

My interventions during the debate on the Environment Bill, 20 October 2021

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): As there is a lot of concern about this on both sides of the House, can the Minister give us some encouragement about what pace of change we can look forward to under her proposals? I think people want some reassurance that this is going to be tackled quite soon.

The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I thank my right hon. Friend for that, and honestly, people are coming up to me left, right and centre about this.

I feel as strongly about it as everybody else, so I am so pleased we have got this into the Bill. I have to say that a lot of it is thanks to working with my right hon. Friend the Member for—[Hon. Members: “Ludlow.”] I have been to Ludlow, but I have a lot of data in my head!

I think my right hon. Friend Philip Dunne would agree that we have worked unbelievably constructively to get what was going to be in his private Member’s Bill into this Bill, which is absolutely the right thing to do. I hope we are demonstrating that this is happening quickly.

For example, we are requiring water companies to put in monitors above and below every storm sewage overflow to monitor the data. They will have to start that right now, because the sewerage plans coming forward in the Bill are already under way.

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Sir John Redwood: Is the Minister saying that if this change goes through, another HS2-type assault on ancient woodland would not be allowed, whereas the last one was?

The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs: What it will mean is that, yes, there will be much more credence given to the value of ancient woodland.

At the moment, ancient woodland does not necessarily win, because one can have the infrastructure, or whatever it is, if one can demonstrate that there are wholly exceptional reasons for getting rid of the ancient woodland.

This approach will really strengthen the position: it is a really big commitment to ancient woodland, which is like our rainforest. We have to do something about it—and we are, which I hope will be welcomed.

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Sir John Redwood: Is there a possible compromise? The Minister said that the regulator could set and enforce targets and extract penalties; would that be a way forward? Could we get the Minister to come up with some tough

regulatory targets that fall short of the absolute guarantee of a legal statement?

Chair, Environmental Audit Committee, Chair, Environmental Audit Committee (Mr Philip Dunne): There will be targets—there are water-quality targets in the Bill anyway—and the Minister referred to the guidance that she is on the point of finalising for the next pricing review period for Ofwat.

My Committee, the Environmental Audit Committee, is currently conducting an inquiry into water quality, and we will make some recommendations to strengthen that guidance, so there are tools that can be used.

That does not, though, get away from the fact that in my view there should be a primary legislative duty on water companies, to persuade them to treat this issue with sufficient seriousness.