



National treasure: managing the country's forests today costs only 30p per head per year

LETTER FROM EXMOOR

The great forest sell-off will end up costing us dear, writes *Stanley Johnson*

Out of the woods

It is hard to imagine how the coalition government could have dug itself so deep into the mire over the proposed forest sell-off. On 6 February, the Environment Secretary, Caroline Spelman, defended the consultation process that her department launched last month. It was “week two of a 12-week” process, she told us – and urged us all to join in. She pointed out that the “Save England’s Forests” letter, published in the *Sunday Telegraph* on 23 January and signed by the Archbishop of Canterbury and Judi Dench, among others, antedated the consultation process. By implication, she suggested, the concerns of the signatories were now superseded, if not out of date.

I was among those who signed the letter, invited to do so by my daughter Rachel Johnson, editor of the *Lady* and president of the Save England’s Forests movement. Let me declare some more interests. I have been a Conservative MEP and vice-chairman of the European Parliament’s environment committee. I fought Teignbridge in Devon in the 2005 election as a Conservative candidate and I am a patron of the Conservative Environment Network.

I have a great deal of time for Caroline Spelman, but what really upset me was her failure to address the central point made in our letter, namely: “Three clauses in the Public Bodies Bill

2010-2011, currently being debated in parliament, will authorise the government to sell the whole of our public forest estate to commercial interests on the open market. Without asking our permission, the government has already allowed the sale of 15 per cent of our public woodlands. Similar plans have been rejected by the Scottish and Welsh parliaments.”

The threat to England’s woods and forests lies not only in ill-advised measures the government may take under existing legislation, but in what may happen in the future under the powers that will be handed to the Environment Secretary, and her successors for ever after, if the bill is passed in its present form. Anyone who doubts this should consider the following exchange, which took place at a recent session of the House of Commons environment committee. Spelman and her civil servants were questioned about the powers they were seeking by including forestry matters in the bill:

Chair of the committee: “That’s a once-and-for-all legislative permit, that you will never again as a department have to come back for future sales of forestry or such?”

Defra civil servant: “That is the intention.”
Secretary of State, Mrs Spelman: “The Public Bodies Bill is an enabling bill on the reform of a wide range of arm’s-length bodies.”

Chair: “So you will never, ever again have to come and ask permission?”

Secretary of State, Mrs Spelman: “We should not have to, no.”

Chair: “So this is our one and only chance?”

Defra civil servant: “Yes.”

Among the things I most loathed, as an MEP, were proposals from the European Commission with clauses for delegating power. Called “adaptation measures”, they allowed the commission to amend European law without recourse to the European Parliament. Here, we call them “Henry VIII clauses”. Terminology aside, the net result of this bill would mean that parliamentary approval for the sale of the forest estate will no longer be necessary.

National assets

Judging by the quality of the speeches when the matter was debated on 2 February, the floor of the Commons is precisely the place for questions of such pith and moment as the future of the nation’s forests to be discussed. And decided. Seeing it from this perspective, it is hard to take the forestry consultation seriously. It looks all the more questionable since the one option that, according to the polls, 80 per cent of the public appears to want – not selling off the forest estate – seems to have been deliberately excluded from the consultation’s terms of reference.

What is the solution? I have three proposals. The government should cancel the proposed sale of the first tranche of the forest estate, totalling 40,000 hectares, many times the amount of land disposed of under the last government; withdraw the forestry clauses from the Public Bodies Bill, thus reserving to parliament the right to take decisions about the disposal of vital national assets; and either terminate the consultation exercise, or permit full consideration of non-disposal options.

Moreover, if the forest sell-off is likely to cost money rather than save it, as now appears to be the case from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs’s own calculations, then not selling the forests should be economically advantageous. Managing the forests today costs the equivalent of only 30p per head per year. Much has been made of the so-called “conflict of interest” in having an institution, such as the Forestry Commission, that is both a trader and a regulator. In the past, however, this issue was handled satisfactorily through Forest Enterprise agencies, operating at arm’s length within the ambit of the Forestry Commission. A similar solution could be adopted today if the objections are still felt to be real rather than theoretical.

Adopting the measures above might allow Caroline Spelman respite from the mounting clamour that must be making her life a misery. The future prospects of the coalition will also, I suspect, be considerably improved. ●

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