



# **Environmental progress and social justice**

**SERA's contribution to third term thinking**

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Our environment sustains life, yet it is suffering constant and increasing damage as a result of unsustainable patterns of human activity. It is no exaggeration to say that life itself will be threatened if we continue along our current paths of development. Moreover, it is becoming more widely understood that environmental problems disproportionately affect the poor in both developed and developing countries. SERA believes that social justice and environmental progress must be the driving forces for the next parliamentary term.

Since 1997, this Labour Government has made considerable progress in addressing some key environmental challenges. The Energy White Paper put climate change at the heart of energy policy and signalled a major political commitment to renewable energy and greater energy efficiency. It also put the UK on a path to achieving a 60 per cent cut in carbon dioxide emissions by 2050<sup>1</sup>. However, in other areas, notably waste and transport, performance has been disappointing and runs counter to the principles of sustainable development.

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, the Prime Minister and other world leaders committed to developing a 10-year framework for accelerating the transition towards sustainable consumption and production. There is a limit to our consumption of natural resources, such as fossil fuels, metals and available land. But, even more importantly, there is a limit to the capacity of the environment to absorb pollution and waste.

Continued commitment to Labour's 1997 Statement of Intent on Environmental Taxation – to shift the burden of taxation from goods to environmental bads – will be essential to changing individual patterns of consumption and getting more from less. Tax incentives that reward people for purchasing energy efficiency household appliances and lower polluting cars are examples of how we can encourage more sustainable choices.

Promoting low carbon technologies could also help to boost the economy. Investment in renewable energy technologies – such as wind, wave and solar power – could create new job and manufacturing opportunities as well as reducing carbon emissions.

Sustainable development rarely gets the political attention it deserves, yet issues relating to the environment and quality of life affect nearly every area of public policy. This briefing sets out ten ways the Government can drive forward its ambitions to promote resource efficiency, reduce environmental problems and protect the planet for current and future generations. SERA's proposals offer the opportunity for the Labour Party to demonstrate how it is committed to a creating a cleaner, greener and safer environment for all.

### Acknowledgements

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# A summary of SERA's ten manifesto proposals

## **1. Quality bus services for all**

Reinvigorate sustainable transport choices, such as walking and cycling, and encourage more reliable and efficient bus services.

## **2. Safe and liveable streets for children**

Reduce child pedestrian accidents through a national programme of traffic calming measures targeted at disadvantaged areas.

## **3. Keeping traffic on the move**

Introduce road user charging in urban areas and tolling on busy motorway routes.

## **4. Plane trading – reducing aviation emissions**

Include aviation in the European emissions trading framework at the earliest opportunity and increase Air Passenger Duty (APD) for long haul flights.

## **5. 'It's the low carbon economy, stupid'**

Continue to encourage innovation and investment in new and emerging low carbon technologies.

## **6. Waste not, burn not**

Reform waste management taxation to reduce landfill disposal and incineration.

## **7. Getting out of the mess we're in**

Reward those households that produce the least waste through variable charging.

## **8. Creating greener and healthier communities**

Improve health outcomes through better co-ordination of environment and public health objectives across government.

## **9. Leading the way in promoting socially responsible business**

Encourage the UK's top 1000 businesses to lead the world in reporting on their social and environmental performance.

## **10. Making this the environment Millennium**

Putting climate change at the heart of achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

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### SERA's ten manifesto proposals

#### **1. Reinvigorate sustainable transport choices, such as walking and cycling, and encourage more reliable and efficient bus services.**

According to the Prime Minister, Labour has “made great strides in widening access, including improvements to public transport and changes to the way we deliver services. But some people still face what can seem insurmountable barriers in simply getting to where they need to go”<sup>2</sup>. There is both a strong social and environmental case for improving sustainable transport choices – including walking, cycling and more flexible bus services, such as rural bus taxis. Equally we should recognise the political case that most Labour voters are bus users.

The Transport Act 2000 was a welcome step forward, containing powers for greater regulation of bus services by local authorities outside London through ‘bus quality contracts.’ In London, private bus operators are already publicly regulated in relation to routes, timetables and fares which partly explains why bus patronage in London has increased year on year. Promoting bus quality contracts throughout England would underline Labour’s commitment to reinvigorating bus patronage.

More effective co-ordination at a regional level would also help to improve the quality and reliability of rail services, particularly in city regions. The government should press ahead with the development of Regional Transport Boards, where regional assemblies co-ordinate the delivery of transport services and planning.

