



Health & Safety **MATTERS**

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What can we expect from the new government on energy and the environment?

Introduction

With a new and unexpected government, it is now useful to pay some attention to the manifesto promises which largely passed under the radar before the election. When the manifesto was drawn up it is probably fair to say that the conservatives did not expect to win alone and that any failure to meet commitments could be blamed on other parties. These cover the areas of energy, industry and the environment.

What are the commitments on energy?

Under the headline – “Guaranteeing Clean Affordable and Secure Energy Supplies”, the key points are:

- Healthy competition – not short term intervention
- Cutting emissions as cost effectively as possible
- A significant expansion in new nuclear and gas
- Continue to support development of North sea oil & gas
- Insulating a million homes over five years
- Plan for a strong global deal at the UN summit in Paris later in the year
- Continue to support the Climate Change Act

They are committed to an energy mix, including the safe development of shale gas, with local communities sharing the proceeds. In the North of England they wish to establish a sovereign wealth fund for investment in the region. However the intention is to end public subsidies for new onshore wind farms, and letting local people have the final say on wind farms in their area.

What are the commitments on Industrial policy?

While analysing the proposals on energy at least they contain some concrete proposals. In contrast the proposals for industry are rather more vague. Statements such as “we will support our modern industrial strategy” and “we will balance our economy”, based on the previous five years performance appear largely meaningless. The jargon includes lines

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like “... *deliver more bespoke growth with local councils, with local support*”, bearing in mind future projected cuts in these areas, don't give much confidence. Much of this strategy appears to revolve around the concept of the Northern Powerhouse, much of which seems to concentrate on delivering a combined social care/health package and on transport infrastructure. This smack's a little of the March of the Makers from the Chancellor previously and that was not exactly a rip-roaring success. There is also mention of the Midlands as an engine of growth, again emphasising transport. In this context it is interesting to note that Jim O'Neill, recently appointed Commercial Secretary to the Treasury, thinks that instead of investing in HS2 it would be of more value to improve transport links between the large cities of the North, from Liverpool to Hull.

What about the natural environment?

First, and perhaps unsurprisingly after the outcry in the last parliament, public forests and woodland will be kept in trust for the nation. However they also intend to set up a Natural Capital Committee to put hard economic numbers on the value of the environment- surely a purely capitalist method of looking at how the environment brings added value to the environment instead of examining other environmental benefits for humans. There is a pledge to build 1,400 more flood defences to protect 300,000 homes- almost certainly not enough. Other areas such as protection of the Green Belt, are likely to come under pressure from house builders, and a commitment to introduce a 5 pence charge for plastic bags already exists in Scotland and Wales. The promise to tackle air pollution rings very hollow as currently the UK is failing in 39 out of 43 zones to meet its' legal duty on air quality and has been told by the Supreme court to achieve this by the end of this year. The irony of course is that these are EU targets they are failing to meet!

Conclusion

It is obvious that not many of us pay attention to manifestos before elections. Suffice it to say that any reform to the energy market or stronger regulations covering fracking, as proposed by other parties will not now happen. Some of the targets, such as a reduction in carbon are already tied in with Europe and others are linked to the UN summit in Paris. The manifesto is littered with words and phrases such as *encourage*, and *continue to support*, which frankly are not robust enough to get real change in the future but reflects an overall de-regulatory approach from this government. Areas where a real difference could have been made including giving the Green Investment Bank powers to raise capital, or a reinvigorated new Green Deal, with a proactive programme on insulation of homes to a standard common across cold, northern Europe, would be a much better investment guaranteeing economic and environmental returns. Voting Blue and getting Green still seem as far away as possible and many opportunities for improvement will continue to be missed. For more information on environmental issues please contact craig.stuart@gmb.org.uk

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