all new trade deals have strong, enforceable climate change and nature protection safeguards and that food standards and nature-friendly farming are not undermined by imports produced to lower environmental standards.
10. Make the UK a beacon of democracy by reversing draconian restrictions on protest, guarantee the independence of the Electoral Commission, stop the attacks on the Human Rights Act, and ensure citizens can challenge unjust decisions through the courts.

Long version - environmental priorities for the next leader of the Conservative Party

This longer version gives some background to the ten priorities summarised above.

Home insulation

1. Invest in the biggest home insulation programme the UK has ever had through a council-led street by street programme and provide additional financial support to low-income households.

Tens of millions of people will face punishing increases in energy bills this autumn due to the skyrocketing price of gas. More financial support, in addition to that already provided, is needed. But so is urgent action to insulate homes in the UK. A council-led street-by-street insulation programme, prioritising areas in the most need, is the most cost-effective and efficient way to deliver help with warm homes and will also cut carbon emissions.

No new fossil fuels

2. Reject calls for the scrapping of the moratorium on fracking and the development of any new oil, gas, or coal extraction and instead say 'yes' to the rapid growth of onshore and offshore renewable energy.

Calls for an end to the moratorium on fracking and the licensing of new oil, coal and gas developments must be rejected. The government asked the International Energy Agency for its view on additional fossil fuel extraction just ahead of the Glasgow climate talks. It said new developments were not compatible with the international goal of keeping global warming below 1.5 degrees. Lord Deben, the chair of the Climate Change Committee, has called the proposal for a new coal mine in Cumbria indefensible. Instead, the growth of renewable energy must be accelerated and unfair barriers to onshore wind removed.

Nature restoration

3. Accept the Office for Environmental Responsibility's recommendations for stronger targets for nature restoration and air quality, reverse plans to weaken habitats and environmental assessment laws, and swiftly implement the Environmental Land Management Scheme to reward nature-friendly farming.

UK nature is in longterm decline. While the Environment Act 2021 offered potential levers to reverse this decline in England, implementation is failing to deliver. Nature restoration targets set under the Act are not fit for purpose. The Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) has already called for stronger targets and more urgent action to embed the environmental principles into policy making. Plans to allow the government to amend retained EU environmental law with little scrutiny, in combination with moves to undermine existing habitats and environmental assessment laws, now threaten the very foundations of our nature protections.

Around 70% of the UK is farmland- how we farm has a huge impact on UK wildlife and greenhouse gas emissions. As highlighted by the State of Nature reports, decades of intensification of crop and livestock production has led to severe biodiversity decline through loss of habitat, excessive use of pesticides and fertilizers and pollution from manure and slurry. A transition to sustainable farming is desperately needed but is being undermined by calls to delay the new Environment Land Management Scheme (ELMS) to allow further intensification of food production.

The next Prime Minister must re-commit to implementing the ELMS to help more farmers transition to nature-friendly practices, including more agroforestry and measures to improve soil health and lock-in carbon. We need a clear strategy for UK land use and a bold vision to enable everyone to access healthy and sustainable diets.

Right to a healthy environment

4. Support calls for the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment to be recognised by the UN General Assembly and put this into UK law, as an essential part of protecting people's health and eradicating environmental inequalities.

Around 1 million children, two thirds of which are under 12s, live in areas where the average annual concentration of the air pollutant nitrogen dioxide is twice World Health Organisation recommended levels. Air pollution causes up to 36,000 early deaths a year. 10 million people live in neighbourhoods that are deprived of adequate green space. Poor diets and unhealthy processed food lead to 64,000 premature deaths each year. People of colour and low-income households are disproportionately affected. These are human rights and health issues as much as environmental issues.

Friends of the Earth and others are calling for the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment to be recognised by the United Nations General Assembly and put into UK law, as an essential part of eradicating environmental inequalities, levelling-up, and protecting human health and nature.

Net Zero Strategy

5. Fix the Net Zero Strategy so it delivers on legally binding carbon reduction targets and the commitments made at COP26, ensuring all departments in Whitehall deliver their part, including the Treasury.

The Climate Change Committee (CCC), the government's own official climate advisor, has said that only 39% of the government's climate change policies are credible. Yet strong policies are needed to deliver on the carbon budgets of the Climate Change Act which have had strong cross-party support since the act became law in 2008 and responds to the continuing high level of UK public concern. The CCC particularly highlighted the failure of some government departments to give the issue the priority it needs, particularly DEFRA and the Treasury.