#### **2. Reduce child pedestrian accidents through a national programme of traffic calming measures targeted at disadvantaged areas.**

Britain has a low rate of road deaths and serious injuries overall but a relatively poor record on child pedestrian safety compared with other European countries. This could be addressed by slowing down traffic to 20 miles per hour or less in residential areas and designing streets to give priority to children, pedestrians and cyclists. Children in disadvantaged areas are five times more likely to be killed by cars than those in affluent areas<sup>3</sup>. If targeted in disadvantaged areas, then traffic calming measures could help to achieve the Government’s target to reduce the number of children killed or seriously injured on Britain’s roads by half by 2010.

#### **3. Introduce road user charging in urban areas and tolling on busy motorway routes.**

There is a pressing need to cut congestion. According to the Government’s official forecast, traffic is set to grow by up to 25 per cent by 2010. The London congestion charge has already proved effective in cutting congestion by 30 per cent in central London<sup>4</sup>. The 2004 Transport White Paper recognised that we cannot build our way out of congestion and called for a national debate on future road pricing<sup>5</sup>. An independent road user charging feasibility study concluded that a national road user charging scheme, based on satellite positioning technology, was technically possible but at least 10 to 15 years away<sup>6</sup>.

In the meantime, there are interim options for cutting congestion. Area based charging schemes should be rolled out in major cities or towns by the end of the decade. Linking road user charging to vehicle emissions performance would also help to reduce air pollutants that contribute to respiratory problems. In addition, tolling congested sections of the motorway network would help to reduce traffic on busy routes whilst also raising much needed revenue for paying for transport improvements in other areas. Opinion poll research suggests motorists will be more willing to accept tolls if their journeys are more reliable and if the Government makes a commitment that the money raised is used to pay for road and public transport improvements<sup>7</sup>. A proportion of the revenue raised should also be used for making public transport more accessible to disabled people.

#### **4. Include aviation in the European emissions trading framework at the earliest opportunity and increase Air Passenger Duty (APD) for long haul flights.**

There has been a five-fold increase in air travel since the 1970's and Government forecasts suggest demand could be two and a half times current levels by 2030. Emissions from international flights fall outside of the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. The Government has committed to cutting carbon dioxide emissions by 60 per cent by 2050. If emissions from international aviation continue to grow unchecked, then by 2050 the impact of emissions from international flights from UK airports could exceed the UK's entire emissions quota<sup>8</sup>.

The Aviation White Paper highlighted the importance of bringing intra-EU flights within the emerging European emissions trading framework<sup>9</sup>. This should be a key challenge for the Prime Minister during the UK's Presidency of the European Union in 2005, though bringing aviation within the EU framework cannot be achieved until 2008 at the earliest. In the meantime, the UK should take unilateral action where it can by increasing APD for long-haul flights. This could be done by charging APD as a percentage of the ticket price – this would be a progressive measure as long-haul flights are generally used by higher income groups.

#### **5. Continue to encourage innovation and investment in new and emerging low carbon technologies.**

Continued support and investment in renewable energy will be also critical to meeting our climate change targets. To encourage long term investment and innovation in new and emerging low carbon technologies the Government should set a firm target for 20 per cent of energy to come from renewable sources by 2020. Such a target would have clear economic benefits: a recent Department for Trade and Industry report highlighted that a 2020 target could potentially account for between 17,000 to 35,000 new jobs<sup>10</sup>.

The majority of these jobs are likely to come from the UK's growing wind market. Other low carbon technologies – wave, tidal, solar, hydrogen fuel cells and some biofuels – are far from being commercially viable. Here the risk is that without more Government support for product development and commercialisation, through demonstration projects and venture capital funds for example, the UK will lose out to these future low carbon technologies being developed elsewhere. A Marine Performance Fund would also help to provide market support for non-wind energy by offering a premium for every unit of electricity produced from wave or tidal power.

#### **6. Reform waste management taxation to reduce landfill disposal and incineration.**

Growing amounts of waste are produced in the UK each year. The Cabinet Office Strategy Unit forecasts that, at current rates of growth, the amount of household waste will double by 2020 and cost £3.2 billion per year to dispose of, which would mean spending an extra £1.6 billion a year on waste management<sup>11</sup>. The commitment from the Chancellor of the Exchequer to progressively increase the Landfill Tax is welcome. Nearly 80 per cent of household waste goes to landfill – far more than in most other European countries – with consequential affects on greenhouse gas emissions and recycling.

