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The Coalition: How Green was My Tally?

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Introduction

In a gloriously backhanded compliment, Roger Helmer, UKIP Energy spokesman, remarked on whether David Cameron had lived up to his pledge to lead the ‘greenest government ever’. Helmer stated: ‘they clearly haven’t been the greenest ever government. But they have been sufficiently green to do huge damage’ (Bawden, 2014). Have they? A notable feature of David Cameron’s early leadership of the Conservative Party was the prominence he gave to the environment (Connelly, 2009, 2011). Shortly after the formation of the Coalition government in 2010, he pledged that ‘this will be the greenest government ever’ which will ‘support sustainable growth and enterprise … and promote the green industries that are so essential for our future (HM Government, 2010: 7). However, the environment has never been an easy issue for the Conservative Party, with one of the main problems being that the environment cuts across some of its key ideological fault lines. Thus, there has been willingness to embrace market-based solutions, but green taxes were regarded less favourably. The desire to avoid non-market, regulatory solutions sets a limit to how far a Conservative-led government can genuinely pursue environmental goals.

It is always difficult to push strong environmental policy during a recession, especially within a government committed to deficit reduction through cuts in public expenditure. Much depends on whether cuts are motivated by ideology or necessity. Those committed to green concerns find themselves uncomfortably caught between neo-liberal ideology and the Coalition’s professed environmentalism. Again, although the
Coalition argued in its own policy documents that many environmental policies lead to green growth and employment, its commitment has, in practice, been weak. Very few any longer seriously claim that the Coalition is the ‘greenest ever government’. On the contrary, the UK seems to have reverted to ‘politics as usual’.

‘Politics as usual’

‘Politics as usual’, in this context, refers to an entrenched approach to the economy, economic growth, and economic and political interests, together with scepticism concerning environmental policy, especially where it is felt to be a brake on growth. This does not necessarily imply active hostility to the environment, but it does imply relative indifference. The structure of ‘politics as usual’ comprises a set of deep presuppositions with a lexical ordering between levels of presuppositions and commitments, the structuring effects of power and influence, and the limits of bureaucratic rationality. On this view, the actions of government are an expression of underlying structures of power and influence, basic beliefs and administrative stasis. Mid-way between observable action and deep presuppositions lie approaches to tactics and strategy, manipulation and structuring of choices, and the shaping of the political opportunity structure.

An important dimension is power: at its deepest level lies the power of action-guiding presuppositions which are unquestioned and rarely challenged. At the next level there is the ability to shape and manipulate public debate through reputational power, or the implicit threat arising from the belief that political actors can access other forms of power if they wish. Finally, there is explicit observable power. Power operates on all these dimensions: they are not mutually exclusive but overlap, and differ in efficiency. For instance, it is more efficient to employ reputational power to manipulate the political agenda than to rely on explicit threats or physical force; and where the political agenda is founded on deep presuppositions ensuring prior agreement on fundamental ends, that is more efficient still (Lukes, 2005).

Thus a political actor can rely on reputation and implicit threat to achieve success in agenda manipulation. This is supplemented by the underlying constellation of presuppositions which absolves them of the need to argue their case explicitly because it is always already the default position. Only challengers to the status quo have to seriously argue their case, whereas its defenders are rarely required to provide more than a minimal level of argument. Thus defenders of the political and economic