Decentralise power

6. Decentralise power and resources to devolved nations and councils so that they can properly eradicate environmental inequalities, deliver on the Climate Change Act, restore nature and ensure planning rules are in line with the climate and ecological emergency.

The Covid-19 pandemic is a graphic illustration of the essential role that communities, councils and devolved nations play in public health. Nations and councils need more powers, in addition to more long term, stable resources, if communities are to cut greenhouse gas emissions, restore nature and reduce environmental health inequalities.

Instead of increased centralisation of power – for example through the Internal Market Act and parts of the Levelling-up Bill – power should be decentralised. The Blueprint Coalition – a unique coalition of local government organisations, green groups and academia – has identified the changes needed, particularly focusing on how disparate short term competitive funding for local government, combined with years of cuts, has been a barrier to action. So has inconsistent and weak national policy in key

areas such as planning. The government's newly established Local Net Zero Forum must swiftly develop an action plan to empower councils. In some areas, devolved nations need additional powers as well. For example, Wales does not have the power to set energy efficiency standards for the private-rented sector. These gaps in devolved powers need plugging.

Make companies accountable

7. Introduce a new UK Business, Human Rights and Environment Act to make companies accountable for environmental damage and human rights abuses in their overseas supply chains and to eliminate the UK's role in global deforestation.

UK consumption of commodities such as timber and soy is driving significant deforestation in high-risk countries such as Russia, Brazil and China. This forest loss overseas must be curbed through a robust implementation of Environment Act secondary legislation on 'due diligence', so that it applies to all commodities immediately and applies to all businesses – not just the largest. Further policy to prevent import of products associated with unsustainable legal deforestation (as called for by the Climate Change Committee) is also needed, alongside a new UK Business, Human Rights and Environment Act making companies accountable for environmental damage and human rights abuses in their supply chains.

The UK must lead in ensuring a strong global deal for biodiversity at the COP15 talks. The UK's overseas footprint can also be reduced through more domestic production of more of these commodities. For example, Friends of the Earth is calling for a Sector Deal with the timber industry - negotiated between government, devolved nations, industry, farmers and conservationists – to lead to 1 million hectares of new wildlife-friendly productive forestry.

End fossil fuel funding abroad

8. Follow through on the UK's world leading commitment to ending financing of fossil fuel projects abroad by speeding up the decarbonisation of the UK Export Finance agency's portfolio. This must include withdrawing funding from the Mozambique gas project and switching financial support to renewable energy.

The UK's world-leading commitments to ending public financing of fossil fuel projects internationally in March 2021 should be extended to cover British International Investments and other investment intermediaries, and the decarbonisation of UKEF's portfolio by 2050 should be sped up. Funding of the Mozambique LNG gas project should be withdrawn. Instead of overseas gas investments, the UK should support a renewables development model through increased climate finance and shifting international investments to clean energy.

Trade deals

9. Ensure all new trade deals have strong, enforceable climate change and nature protection safeguards and that food standards and nature-friendly farming are not undermined by

imports produced to lower environmental standards.

The UK is currently negotiating trade deals with the Gulf States and Israel, despite evidence of human and workers' rights abuses. We have negotiated Free Trade Agreements with Australia, New Zealand and soon with India, with no concern for the cumulative environmental impact of these deals. Because trade policy can have a wide-reaching impact on workers and communities around the world, it should be shaped through rigorous participation and effective consultations to ensure that deals safeguard human rights. Without protections for rights, trade agreements can exploit the vulnerabilities of weaker economies, their workers, their communities and their environment. We need a joined-up, principled trade and investment policy to work alongside - not against - climate finance and international cooperation efforts.

The right to protest

10. Make the UK a beacon of democracy by reversing draconian restrictions on protest, guarantee the independence of the Electoral Commission, stop the attacks on the Human Rights Act, and ensure citizens can challenge unjust decisions through the courts.

Boris Johnson's government forced through draconian legislation in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Court Act that severely reduce the right to protest and persecute marginalised communities. The Elections Act removed the independence of our elections regulator and imposed restrictions on voting and legitimate civil society campaigning. New legislation continues to crack down on those demanding action to address the climate and nature emergencies. Constant threats to break international law and undermine judicial review have diminished the UK's international standing. If the UK wants to be a beacon of hope for countries that suffer at the hands of dictators, it must have the strongest possible standards to safeguard protest and ensure citizens can challenge unjust decisions through the courts. The next Prime Minister must drop the assault on the Human Rights Act, restrictions on protest and campaigning and recommit to uphold international law.