The Government's Waste Strategy established recycling targets requiring at least 25 per cent of household waste to be recycled by 2005 and 30 per cent by 2010<sup>12</sup>. Actual progress on recycling, however, suggests we are not on track to meet these targets<sup>13</sup>, which is in part due to a lack of incentives and some 'perverse incentives'. For example, recycling is subject to the full climate change levy whilst incineration is not, creating an incentive for local authorities to choose incineration ahead of recycling.

Reforming the Landfill Tax into a wider waste disposal tax, including a smart tax on incineration, would help to encourage recycling. Targeted tax exemptions or discounts could apply to allow for the incineration of specific separated waste streams.

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### **7. Reward those households that produce the least waste through variable charging.**

The ever-increasing production of waste, combined with the Landfill Directive requirement to significantly reduce the amount of biodegradable waste sent to landfill, will substantially increase the costs of waste management. The obvious way to get people to create less waste is to introduce 'variable charging' – rewarding those who produce less waste or recycle their waste effectively, and charging more to those who produce more waste. In exchange, waste charges currently included in Council Tax could be stripped out – saving each household about £50 per year<sup>14</sup>.

The Government should legislate to enable local authorities to introduce variable charging, alongside doorstep collection of recyclables, where there is local support. Adequate social safeguards could be introduced to robustly address any regressive impacts arising from variable charging through tax credits and benefits.

### **8. Improve health outcomes through better co-ordination of environment and public health objectives across government.**

Clean, green and safe environments make for stronger and happier communities. Yet we are currently travelling in the opposite direction. Asthma and respiratory problems are on the increase and obesity amongst young people is growing. Estimates by the Health Development Agency put the cost of obesity in England at £2.6 billion per year and rising<sup>15</sup>. In disadvantaged communities, the problems are exacerbated due to lack of access to healthy food, nutritional information and facilities for recreation and exercise.

Instead of focusing on providing ever more hospital beds and cardiac facilities we should be combating the environmental causes underlying ill health. The Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Department of Health should adopt a joint Public Service Agreement to reduce health impacts and inequalities through better environmental protection. Regional Public Health Directors and Strategic Health Authorities must give direction and support to Primary Care Trusts, encouraging them to take a broader and more creative approach to improving the health of the populations they serve. The reduction of cases of childhood asthma should be a priority. Labour's commitments to sustainable transport, safe routes to school, and better co-ordination between local regeneration partnerships and Primary Care Trusts must be underpinned by a pledge to improve air quality in accordance with European air quality law.

### **9. Encourage the UK's top 1000 businesses to lead the world in reporting on their social and environmental performance.**

The Government's proposals for an Operating and Financial Review (OFR) will require the UK's top 1000 companies to disclose which social, ethical and environmental matters are material to their future prospects as a business. This is a welcome step. But, there remains a risk that for most companies this will not capture those issues that are 'material' to wider society. Whilst the trend to increase voluntary social and environmental reporting by companies is positive, too much of it is piecemeal and too many companies choose to disclose no information on their social and environmental performance.

Governments, shareholders, customers and employees all require much more comprehensive data if they are to effectively integrate social and environmental issues into their decision making. The Government should commit to a full review of the impact of the OFR after 2 years. It should also review the case for mandating the disclosure of key social and environmental performance indicators to ensure UK business continues to lead the world in sustainability reporting.

## 10. Putting climate change at the heart of achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

This Labour Government has done more than any other previous UK government to alleviate poverty. It is strongly committed to the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of reducing poverty by half by 2015. Agriculture is often described as the 'prevailing way of life' in Africa. The poor in sub-Saharan Africa spend 60-80 per cent of their income on food and as a consequence there is a direct reliance on farming for peoples' basic well-being<sup>16</sup>. While inequitable access to food is a major factor in fuelling world hunger, global warming is also undermining food security.

The poor and most vulnerable in developing countries are nearly always the most severely affected by weather related hazards such as droughts and floods. The Kyoto Protocol has helped to build some international support for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. We now need to move forward to negotiate a long-term solution based on stabilising concentrations of greenhouse gases at no more than 2° C above pre-industrial levels<sup>17</sup>. A global emissions trading system, based on the fair allocation of emissions entitlements on a per capita basis, is perhaps the best way of getting developing countries on board. In the UK's forthcoming Presidency of the European Union and G8 Summit, the Labour Government should champion further action to tackle climate change and ensure that the environment is integrated into international development policy.

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**SERA – the Socialist Environment and Resources Association – is an independent environment group affiliated to the Labour Party. SERA works to integrate green thinking into Labour Party policies and believes that social and environmental concerns must be addressed together. SERA campaigns by organising events such as conferences and seminars, and publishes regular briefing papers and a magazine entitled ‘New Ground.’**

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